

THE HORNBILL SONG

Holud Paakhir Gaan

A story of love across worlds

Ajanta Sinha Roy



BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

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Not in Utopia, subterranean field,
Or some secreted island, Heaven Knows where!
But in the very world, which is the World
Of all of us, the place where in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all!

—*William Wordsworth*

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

When I began writing *The Hornbill Song*, I had no idea I was embarking on a journey that would span years and resonate deeply with my heart. This novel is my debut as a fiction writer, though words have been my companions throughout my life—as an educator, a poet, and a writer of nonfiction. But this story demanded something different from me. It demanded that I open not just my craft but my soul.

Why I Wrote This Story

My husband's service in the defence forces brought us to Nagaland, where I had the privilege of serving as principal of the Assam Rifles Nodal School. Those years changed me fundamentally. Living among the Naga community, I witnessed a way of life marked by profound simplicity, fierce loyalty, and a deep connection to land and heritage. I saw the beautiful amalgamation of Naga and Bengali cultures, watched my students navigate between tradition and modernity with grace, and felt the warmth of a community that welcomed outsiders with open hearts.

But I also saw the other side—the discrimination my students faced when they travelled to India's plains, the casual racism, and the way their distinct features and accents made them targets of mockery or worse. I saw young people questioning whether they truly belonged in their country, whether their love for someone from the "mainland" could ever be accepted by either side.

This book is my tribute to them, to their resilience, and to the possibility that love can be stronger than prejudice.

A Note on Characters and Places

Every character in this novel is fictional, born entirely from my imagination. While I have drawn inspiration from the landscapes, cultures, and social realities I witnessed, no character represents any real person. The Angami family, the Hornbill Hearth Community, LM's music empire, and the temple in North Kolkata are all made-up places that serve the story's emotional and thematic truth, not real people or events.

Similarly, while I have tried to portray Naga culture with respect and authenticity, I acknowledge that this set is one outsider's interpretation, filtered through my Bengali lens and my novelist's need for dramatic narrative. Any errors or oversimplifications are mine alone.

The Two Love Stories

At the heart of this saga are two love stories, separated by a generation but united by a single question: Can love survive when the world conspires against it?

Rick and Priya's love is the love of sacrifice and exile. Theirs is a romance that begins in the intoxicating freedom of youth—two talented musicians from different worlds who find in each other a harmony they'd never known. But their love is tested not by their doubts but by a society that refuses to accept their union. When Priya steals from the temple to save Rick, she doesn't just take jewellery—she severs herself from her entire world: family, identity, and community. Rick, in turn, silences his music for twenty years, giving up the very thing that defined him to keep his family safe.

Their love is quiet and enduring, marked by what they've lost rather than what they've gained. It's the love of parents who've known exile, who've built a life in the shadows, who wonder every day whether the price was too high. Yet when I watch them in the final chapters—Rick returning to music, Priya reuniting with her mother—I see that their love was also preparation. They were building the foundation that would allow their daughter to love more freely than they ever could.

Aarav and Pakhi's love is the love of defiance and hope. They represent the next generation's refusal to accept the limitations their

parents endured. Where Rick and Priya fled and hid, Aarav and Pakhi stand and fight. Their love is loud, public, and unapologetic. They refuse to let family opposition, cultural differences, or even violence separate them.

But their love is also more innocent and more idealistic. They don't yet carry the weight of decades of compromise. They believe—perhaps naively, perhaps beautifully—that love is enough. And in the end, maybe love is enough because of the foundation laid by Rick and Priya's sacrifice and the community built by the Hornbill Hearts.

What moves me most about these two love stories is how they complement and complete each other. Rick and Priya's sacrifice makes it possible for Aarav and Pakhi to be defiant. The parents' exile creates the space for the children's belonging. The first generation's silence allows the second generation's voice.

This is what I wanted to explore: how love across cultures isn't just about two individuals—it's about generations, communities, and the slow work of building bridges one brave choice at a time.

On Structure and Style

You'll notice that this novel doesn't follow traditional chapter length conventions. Some chapters are brief; others sprawl across many pages. This reflects how the story came to me—in bursts of inspiration, in flowing scenes that refused to be artificially contained. I've honoured that organic quality, believing that the story's emotional rhythm matters more than geometric precision.

This piece is a free-flowing narrative, meant to be experienced like music—with crescendos and quiet moments, with themes that repeat and transform, and with harmonies that emerge between storylines.

A Word on Difficult Themes

This novel deals with domestic violence, sexual assault, discrimination, and other painful realities. I've tried to handle these subjects with both honesty and sensitivity, never gratuitously but never shying away from the truth of what many people endure. If you are a

survivor of violence or trauma, please know that some scenes may be complex. I hope, however, that the ultimate message—that healing is possible, that love can triumph, that speaking truth can break cycles of abuse—offers not just realism but hope.

"My deepest gratitude reaches beyond the physical world to my parents. Ma and Baba, though you are no longer here to hold this book in your hands, I know you are witnessing my joy. I feel your pride and your love in every word I've written. This milestone belongs to you as much as it does to me."

My Gratitude

Thank you to my students in Nagaland for letting me into your world, sharing your stories, and showing me how strong it is to be yourself in a country that doesn't always make room for you. You taught me more than I ever taught you.

To the Naga community that welcomed my family: this book is my love letter to you, imperfect as it may be.

To my husband, whose service brought us to the Northeast and whose support made this book possible: you gave me not just the experiences that inspired this story, but the courage to write it.

Thanks to my family and friends for their belief in me.

To every reader who picks up this book: thank you for giving these characters a home in your imagination, for seeing the humanity in people whose cultures might be unfamiliar, and for believing that love stories can change the world one heart at a time.

What I Hope You'll Take Away

More than anything, I hope this book helps you see the Northeast—and the people from those beautiful, complex, often overlooked states—with new eyes. I hope it makes you think twice before asking someone, "But where are you really from?" I hope it reminds you that every face that looks different from yours contains galaxies of story, generations of love and loss, and dreams as valid and precious as your own.

And I hope it reminds you that love—honest, brave, defiant love—is always a revolutionary act.

Thank you for reading *The Hornbill Song*. May Pakhi's flight toward freedom inspire your own.

With gratitude and hope,

Ajanta Sinha Roy

Note: All characters, institutions, and events in this novel are fictional. Any resemblance to actual individuals, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. As an author, I drew the cultural elements from my observations and research, filtering them through the demands of dramatic storytelling.

About the Author

Ajanta Sinha Roy, an educator, poet, and now debut novelist, has dedicated her life to bridging worlds and empowering dreams.

An accomplished academic with an MA in English (gold medalist) and an M.Phil in Education, Ajanta has spent decades shaping young minds as a principal of distinguished CBSE schools across India. As the visionary founder of Vidya.com, she has guided thousands of students toward international educational opportunities, helping them turn aspirations into achievements worldwide.

But it is her years in Nagaland, as the wife of a defence officer and principal of the Assam Rifles Nodal School, that planted the seeds for *The Hornbill Song*. Living immersed in Naga culture, Ajanta witnessed firsthand the beauty of the Northeast—the warmth of its people, the richness of their traditions, and the profound bonds formed when different cultures meet with open hearts. She also observed the harsh reality of how people from the Northeast are often treated when they venture into India's plains, facing casual discrimination that affects their everyday experiences.

This book is her way of honoring the Naga people for their strength, dignity, and simplicity. It is also her way of addressing the rarely told stories of cross-cultural love and belonging in contemporary India. Though all characters, places, and events are fictional creations born from her imagination, they are infused with the deep respect and affection she holds for the communities she came to know and love.

A poet, nonfiction writer, and academic with years of experience, Ajanta brings her gift for language and her educator's insight into human nature to her first novel. *The Hornbill Song* is a free-flowing narrative of love, identity, and redemption that spans generations—a story as much about the healing power of community as it is about two young people who dare to love across divides.

Written with the heart of someone who has spent a lifetime building bridges between worlds, this debut novel marks Ajanta's entry into the literary landscape as a voice for the underrepresented, the marginalised, and the misunderstood.

She currently lives in Kolkata, India, where she continues her work in education while nurturing her creative voice through writing.

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Chapter 1

The Song That Named Her

March 2022 Kohima

The church bells rang out in victory in the morning, their bronze voices echoing across the cool mountain air of Kohima. Ricky Angami's fingers moved across the piano keys with trained dedication within the little hut. Each note rose like incense towards the wooden rafters.

Holud sat on the edge of the bench next to him, her yellow patterned jersey skirt spread out like petals around her thin body. Her peasant shirt hung loosely on her shoulders, and her messy curls fell over her face like black honey, almost hiding those wonderful grey-blue eyes that looked like they held whole storm clouds inside them. When she gazed at her father, love and respect burned so brightly that it might have lit lamps.

Her voice rose over the piano's tune, which was clear and pure: *"Aloker ei jharna dharai dhuiye dao..." Today she sang a Rabindra Sangeet, which she had learned in a cultural workshop. She knew very little Bengali from a few friends at school. The Bengali words came out of her mouth like prayer, like coming home, like the song of a bird that had never been home yet had music in its bones.

As they stopped for their weekly routine, the bakery's warm hug of yeast and sugar surrounded them. Holud's question came as naturally as the sun was rising. It was the same question that had been bothering her for years, but now it was asked with the urgency of a seventeen-year-old girl looking for her place in the world.

"Pa! Why do I have such a strange name—Holud Paakhi? She showed the same interest each time she asked the question.

Rick's hand, which had seen a lot of weather, stopped moving over the bread bag. His eyes lost focus as he looked not at the busy bakery but at a courtyard from almost nineteen years ago, bathed in morning light and mystery. "When you took your first breath in the world," he began, his voice soft with awe that hadn't faded over the years, "a yellow bird appeared in our courtyard. Not just any bird, but a hornbill. It sang for seven days and seven nights. That song, dear, sounded like all the happiness in the world had found its voice. It didn't stop and go away until you opened your eyes and cried."

He tenderly touched her cheek. "Your mother thought you were blessed. Since you are half Bengali, names hold significant power in your culture. Krishna Koli and Nayan Tara are names that embody the essence of what a child is meant to become. You are our Holud Paakhi, our Yellow Bird.

The usual follow-up question came out, but this time it had a hint of longing: "Then why don't I have Dida, Dadu, Mama, and Mashi like all my Bengali friends?"

Ricky's jaw got tighter, but not by much. "Because your mother gave up everything for love." Her family, who were orthodox Brahmins with traditional values, couldn't accept a Christian son-in-law. She chose exile when she selected me. She gave up her whole family for the love of one man.

"But Pa," Holud's voice raised with intense protectiveness, "you're good, you're honorable! How could they not see—

"This is the end of our story session." His voice was soft but firm. "We're home." Give your Ma a hand with breakfast. You know how these talks can bring up old wounds.

The cottage looked like a living prayer, with Christian crosses and Hindu prayer flags hanging from the same roof. Brass bells and wooden wind chimes made a symphony of faiths. Priya came out of the door as they got closer. Her morning puja was complete. The scent of sandalwood and incense clung to her like a blessing.

She appeared like a goddess who had decided to die for love in her plain white saree with a bright red border. Her hair was still wet from her routine bath, and she had twisted it into a loose bun that showed off the exquisite curve of her neck. She had been married to Rick for twenty years, but her faith had not wavered or changed. It had grown stronger in her solitude.

Holud looked at her mother with both love and sadness. This woman chose love over family, established a temple for two religions under one roof, and never once spoke ill of the family that had thrown her out like a broken vessel.

Christmas songs and bhajans played in this house, while Easter lilies and marigolds and coral jasmine (shiuli phul) flowered for Christmas and Durga Puja. Love flowed so freely that it seemed to spill out of every door and window. This love was even more valuable because of the sacrifices that had nourished its roots.

“Aloker Ei Jharna dharai” is a Bengali Rabindra Sangeet

"Pour your cascades of sunshine" is the English translation.

Chapter 2

Wings Against the Wind

The classroom erupted in chaos—gleeful shouts, laughter, and the scrape of desks as students pushed them aside and embraced, promising to stay in touch. Today was the last day of high school, and tomorrow they would scatter like seeds on the wind. Some would attend local colleges, while others had their sights set on Bangalore, Kolkata, or Guwahati. The wealthier ones had already secured admissions in the US or Canada.

Pakhi sat caught between worlds, her mother's enrollment at the local college weighing against her burning desire for something more. In the corner, Priyanka and Ana huddled over glossy brochures from a prestigious Kolkata college, their animated whispers about sociology and journalism courses only intensifying Pakhi's longing.

"Comparative Literature," she murmured, tracing the course description with her finger. "Can you imagine studying Tagore in the city where he walked? Reading Manik Bandyopadhyay beside the Ganges?"

"But your mother—" Priyanka began gently.

"Ma thinks I'm not ready for the plains. She thinks I'm too sheltered, too naive." Pakhi's voice carried familiar frustration. "But how can I understand my heritage if I never experience it? Half of me is Bengali,

yet I've never seen a pandal during Durga Puja, never felt the pulse of the city that shaped my mother's soul."

Ana nodded sympathetically. "My parents had the same fears. But we can't live our lives in protective bubbles, can we?"

A shadow fell across their table. Kyan's reflection appeared in the window glass before they heard his voice—tall, confident, with those distinctive green eyes that had captured the attention of half the girls in school. His hair, as always, was pulled back in a neat ponytail, and his casual lean against their table spoke of someone accustomed to being the center of attention.

"Priya Aunty is absolutely right," he said, his voice carrying the authority of someone who'd already tasted the world beyond their hills. "You shouldn't go to the plains, Holud. We're not welcome there. They see our faces and immediately categorise us—foreign, different, less than."

Pakhi's grey-blue eyes flashed with defiance. "I don't believe that. You all keep trying to decide my life for me. It's my choice, my future. Why won't anyone let me make my own decisions? I still need to convince Ma—please don't make it harder than it already is."

Kyan's expression darkened, his protective instincts overriding his usual charm. "You should have seen Lyna when she came back from Kolkata." His voice dropped, heavy with old pain. "The actions of those city boys changed everything for her. "She's in a wheelchair now, Pakhi. Paralyzed. They attacked her simply because she was from the Northeast."

Pakhi's face softened with genuine concern. She knew Lyna's story—everyone in their community did. Parents whispered Lyna's story as a cautionary tale to keep their daughters close to home.

"I'm so sorry about Lyna, Kyan. What happened to her was terrible. But that doesn't mean I should abandon my dreams." Her voice grew stronger. "My mother was born there. My parents met there and fell in love. I want to see the Ganges with my own eyes, walk through the

temples, ride the trams, and stand in the maidan. I want to understand the city that's half of who I am."

Kyan studied her face for a long moment, recognising the stubborn determination that had defined Holud Pakhi since childhood. He sighed, a smile breaking through his concern.

"Okay, okay, Queen of Drama! You don't have to be so theatrical about it." He straightened up, his mood shifting. "Are you all coming to the ball tonight? Let me treat you girls to something special. Consider it a farewell gift before you fly away to chase your big-city dreams."

Priyanka and Ana exchanged glances, then grinned. "Of course we're coming!"

"Good." Kyan's eyes lingered on Pakhi a moment longer than necessary. "Just promise me you'll be careful out there, Holud. The world beyond these hills isn't always kind to people like us."

"I promise," Pakhi said, though they both knew that once she spread her wings, no amount of caution would keep her from soaring.

As Kyan walked away, Ana leaned close to Pakhi and whispered, "He's worried about you."

"He's worried about everyone," Pakhi replied, but her voice was softer now, touched by the knowledge that Kyan's concern came from a place of genuine care—and perhaps something deeper that neither of them had yet acknowledged.

Outside the classroom windows, the Kohima hills stretched endlessly, beautiful and protective. But beyond those hills lay a world Pakhi had only glimpsed into her mother's carefully guarded stories and her father's melancholy songs.

Tomorrow, she would begin the real fight—convincing her mother that some birds were meant to fly, even if the journey led them far from the safety of the nest.

Chapter 3

Echoes of the Plains

A Story from the Past (May 2000)

Kyan's warnings weren't born of overprotectiveness—they were rooted in bitter experience. Students from the Northeast who ventured to India's plains carried more than their belongings; they carried the burden of being different, a weight that followed them like a shadow.

The moment they stepped off trains in Delhi, Mumbai, or Kolkata, the stares began. Their East Asian features—inherited from centuries of migration and cultural mixing—marked them as perpetual strangers in their own country. "Chinky." "Momo." "Chinese." The slurs came from market vendors, classmates, and even potential landlords who quoted double the rent without blinking.

For many, survival meant working in call centres where their flawless English became a lifeline or using their musical talents in city bands where their art was appreciated, even if their identity wasn't. But the very qualities that made them beloved in their mountain communities—openness, directness, trust—made them easy targets in the unforgiving sprawl of the plains.

Rick had learned these lessons the hard way.

Rick Angami came to Kolkata in May 2000 with a guitar case, a head full of dreams, and three bandmates who shared his vision. They called themselves "Yellow Hornbill," after the magnificent bird that soared through the forests around Kohima—a symbol of home, of beauty, of untamed spirit.

The flat they rented on a narrow lane near their college could barely contain four boys and their instruments, yet it overflowed with music every night. Rick's voice—shaped by mountain winds and years of church choir training—could make even the most jaded listener pause. Their Bengali neighbours would linger in hallways when he sang of mist-covered peaks, ancient legends, the ache of leaving home, and the courage it took to chase dreams in unfamiliar lands.

Three months after their arrival, opportunity knocked. The college announced its annual cultural festival, and Rick entered their band's name with trembling hands, knowing this could change everything.

He first saw her during auditions.

Priya seemed to be everywhere at once—clipboard in hand, ensuring every participant had what they needed. She moved with the focused energy of someone who found joy in others' success, content to work behind the scenes while never seeking the spotlight herself.

Then Yellow Hornbill took the stage for their sound check.

Rick's voice filled the auditorium, transporting listeners to cloud-draped mountains and valleys echoing with ancestral songs. The lyrics—woven from English and his native tongue—spoke of journeys and homecomings, of love and loss, proving once and for all that music transcends language.

At the back of the hall, Priya forgot her clipboard entirely. She'd heard hundreds of college bands, but this was different. This music didn't just entertain—it transported, it healed, and it made you homesick for places you'd never been.

"Tarang" had dominated the college music scene for three consecutive years. Their leader, Neev, was everything Rick wasn't—polished, well-connected, and moving through the world with the confidence of someone who'd never had to justify his presence anywhere.

At twenty-four, Neev had deliberately remained enrolled by avoiding final exams, citing his roles as the College Representative for the ruling party and his involvement with the state's cultural department. His father owned Bhavna Studio, one of Kolkata's leading music companies, ensuring Neev never lacked resources or influence.

He was handsome in a calculated way—easy smile, practiced laugh, the kind of person who seemed to make friends effortlessly. But beneath the charm lay a ruthless mind that viewed every new talent as a threat to be neutralized.

After one of Yellow Hornbill's rehearsals, Neev approached Priya with studied casualness.

"Priya, I was hoping you could introduce me to this new band. They're quite... intriguing."

Priya's eyes narrowed. She'd watched Neev for two years, seen him befriend rivals only to sabotage them later. "Why the sudden interest? Last month, your 'helpful advice' left that Mizo boy in tears. I heard you mock his accent and tell him he'd never succeed because people couldn't understand 'jungle English.'"

Neev's smile never faltered. "That was friendly competition, Priya. I was preparing him for the real world. These Northeast kids are so... sensitive. I want to help Rick avoid similar mistakes."

"Help him?" Priya's voice carried a warning. "Or eliminate the competition?"

"You wound me," Neev murmured, hand pressed to his chest in mock injury. "I've never deliberately harmed anyone." His voice dropped, taking on an intimate tone. "But tell me, Priya—are you developing feelings for our mountain boy? You know what your father

would say. Kaku, head priest of one of North Kolkata's oldest temples—what would happen if he found out his daughter is involved with a tribal Christian? He'd disown you."

Priya's cheeks flushed, not with embarrassment but anger. "My personal life is none of your concern. And Rick isn't 'some tribal'—he's worth ten of you."

"Careful, Priya." Neev's mask slipped slightly, revealing something cold beneath. "Passion makes people do foolish things. It would be such a shame if something came between you two."

The threat hung in the air like smoke.

But the truth was, Rick had already captured Priya's heart—not just with his raw talent, but also with his gentle strength and vulnerability in a world that demanded he be invulnerable. More than attraction, she felt chosen, as if the universe had positioned her exactly where she needed to be to protect this beautiful soul from those who couldn't understand what it meant to be different.

She didn't know how far she would go to keep him safe.

She couldn't imagine that within months, she would sacrifice everything—family, heritage, the very identity she'd been raised to cherish—all for the love of a boy from the mountains who sang like he was calling the clouds home.

But fate was already weaving their story, thread by thread, note by note, leading them toward a choice that would echo through generations.

Chapter 4

The Hesitant Heart

Autumn 2000

The autumn evening cast long shadows across the Kolkata college campus as Rick sat alone on the steps of the music building, his guitar resting against his knees. His fingers moved across the strings in patterns expressing longing and desire, melodies emerging from depths he'd never accessed before.

"You play beautifully," came a soft voice from behind him.

Rick's hands froze as he turned to find Priya approaching, books hugged close to her heart, her simple pink cotton salwar suit glowing softly in the last rays of sunlight. Over the past month since auditions, she had woven herself into his evenings—always arriving with gentle excuses about schedules or equipment, always lingering longer than necessary.

"Thank you," Rick replied quietly, his voice reflecting careful politeness. "I was just working on new compositions."

"May I listen?" Priya settled onto the step beside him with a naturalness that both thrilled and terrified him.

Rick nodded, though his heart hammered. When Priya was near, his music flowed from places he didn't know existed—deeper, more passionate, filled with emotions he couldn't express in words.

He began a melody he'd been working on, one that spoke of mountain mists and distant dreams, of love as vast as the sky and as impossible as touching stars. His voice joined the guitar, the lyrics flowing in a mix of English and his native tongue.

"What does it mean?" Priya asked softly when the last note faded. "The words in your language—they sound like poetry."

Rick's cheeks flushed. "It's nothing important. Just thoughts about home, about feelings that are difficult to express."

"Rick," Priya's voice grew gentle but insistent. "You don't have to diminish yourself around me. Your music, your language, and your culture—they're beautiful. Why do you act as if they're something to be ashamed of?"

Rick set his guitar aside and stared at his hands, strong and capable from years working his family's farmland back in Kohima. "Because we come from different worlds, Priya. You're from a family of scholars and priests who shape urban culture. I'm from the hills, where we measure wealth differently and define success differently."

"So?"

The simple question hung between them, and Rick looked up to meet her eyes—clear, intelligent, and completely free of the judgment he'd expected.

"So we value different things," Rick said, his voice gaining strength. "You speak three languages fluently, know Sanskrit texts by heart, and discuss philosophy with professors. You understand city sophistication and urban complexity."

"And?"

Rick smiled ruefully. "And I come from a place where a man's worth is measured by his integrity, his connection to land, and his ability to

preserve tradition while moving forward. Where humility matters more than ambition, community more than individual achievement."

"I don't see the problem."

"The problem," Rick said gently, "is that your world sees mine as primitive, backwards. In Kolkata, when people learn I'm from Kohima, they either romanticize us as 'noble tribals in harmony with nature' or dismiss us as 'people who haven't learned to be properly civilized.'"

Priya was quiet, observing his expression, the way his hands moved restlessly, and how his shoulders straightened when speaking about home.

"Can I tell you something?" she finally said. "The first time I heard you sing, I cried. Not because your music was sad, but because it was so honest. So grounded. In my world, everything is performed—the way we speak, dress, and express emotions. Everything filtered through centuries of tradition and pressure to excel, compete, and prove our worth."

She moved closer until the jasmine scent from her hair wrapped around him, stirring something tender and electric.

"The boys from my community court me with Tagore quotes, classical music theory discussions, and promises of appropriate marriages benefiting both families. They're accomplished, ambitious, and driven to excel in competitive urban society."

She paused, eyes growing thoughtful.

"But none of them have your depth—your understanding of what truly matters. No one has your groundedness, your humility, or your connection to something larger than personal achievement."

"Priya," Rick's voice was barely a whisper. "You don't understand what you're saying. If your family knew—"

"If my family knew, they'd be scandalized. They'd probably disown me, cut me off from everything I've known." Priya's voice was steady despite the magnitude of her words. "But Rick, tell me—when you write

these songs, when you play these melodies from your heart, are you thinking about me?"

Rick's silence was answer enough.

"Then we have something real," Priya continued. "Something that transcends all the artificial barriers society built between people like us."

"Barriers that exist for a reason," Rick said desperately. "Priya, I come from wealth, education, and a respected family. But that means nothing here. We're still outsiders, people whose values are considered quaint but irrelevant to modern life."

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" "Hurt," edged her voice.

"No," he said quickly. "That's not what I meant. You're genuine, kind, and beautiful in ways that extend beyond your appearance. But your intentions don't change what the world will see when they look at us together."

Dan's voice was suddenly interrupted. "Rick, there you are! I've been—" He stopped abruptly, seeing Priya beside his friend, intimacy evident in their body language.

"Sorry. Didn't realize you were busy."

"It's fine," Rick said, standing and putting distance between himself and Priya. "We were discussing music arrangements."

Dan's sceptical expression suggested he wasn't fooled. "Priya, good evening. Rick, may I speak with you privately?"

As Priya gathered her books and left with a soft "good night," carrying layers of unfinished conversation, Dan fixed Rick with a serious stare.

"Brother, what are you doing?"

"Nothing," Rick replied, his defensive tone betraying him.

"That didn't look like nothing. That looked like two people falling in love—either beautiful or dangerous, depending on circumstances."

Rick slumped back onto the steps. "You think I don't know how dangerous this is?"

"Then why are you entertaining these feelings?"

Rick stared at the darkening sky. "Because when she looks at me, Dan, I feel that the values I was raised with—humility, integrity, and a connection to something larger—might not be weaknesses in this urban world. Maybe they're strengths she recognizes and values."

What happens when her family destroys both of your lives for daring to cross those cultural lines?

"Then at least I'll have known what it felt like to be appreciated for who I really am, not who I'm supposed to become to fit their world."

Dan sat beside his friend, his expression softening. "Rick, I love you like a brother. But love doesn't always bridge the chasms society insists on maintaining. Occasionally, it just gets caught in the middle and torn apart."

"I know," Rick said quietly. "But occasionally the song in your heart is so strong you have to sing it, even if the world doesn't understand the melody."

While the two friends sat in contemplative silence, a shadow lingered nearby. Neev watched with eyes sharpened by ambition. He'd already marked Rick as a rival. Still, now he saw something more useful: vulnerability ripe for manipulation, love that could be twisted into a weapon, and a heart waiting to be shattered.

Dark schemes began taking shape, each designed to turn Rick's noble heart and Priya's defiant love into tools for their undoing.

He smiled to himself. How he hated love stories.

Chapter 5

Love Against All Worlds

Three weeks passed like a record stuck in silence. Practice rooms felt emptier, scattered sheet music lay untouched, and Priya's unanswered messages accumulated on her phone. She remembered Rick's laughter filling the corridors, the softness in his voice when he discussed his dreams, and those moments that felt like a sanctuary amid uncertainty.

She found him in the library, surrounded by music theory books and handwritten compositions.

"You're avoiding me," she said, keeping her voice steady.

Rick glanced up, and in that fleeting moment, the longing in his eyes was exposed—raw and desperate—before he forced the walls back into place.

"I'm trying to do the right thing," he said quietly.

"The right thing for whom?" Priya settled into the chair across from him, ignoring curious glances from other students. "For me? Because I'm perfectly capable of deciding what's right for my life."

"For both of us." Rick's voice lacked conviction. "Priya, you don't understand what it feels like to be constantly perceived as inferior. To

have people assume any success you achieve must be charity or quotas rather than talent."

"Then help me understand." Priya leaned forward, urgent. "Don't shut me out because you think I'm too privileged to comprehend struggle. Talk to me, Rick. Trust me."

Rick's fingers drifted over the tabletop in absent patterns, echoing the melodies he played when no one was watching.

"When I first arrived in Kolkata," he began slowly, "I was so excited. I thought talent was all that mattered. The first week, I auditioned for three different bands."

He paused, the memories still raw.

"The first said I had 'an intriguing ethnic sound' for 'special occasions.' The second asked if I knew traditional tribal songs because that would be 'more authentic' than modern music. The third told me I was talented but might be happier playing for students from my background."

Priya felt tears burning behind her eyes, but willed herself to stay present.

"The worst part," Rick continued, words flowing like water breaking through a dam, "is when people are kind because they feel sorry for you. When they praise your music and then explain to friends how 'remarkable' it is that someone from such a 'disadvantaged background' could create something so sophisticated."

"Finding a place to live?" Rick's voice grew bitter. "Half the landlords wouldn't even consider renting to me. The other half wanted to triple the deposit because Northeastern students are 'unreliable.' I finally found a place where the owner prides himself on being 'progressive enough to rent to tribals.'"

He remembered one particular landlord—an elderly man who'd peered at him through a narrow door gap. "It's not personal, but people like you have a different way of living. It's better for everyone if we

avoid misunderstandings." The door had slammed shut, another reminder of how unwelcome he was.

"I had no idea," Priya whispered.

"How could you? You move through this world as if it were designed for you, because it was. When you walk into a room, people see a refined Bengali girl from a good family. When I walk in, they see an outsider trying to fit where he doesn't belong."

Priya reached across the table and took his hands in hers, ignoring the way conversations around them quieted.

"You're right. I don't understand that discrimination because I've never experienced it. But Rick, when I look at you, do you know what I see?"

Rick shook his head, though he didn't pull away.

"I see someone whose music carries stories as rich as the mountains that shaped him. I see hands that create beauty, not just from technique but from understanding life's true essentials." She paused. "I apologize for initially romanticizing your experiences, turning them into something idealized instead of truly understanding their weight. I'm learning to appreciate all that you are with genuine respect."

"I see someone who treats everyone—from the college dean to the man who sweeps our classroom—with the same genuine respect. Someone who makes me want to be more grounded, more authentic, and more connected to what really matters."

Rick stared at their entwined hands, stunned. Her warmth seeped into old wounds like balm.

Priya continued, "But most of all, I see someone so hurt by prejudice that he's afraid to believe he deserves love." Well, I'm here to tell you that you do, Rick Angami. You deserve all the love you can handle and more."

"Even if it costs you everything?" Rick asked, finally meeting her eyes. "Because it will, Priya. Your family, your community—they'll

expect you to marry someone appropriate, someone who fits their plans."

"Then they'll be disappointed," Priya replied without hesitation. "Because I've never been good at doing what's expected."

Something inside Rick broke—a fierce, hidden fear giving way to vulnerable hope. For the first time, he let himself believe her love might actually reach him.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I've fallen in love with you, Rick Angami. Not despite your background, not to rebel against my family, but because you are the most genuine, talented, beautiful soul I've ever encountered."

"Priya," Rick's voice was barely a whisper. "I love you too. God help me, I've been in love with you since the first day you asked to hear me practice."

"Then stop trying to protect me from my choices," Priya said, squeezing his hands. "I know what I'm risking. I know what this could cost. But Rick, some things are worth risking everything for."

Around them, the library had fallen into a hush, students feigning focus as they listened to the extraordinary scene unfolding—a Bengali Brahmin girl boldly proclaiming her love for a tribal boy.

"What happens now?" Rick asked, hardly daring to believe.

"Now we stop hiding." Priya stood, keeping hold of his hand. "Now we walk out of here together and let the world see we've chosen each other."

"Priya, are you sure? Once we do this, there's no going back. Word will reach your family—"

"Good," Priya said firmly. "Let them talk. Let my family know their daughter has found someone worth fighting for. And Rick? Stop calling it 'your background' like it's something shameful. You're Naga. You're from Kohima. You come from people who've preserved their culture against enormous pressures. You speak languages I don't know,

understand traditions I've never experienced, and carry stories that are part of who you are."

She paused, breath shaky, eyes blazing with determination.

Just beyond the shelves, a shadow shifted. Neev lingered, unseen, observing with keen interest. Their open defiance highlighted his own perceived failures, the dreams he'd sacrificed to family expectations. Envy and bitterness churned within him.

As Rick and Priya left hand in hand, Neev's facade slipped. He had heard enough. Schemes began taking shape—plots to twist their love into a weapon, to show Rick the cost of dreaming beyond his place, and to teach Priya the bitter price of following her heart.

But for now, Rick and Priya wandered the campus bathed in golden afternoon light, their clasped hands a silent rebellion against a world determined to keep them apart. They were young, in love, and brave—or foolish—enough to believe their hearts could conquer any barrier.

They held tightly to each other, determined to face whatever came with unwavering resolve. Dark clouds had already gathered on the horizon: an impending marriage proposal for Priya from an influential family her parents couldn't ignore. She stood to lose everything. Yet undeterred, they vowed their love would be enough.

Chapter 6

The Weight of Heritage

Present Day - March 2020

The Angami household revealed the beautiful complexity of cultural fusion. On a crisp Sunday morning, Priya prepared breakfast that captured this blend—steaming Khasi-style jadoh beside luchis and alur dom. Rick led a prayer in English and Nagamese. Their dining table held proper cutlery, conversations flowed in three languages, and brass utensils gleamed like miniature suns beside Naga wooden bowls.

Books in Bengali script lined the shelves next to Naga folk tales. The faint fragrance of incense mingled with mountain air. They were Naga, yes, but their daily life reflected many worlds.

Priya had adapted well to this land of rolling hills and wild orchids, yet she could never fully surrender her past. She locked away her musical gifts, like jewellery she couldn't bear to wear. But other parts of her Bengali identity continued to bloom. In her kitchen, the aroma of fish curry and steamed rice brought her back to her mother's kitchen in Kolkata. The sizzle of mustard oil in a hot pan sang to her as it did in childhood. Her sarees, preserved in sandalwood-scented trunks, emerged for every occasion—or for none at all, simply because wearing them felt like embracing a part of herself she refused to let die.

In her late thirties, Priya remained strikingly beautiful. Her long hair, still thick and lustrous, was often braided with jasmine from her garden. Her fair skin bore the glow of someone who had found peace, if not happiness. But her eyes were windows to secrets—deep waters that reflected light but never revealed their depths.

The night that changed everything stole more than her old life. Rain had drummed against windows, mirroring her pounding heart as she clutched the cloth to her chest. She escaped with nothing but clothes on her back and her grandmother's brass water vessel from the family shrine—both theft and desperate preservation, her final rebellion against a family that chose orthodoxy over happiness.

Each day in Nagaland, she carried the weight of what she'd left behind. She missed her parents' evening prayers, her music teacher's patience, her college friends' laughter, and the chaos of Kolkata's streets. She could never touch the harmonium that had been her first love. Music became a monument to dreams sacrificed for love.

Yet in stillness, she would occasionally feel a whisper of forgotten notes brushing against her mind. *Will the echoes ever fade?* Though her heart answered with silent resolve, she carried on, finding courage in that unspoken melody.

At first, joining the Angami clan had filled her with apprehension. How could she, a Bengali Brahmin girl from the plains, ever find acceptance from people whose customs were so foreign? The nights were sleepless, filled with questions about whether she'd ever truly belong.

But Rick's father, John Angami, became her unexpected salvation. A barrister who'd studied law in the UK, John possessed worldly sophistication that bridged cultures effortlessly. He built their family home as a grand British-style mansion with sprawling verandas and manicured gardens, offering panoramic valley views—a testament to his hybrid identity.

"Culture," John had said during their first meeting, "is not about where you come from. It's about how you honour the best of all worlds you've touched."

With John's patient guidance, Priya learned to appreciate the Angami way of life. She saw deep spirituality in their connection to the land and valued the wisdom in their agricultural practices. John's farm, with terraced fields and prized Mithuns in highland meadows, became her sanctuary. Tending vegetables and herbs reminded her of her grandmother's garden in Kolkata, their growth echoing her journey toward healing.

The château John built as a young man was his tribute to the English countryside he'd loved during his studies. It became Priya's creative haven. Its library, with books in several languages, offered refuge whenever homesickness threatened. The sunlit morning room became her favourite space for reading and reflection.

Even in this paradise, Priya's heart remained vigilant. She'd found happiness, but at a cost that haunted her dreams. Music that once flowed through her like a river was now dammed by trauma. Only silence remained where melodies once danced.

Occasionally, when wind rustled through garden leaves or the kettle whistled on the stove, a stray note would catch her ear—ghost notes hinting at melodies that lingered on the edge of consciousness, whispers urging her to find her voice again.

Now, watching her daughter's determined face across the breakfast table, Priya felt the familiar tightening in her chest. Holud had her father's gentle strength and her grandmother's stubborn spirit. She also carried Priya's dreams—dreams that had led to both love and devastation.

"She wants to fly," Priya whispered to herself, watching Holud. "She wants wings like a hornbill—exquisite, unique, and able to conquer the world."

But Kolkata, the city of joy and sorrow, stayed off limits. Priya would not allow her daughter to visit. It was final. No argument could change her mind.

She remembered too clearly the dangers lurking beneath Kolkata's vibrant facade—the oppressive shadow of events that refused to fade. The city that had once been a sanctuary became a stage of betrayal and loss, where whispered rumours could turn into life-altering thunder. She had sacrificed and survived too much to risk losing her daughter to the same forces that once threatened to destroy her.

The hornbill called from its perch in the ancient oak, its echo cascading across the valley. It reminded Priya of the freedom she once craved, the heights she'd longed to reach. But the familiar call also resonated with her fears, the shadows of past choices, and the risks imprinted in her memory.

As the hornbill's voice drifted into the morning air, Priya understood that while some dreams beckoned beyond these hills, others lay trapped within, weighed down by dangers she could never ignore.

Her daughter wanted wings. But Priya knew too well—some flights end in falling, and not every bird that leaves the nest returns home.

Chapter 7

A Ray of Hope

March 2022 (continues)

Days slipped past in a blur, and Holud remained utterly clueless about how to sway her mother. Her father had already thrown in the towel.

"I can do nothing against Ma," he'd said with a helpless shrug the night before. "You know how she is."

In their family, Ma's word was the silent law. Even Granny and Grandpa, devoted to her, nodded along with every choice she made. At family gatherings, whenever Ma paused mid-sentence, Grandpa's eyes would meet Granny's in an almost imperceptible exchange. Holud often sensed a hidden message in their glances—once, she caught Grandpa beginning to say something, only to stop and adjust his glasses. It was as if everyone shared a secret she alone was denied.

The morning started gloomily. Thick clouds swathed 'Surji Mama'—as Ma had called the Sun in childhood—obscuring the bright blue heavens. The oppressive damp air reflected Holud's own mood. She decided to step out, hoping the open air might soothe her turbulent thoughts.

Should I visit Ana or Priyanka? No, they'd only pester her: "Are you coming with us?" Her answer was set in stone.

Then, a sudden thought sparked—Dan Uncle, Kyan's father.

"If anyone can help, it's Uncle Dan," she said, hope flickering. "Even Ma listens to him sometimes."

Pa had once shown her an old photograph, its edges worn and yellowed. "Dan and I go way back to our school days," he'd said with a smile. Dan had gone to the UK to complete his master's degree before returning to serve the people of Nagaland. "A true man of the community," Ma had called him. "Always putting Nagaland first." Everyone in Kohima respected him for his knowledge and simplicity.

He could help. Maybe he'd finally reveal why Ma and Pa returned to Kohima before finishing their studies. *I need answers. If this chance slips away, will I ever uncover the truth?*

Kyan's house stood as a colonial gem from the British era, steeped in heritage—not just Kohima's pride but a treasure for all of Nagaland. Nestled on the hillside, its bricks seemed to whisper tales from another time.

The garden looked like a cascade of colourful necklaces draped along the hillside. Rare orchids dangled from tall trees sheltering flocks of birds. The crisp aroma of moss after rain mingled with the sweet orchid scent, grounding her in a Naga world full of memories.

"It feels like every bird in Nagaland has gathered in Dan Uncle's garden—except me," Holud mused with a smile. After all, she was named for the region's most exquisite bird, the hornbill.

"Ah, there's my rare bird!" Uncle Dan would say jokingly whenever she visited. "You're so rare that you only visit occasionally nowadays."

Uncle Dan was the rare person Ma sometimes listened to. Maybe he could reach her. *Maybe he'll have answers. I can't let this moment pass without discovering what lies beneath the surface.*

Holud pushed open the ornate iron gate. Three rhododendrons, blazing red at the entrance, greeted her like loyal friends.

"Hello, beautiful ones," she whispered. "At least you're always here for me."

The grey sky and crimson rhododendrons lifted her spirits. She began humming 'Holud Pakhi,' the lullaby her mother sang when she was a child. Surrounded by hills, birds, and imagined necklaces, hope flickered within her.

There must be a way forward. I refuse to give up. Someone can help me. Please, let Uncle Dan hold the answers I need.

Drawing a deep breath to steady the nervous energy swirling inside, Holud knocked on the door, her heart pounding with hope, anxiety, and determination. The door creaked slowly, resonantly, echoing gently into the quiet garden.

She stepped back, anticipation hanging in the air like the moisture in the clouds above.

Chapter 8

First Day Blues

Kolkata, April 2022 - LM Palace

Aarav, notorious for sleeping in, surprised himself by rising with the sun on his first day of college. The crisp morning air carried faint strains of a distant raga, drawing him into a day that promised new beginnings.

Music ran in his veins. His father—the force behind the legendary 'Lord Of Music' company—had shaped countless stars' careers. Today, Aarav was determined to step out from that shadow and prove he was more than just a legacy.

From childhood, music was the only thread connecting Aarav to his father. In every other way, he mirrored his principled mother, once celebrated as her school's "Nightingale," who silenced her song after Aarav was born—persuaded, or instead coerced, by LM.

LM wielded immense power in India's music world, always advancing his ambitions. Unable to accept Suranjana's brighter talent, he'd extinguished her singing career entirely.

Fortune had smiled on LM, making him one of India's wealthiest. Yet no amount of success could bridge the silent chasm between him and his son. Aarav and Suranjana stood on one shore, LM stranded on the other.

"I know I never allowed Su to pursue music," LM often muttered in solitude. "But Aarav is my son. I love him more than myself. Why can't he love me unconditionally?"

The question haunted him, though he refused to see the answer reflected in his actions.

Aarav harboured quiet resentment for his father's legendary disregard for others' feelings. LM's self-absorption and need for control left Su wounded, leaving friends puzzled by her loyalty. Aarav understood his mother's sacrifice was for his sake, and he poured himself into music to ease her pain.

His father dubbed him 'Lord of Music Junior'—a title that was both a blessing and a burden.

"Ma! Where are my jeans?" Aarav called out as he rummaged through his wardrobe.

"Aarav, you cannot go to college on the first day in tattered jeans," Suranjana replied from the hallway, her saree rustling softly. The scent of rose and chandan followed her as she set down neatly folded formal trousers and a shirt. "I purchased the clothes for your first day. Get ready—Maya and Subho are coming any minute. Driver Kaku has your favourite car ready."

"But Ma! That's not me! You know I only wear jeans. Maya and Subho will laugh," Aarav protested, holding up the formal clothes with a grimace.

"No, they won't—not if they know I chose it." Suranjana smiled gently. "I can hear them in the garden now. Just get ready, Jishu!"

With his trimmed beard and flowing ponytail, Aarav's resemblance to Lord Jesus earned him admirers wherever he went. Yet beneath this striking appearance, he felt constant discomfort with the attention. He longed for recognition beyond his external persona, for someone to see past the façade and appreciate the passion and struggles that defined his journey.

Maya was among his closest friends, harbouring feelings that went beyond friendship—though Aarav remained oblivious. For him, Maya and Subho were like second skin; life without them felt unimaginable.

"Aunty, we're here!" Maya chirped as she entered. "Aarav's not ready, as always. We need to be on time today!" She softened. "I brought a treat—Mummy sent Aarav's favourite chocolate swirl cake!"

"Aarav!" Suranjana called out.

"I'm here!" He walked down the stairs.

"OMG! Subho, just see how handsome Aarav looks!" Maya exclaimed, eyes lighting up.

Maya, in her crisp white skirt and black blouse, commanded attention anywhere. Her sharp features and expressive eyes made her unforgettable.

"Pista green shirt with khaki formals! Ready to impress," Subho said with a warm laugh.

"Thanks for all the sarcastic remarks." Aarav rolled his eyes. "I am aware that I will be ridiculed today." But I can never say no to Ma."

"You look flawless, Jishu." Suranjana adjusted his collar with motherly pride. "Now go make us proud."

"Here are the keys! Let's go! Bye, Ma!" Aarav jingled the keys.

"Take care, son. Call when you reach."

"We will, Aunty!" Maya and Subho chorused as they headed toward the car.

As the trio set off, LM lingered on the rooftop balcony, observing their departure with a heavy heart. The sound of the car engine stirred something within him—a desire to reconnect, to bridge the distance that had grown over the years.

In a moment of quiet resolve, he hurried downstairs, clutching a small, handcrafted charm symbolising luck and protection. He placed it

gently on the car's bonnet—a silent gesture of love and hope that his son would never see, never acknowledge, never understand.

As the engine roared to life, LM retreated behind a garden pillar, watching discreetly as they drove away. His throat tightened with words he'd never learned to say.

I'm sorry. I'm proud of you. I love you.

But the words remained trapped, as they always had.

He turned back to his rare adeniums, tending them with strong hands that had built an empire but couldn't reach his own son. He hoped their quiet beauty might soothe the emptiness inside—the hollow space where a father's love should have flowered into connection but had only ever grown thorns.

The morning breeze carried away his unspoken words, leaving only quiet hope and the gentle scent of flowers that would never be enough to fill the silence between them.

Chapter 9

The City of Joy

Kolkata, April 2022

The sour-sweet tang of cut mango hit Billy's nostrils the moment they stepped into Howrah station. The station swallowed them whole—a chaos of humanity, food vendors, and fish sellers, all swirling into a dizzying haze. Voices clashed with the screech of trains. Unknown faces pressed in from every side. The city's excess pressed down on them, making them ache for the gentle order of the hills.

"Oh my God!" Billy gasped, clutching Ana's arm. "I can't breathe. The air is so thick."

"Should've taken the flight," Prii muttered, her eyes darting nervously.

"No." Ana squared her shoulders. "We wanted the real journey, remember? We said we wanted to see the country."

"Then let's keep moving." Ana's voice sharpened. "Stay close."

The weight of strangers' stares made them squirm. Billy's short skirt drew looks. Prii's beauty invited whistles that made her flinch. Ana's tomboyish stride carved a small shield through the crowd, but even she seemed rattled.

"Why are they staring?" Prii whispered.

"Don't look. Just walk."

They squeezed toward the exit, Ana forging their path. The city's chaos crashed against memories of tranquil hills. Billy gulped for air, hot wind slicking sweat down her aquiline nose—her mother's legacy.

"This is the City of Joy?" Billy wiped her forehead. "Ma's city?"

A storm of emotions churned inside her. Dan Uncle had finally persuaded Ma, and she'd caught fragments of his gentle insistence—that Billy should go to Kolkata, that her dream deserved a chance.

The past is past. That should not affect Billy.

Uncle called her Billy because, to him, she was the exotic hornbill everyone adored.

Someone stepped on her foot. She stumbled.

"Careful!" Ana caught her arm. "Don't daydream while walking. This isn't Kohima."

"Look—Howrah Bridge," Prii breathed.

The bridge soared above the throng, a marvel of steel and strength. Skyscrapers pierced the haze. Buses careened past with people dangling from doors like carnival riders.

"They're hanging out like fruits from a tree!" Prii's eyes widened.

"How do they hold on?" Billy wondered aloud.

They'd planned to stay in a hostel near campus—Priya had insisted on this particular one, citing its proximity to important landmarks. After the station's chaos, their excitement had curdled into nervous unease.

"Are we making the right decision?" Billy asked quietly.

"Too late now." Ana's voice carried its own uncertainty.

The hostel was a snug two-story house hidden in winding lanes. Billy's mind drifted to her mansion, her parents, and the comforting aroma of cakes baking in their sunlit living room.

"Welcome, my dear girls!" A middle-aged woman appeared in the doorway. "You must be exhausted. I'm Anjali. Come, let me show you your room."

Anjali Aunt's warmth was genuine, but their room was a tight squeeze—three beds and a window no bigger than a letterbox, letting in only a whisper of air.

Billy unlatched the tiny window. Instead of sky, she faced the looming wall of a multi-storied flat, crowding out the view and sunlight.

"Aunt, why is the window so small?"

Anjali Aunt's face grew sad. "Let me tell you something, dear. I'm a childless widow, and these local promoters—some act like political gangs; we call them 'dadas"—keep trying to force me out. They offer money and a new flat. But how can I leave?" Her voice caught. "This isn't just a house. I sat on that porch watching my husband tend our garden, his laughter on these walls. In this hungry real estate boom, my little corner of peace is always under threat."

"That's terrible." Prii's voice softened. "How can they do that?"

"This is how the city works, dear. The powerful crush the weak." Anjali Aunt's smile turned bitter. "But I won't give up. This house holds our love, our memories."

She paused at the door. "Rest now. You've had a long journey. I'll bring tea later."

Once alone, Billy flopped onto her bed, drumming her fingers on her stomach—a restless beat echoing her thoughts. Ana sprawled beside a crumpled map; eyes skimming routes she'd traced countless times. Prii clutched her pillow, face half-buried in soft fabric, a fortress against swirling emotions.

Dinner was forgotten. Each girl quietly questioned their choice to come to this so-called City of Joy, though Priya's insistence had left no room for second thoughts.

"I miss home," Billy whispered.

"We all do." Ana stared at the ceiling. "But we're here now."

"What if Ma was right?" Billy's voice barely carried. "What if we can't handle this place?"

"Don't." Prii's voice was shaky. "Don't think like that. We came here with dreams."

"And Priya Auntie insisted we stay here," Ana spoke slowly. "There must be a reason, even if we don't understand yet."

The three friends lay in wordless silence, each adrift in her thoughts. From outside, the rhythmic clang of a distant temple bell mingled with vendors' cries. Kolkata had a voice that whispered both welcome and challenge.

Billy couldn't shake a premonition—that tomorrow held more than they were prepared for. The pulse of the city seeped into the room, telling stories untold, promising a tapestry of experiences yet unfurling, as if insisting the city held its dreams and secrets parallel to their own.

A soft knock broke the silence.

"Girls?" Anjali Auntie's voice came through the door. "I brought tea. Chai always helps on the first night."

Ana opened the door. Anjali stood there with a tray, steam rising from clay cups.

"Drink. It will settle you." She smiled. "Every girl who comes to this city feels lost at first. But Kolkata has a way of becoming home if you let it."

Billy took a cup, the warmth spreading through her fingers.

"Did you... Did you feel this way, too, Auntie? When you first came?"

"I was born here, dear. But yes—there was a time when I felt lost in my city." Anjali's eyes grew distant. "That's when I learned something. The city doesn't change for you. You change with it. Alternatively, you can discover the places that allow you to remain true to yourself.

She touched Billy's cheek gently. "Your mother chose this hostel for a reason. Trust that."

After she left, the three girls sipped their tea in silence. The clay cups smelled of earth and rain. Outside, Kolkata continued its endless song.

"Tomorrow," Ana said finally. "Tomorrow we find our footing."

"Tomorrow," Prii echoed.

Billy closed her eyes, the tea warming her from within. Somewhere in this vast, bewildering city was the college where her parents had met, the streets they had walked, and the music they had made together.

Somewhere in this chaos was her story, waiting to begin.

Chapter 10

The Morning After

Morning arrived with a jolt. Billy awoke to honking cars and vendors' cries, the city's restless energy pressing in from every side. Diesel fumes mingled with street food aromas. She pulled the rough blanket closer, aching for home.

"Girls! Breakfast is ready. College registration is today, right?" Anjali Aunty knocked briskly.

Billy rubbed her eyes. In daylight, the cramped room felt even smaller. Her gaze found the small jar of bamboo shoot pickle from Nagaland on the windowsill—all that connected her to morning mist over valleys, her mother's kitchen, and the gentle sounds of bamboo in the wind.

"Ana, Prii. Wake up."

"Don't want to." Ana groaned. "I want our hills."

"We all do." Prii sat up. "But we can't go back."

Anjali Aunty served warm parathas and steaming tea. The familiar rhythm steadied them, though each measured the meal against memories of home.

"You look worn out, my darlings. Didn't sleep well?"

"Just different, Aunty." Billy sipped her tea. "Too noisy."

"You'll adjust, child. This city has its magic."

"What magic?" Ana's tone was sharp. "All this chaos?"

"Dreams." Anjali Aunty smiled. "This city sees millions come true. Do you know Mr. Sen, the tea seller by the station? He came with nothing but a few rupees. Now he owns three stalls and employs young people like himself. The city rewards persistence."

Ana rolled her eyes but said nothing.

"Magic isn't always obvious," Prii said quietly. "Sometimes you have to work for it to show itself."

They squeezed onto a crowded bus, jostled by strangers. Billy pressed her forehead against the window, trying to track the fast-moving streets.

The bus lurched to a stop.

"Wait—did we miss it?" Prii's voice pitched high.

"We missed our stop!" Ana pushed toward the door. "Driver! Next stop, please!"

They tumbled out onto an unfamiliar corner. For a moment, panic flickered between them.

"Okay." Billy took a breath. "We're not lost. We're just... figuring it out."

Around them, the city pulsed with life. Street vendors arranged their wares. A woman balanced three tiffins on her head. A man painted a fresh rangoli on the threshold of his shop. Everyone is chasing something, building something, becoming something.

"Anjali Aunty was right," Billy said slowly. "There is something here."

"What?" Prii looked sceptical.

"Everyone's chasing something. We're not alone—we're part of something bigger."

Ana studied the street, then nodded. "Come on. College is this way."

The college gates rose before them—towering, ornate metalwork that reminded Billy of temple designs from home. The sprawling campus stretched beyond, heavy with history and possibility.

"This is it." Ana's voice carried both awe and determination. "Our mark begins here."

"Welcome to your new life, girls." Prii smiled, but her hand trembled slightly.

Billy paused at the threshold. In Kohima, she was Dan uncle's pet, a known face with a clear role. Here, she was anonymous—a possibility waiting to be shaped. The thought terrified and thrilled her in equal measure.

Could she be Pakhi here, instead of just Billy? Could she be more than the exotic hornbill everyone adored?

"Ma," she whispered, looking up at the sky—different, but still the same. "I hope I make you proud."

Ana squeezed her hand. Prii nodded. Their silent exchange carried everything they couldn't say aloud.

Together, they crossed into their new beginning.

The City of Joy had shown its harsh side—crowded, chaotic, unforgiving. But it had also whispered a promise: that dreams could be within reach if they were brave enough to chase them.

And occasionally, that promise alone made every struggle worthwhile.

Chapter 11

When Hearts Collide

"Fresh meat!"

The taunt cut through the morning air. Billy's hand tightened on her yellow skirt as a group of boys materialized around them, blocking the college gates.

Expensive motorbikes. Dirty grins. Eyes that crawled over skin.

"Look at the momos!" one shouted. "Pork or chicken?"

"Don't miss the Drumstick Jumbo!" Another pointed at Ana, crude laughter rippling through the pack.

Billy's vision blurred with tears. Prii froze. Ana stepped forward, her voice shaking but firm.

"Let us through. Now."

The bearded one—Sunny—grinned wider. "Kichu hobe na jaaneman!" His beady eyes glittered. "We'll eat our breakfast today! Nobody touches us here. Not even your principal. Khabo khabo! Abaar khabooo (we want to eat)! Ore Godai, edike aai!"

The fat boy, Godai, lumbered forward.

Hands grabbed.

Prii stumbled, knees hitting concrete. Billy felt Sunny's arms close around her, his breath hot on her neck. She couldn't breathe, couldn't scream—

Ana fought back, but there were too many. They pinned her arms and twisted her legs. A branch cracked underfoot. Students watched from a distance, frozen. Faculty turned away.

No one helped.

No one dared.

A sports car screeched to a halt at the gates.

"Aarav! Look!" Maya's voice was urgent.

Three figures tumbled out. Aarav saw Sunny's hands on a girl in yellow, saw her terror, and something inside him snapped.

"Sunny!" His voice was ice and fire. "Get your fucking hands off her!"

He and Subho charged. Years of karate made their movements precise and brutal. Aarav grabbed Sunny by the collar and hurled him backwards. The hooligan hit the ground hard.

"Touch them again," Aarav's voice was deadly quiet, "and I'll break every bone in your hands."

Subho pulled the others off Ana. "Are you okay? Can you stand?"

Ana nodded, blood trickling from her split lip.

Maya rushed to Prii. "Are you hurt?"

"I... I don't know." Prii's whole body trembled.

Aarav turned to the girl in yellow.

She was shaking so hard she could barely stand. Tears streaked her face. But her grey-blue eyes—storm-coloured, defiant even in fear—held him frozen.

"Hey." His voice gentled completely. "You're safe now. I promise."

She looked up at him. The world narrowed to just the two of them—her ragged breathing, his steady heartbeat, and the way she fit against his chest when she collapsed forward.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for—"

"Don't." He steadied her with both hands. "Are you hurt? Did they—"

"No. I'm okay now." She took a shuddering breath. "I'm Billy. I mean, Holud. My friends call me Pakhi."

"Aarav." His thumb brushed tears from her cheek without thinking. "You're safe, Pakhi."

Something electric passed between them. They both sensed a familiarity they couldn't quite pinpoint.

Behind them, Maya watched with an expression she quickly masked. Subho glanced between Aarav and the girl, eyebrows raised.

"Aarav?" Maya's voice carried an edge.

He didn't seem to hear her.

Pakhi's breathing synced with his. Her fingers gripped his shirt like a lifeline. Neither moved.

"We should report this," Maya spoke louder. "The principal needs to know."

"No." Ana's voice was flat. She wiped blood from her mouth. "We handle the situation ourselves."

"But they'll do it again—"

"I said no." Ana's eyes were hard. She'd learned long ago that reporting only brought more trouble. "Thank you. "Thank you all." I'm Ana. This is Prii. And this is Pakhi."

"Maya." The introduction was clipped. "And Subho."

"We're from Nagaland," Prii added, still shaking. "First day."

"Hell of a welcome." Subho's smile was bitter. "Sunny's been terrorizing this campus for years. Rich family, political connections."

"Not anymore." Aarav's arm was still around Pakhi. "If he touches any of you again, he answers to me."

Pakhi looked up at him. "Why did you help us?"

The question surprised him. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Everyone else just... watched."

Something flickered in his eyes—anger, recognition, something deeper. "I'm not everyone else."

"No." Her voice was barely audible. "You're not."

Sunny pushed himself up from the ground, blood on his lip. His grin was vicious.

"This isn't over, Mukherjeei." He spat. "Your daddy's name won't protect you forever."

"Try me." Aarav's voice was soft, lethal. "I'm right here."

Sunny looked at Pakhi one more time—a look that promised retribution—then jerked his head at his gang. They slunk away, but the threat lingered in the air like smoke.

Aarav, Maya, and Subho knew the gang from their higher secondary days. They had studied in the same school.

"Come on." Maya touched Aarav's shoulder. "We need to get to class."

"I'll walk them to registration first." Aarav didn't look at Maya. His eyes were still on Pakhi.

"We're fine now." Ana's tone was careful and grateful but wary. "You've done enough."

"I'm walking you." It wasn't a question.

Ana exchanged glances with Prii. Some silent communication passed between them.

"Okay," Ana said finally. "Thank you."

They walked through the campus—six of them now instead of three. Students stared. Whispers followed. But with Aarav beside her, Pakhi felt the ground steady beneath her feet.

"First day," she said softly. "And I've already cried, been attacked, and..."

"And what?" Aarav asked.

Met you. The words hung in her throat. "And survived."

"You did more than survive." His hand brushed hers, fingers tangling briefly before pulling away. "You stood your ground."

"I was terrified."

"Being brave doesn't mean you're not scared." His eyes held hers. "It means you're scared and you keep going anyway."

Behind them, Maya's jaw tightened. Subho noticed and said nothing.

Ahead, the administration building loomed. But Pakhi wasn't thinking about registration anymore. With storm-grey eyes filled with emotions, she thought about hands that could hurt and hands that could protect, as well as a voice that made her feel safe for the first time since leaving home.

Momma, she thought, did your heart race like this when you met Daddy?

She didn't know that in her parents' story, first meetings also came with chaos, with danger, and with a connection that defied logic.

History, it seemed, had a way of repeating itself.

But whether it would repeat the tragedy or rewrite the ending—that remained to be seen.

Chapter 12

New Beginnings

The rest of the day blurred. Pakhi sat through registration, orientation, and a campus tour—but all she could think about were gentle brown eyes and the feeling of strong hands steadying her when the world tilted sideways.

"Pakhi, are you even listening?" Ana nudged her in the canteen.

"Huh?"

"I said we need to report those hooligans." Ana's voice still carried anger. "What if they do this to other girls?"

"We should thank them." Pakhi stirred her tea. "Aarav and his friends. We should thank them properly."

Ana and Prii exchanged glances.

"Oh, so that's what this is about." Prii's smile was gentle. "You like him."

Pakhi's cheeks flamed. "I don't—I mean, I just—"

"Pakhi, your face is as red as a Naga chili." Ana laughed. "And he couldn't stop looking at you either."

"Really?" Pakhi's voice went small, hopeful.

"Really." Prii squeezed her hand. "Like you were the most precious thing in the world."

Under the old banyan tree, Aarav sat with Maya and Subho. His tea went cold, untouched.

"Earth to Aarav." Subho waved a hand in front of his face. "You've been staring at nothing for ten minutes."

"Sorry, what?"

Maya's chest tightened. She knew that look, that distraction. "Is this about that girl? Pakhi?"

Aarav's face brightened. "She's different. There's something about her—something honest. Did you see her eyes?"

"Since when do you notice eyes?" Subho raised an eyebrow.

"Since this morning." Aarav's grin turned sheepish. "I can't stop thinking about her. Is that weird?"

"Weird? Try insane. You just met her."

"Sometimes you just know." Aarav's voice went quiet, wondering. "I never believed in love at first sight. I thought it only existed in films."

Maya's throat constricted. She'd always pictured a future with Aarav, certain their paths would merge. Now she felt those dreams slipping through her fingers like water.

"Maybe we should invite them to hang out," she heard herself say. "They're new. They don't know anyone."

Aarav's eyes lit up. "That's brilliant, Maya! You're the best."

If only you knew. She forced a smile.

That evening, Anjali Auntie knocked on their door. "Girls, you have visitors."

Pakhi's heart jumped. *Could it be—*

Downstairs, Aarav stood in the small living room, looking slightly out of place. His eyes found hers immediately.

"Hi. I hope we're not disturbing you."

"Not at all." Her voice came out breathless.

"We thought you might want dinner," Maya said, smile bright and brittle. "There's a Bengali restaurant nearby. Our treat—welcome to Kolkata."

"That's kind of you," Ana said, glancing at her friends.

"We'd love to," Prii added.

They walked through the evening streets, the city alive with tram bells and vendor calls. Maya led the way with Ana and Prii. Subho hung back, grinning knowingly. Aarav fell into step beside Pakhi.

"How was your first day?"

"Better than it started." She smiled. "Thanks to you."

"I'm just glad you're safe." His voice dropped, fierce. "I won't let them hurt you again."

"You don't have to protect me." This warmth bloomed in her chest even as she thought about her mother.

"Maybe not." He stopped and turned to face her. "But I want to."

The honesty in his words stole her breath. Under streetlights, with the city humming around them, the world narrowed to just the two of them.

"Why?" she whispered.

"From the moment I saw you, something shifted." He searched for words. "I can't explain it. But it feels like I've been waiting my whole life—just to find you."

Tears stung her eyes. "I feel it too."

They stood there, lost in each other, until Subho's voice carried back. "Hey, lovebirds! Restaurant's this way!"

Both blushed furiously. As they hurried to catch up, their hands brushed. Neither pulled away.

Up ahead, Maya watched. Her hand tightened around her phone, knuckles white. She understood with quiet certainty that she'd lost him—if she'd ever had him at all.

The restaurant was warm and full of laughter and the smell of fish curry. Pakhi found herself relaxing, the earlier terror fading. Ana debated literature with Subho. Prii made Maya laugh despite her sorrowful mood. And Aarav—

Aarav only had eyes for Pakhi.

"Try this." He pushed a plate toward her. "*Kosha mangsho* (a slow cooked Bengali mutton cuisine). You'll love it."

She took a bite. The spices exploded on her tongue—complex, layered, nothing like home but somehow perfect.

"Good?" His smile was eager and hopeful.

"Amazing."

"Like you." The words slipped out before he could stop them.

Pakhi's breath caught. Across the table, Maya looked away.

Walking back to the hostel, Kolkata felt different. Less overwhelming. With Aarav beside her, even the city's chaos softened into something almost like a promise.

"Thank you for today," she said at the hostel gate.

"Thank you for letting me be part of it."

He would rather not leave. She didn't want him to go. But Anjali Aunty was watching from the window, and propriety demanded they say goodnight.

"Tomorrow?" Aarav asked.

"Tomorrow," she promised.

His car pulled away. Pakhi pressed a hand to her racing heart. Upstairs, Ana and Prii were waiting with knowing grins.

"So?" Prii demanded.

"So." Pakhi couldn't stop smiling. "I think I understand now."

"Understand what?"

"What Ma meant about magic." She touched her lips, still tasting spices and possibility. "About first love."

Outside, the city sang its endless song. But Pakhi was already dreaming of tomorrow.

In his car, Aarav drove home in a daze. Subho talked about the evening, but the words washed over him like rain.

All he could think about was grey-blue eyes and a smile that made his chest ache with something he'd never felt before.

His phone buzzed. Maya.

Thanks for tonight. The new girls seem lovely.

He typed back quickly. *They are. Especially Pakhi.*

The dots appeared, then disappeared. Then reappeared.

Yeah. Especially Pakhi.

Aarav didn't notice the period at the end of the sentence, which conveyed the weight of resignation in those three words.

He was too busy thinking about tomorrow.

Chapter 13

The Next Day

Dawn broke over the campus, but the previous night's magic lingered like morning mist.

Pakhi stood by the hostel window, watching sunlight paint the streets gold. Aarav's face filled her thoughts—his eyes when she spoke, his gentle touch, and the quiet fire in his gaze when he thought she wasn't looking.

"You're glowing." Ana appeared beside her, grinning. "Love suits you, Pakhi."

"It's too soon to call love." But her blush betrayed her.

"Your face says otherwise." Prii joined them. "When will you see him again?"

"I don't know." Pakhi touched her lips, remembering. "Soon, I hope."

In his family's South Kolkata mansion, Aarav sat at breakfast, food untouched. His mind was elsewhere—grey-blue eyes, a shy smile, the way Pakhi's hand had fit perfectly in his.

"You seem different today." His mother, Su, studied him carefully. "Did something happen at college?"

Aarav met her eyes. "I met someone, Ma. Someone extraordinary."

Su's heart stuttered. She'd always hoped Aarav and Maya would find their way to each other. Maya had been part of their lives for years. Maya fit seamlessly into their world, becoming an integral part of it. There had been an unspoken understanding between the families, a gentle assumption that their children's friendship would bloom into something more.

"Tell me about her," Su said carefully.

"Her name is Pakhi. She's from Nagaland." Aarav's face lit up. "There's something about her, Ma. She's quiet but strong. Honest. When I'm with her, I want to be better."

This was no fleeting crush. Su heard it in his voice and saw it in his eyes.

"And Maya?" The question slipped out before she could stop it.

Aarav blinked. "Maya's my friend. She'll always be my friend."

But not more than that, Su understood with a sinking heart. *Not for him.*

"Be careful, Jishu," she said softly. "Hearts are fragile things."

"I know, Ma." His smile was gentle, certain. "That's why I'll protect hers."

Su watched him leave, worry knotting in her chest. What would she tell Maya's mother? How would she explain that the future they'd quietly imagined was crumbling before it could begin?

In her family's bungalow, Maya knelt among the roses, hands buried in cool earth. Sleep had eluded her all night, her mind replaying every moment—every look Aarav had given that girl from Nagaland.

"You look troubled." Her mother settled beside her on the stone bench. "Want to talk about it?"

Maya's composure cracked. "I think I've lost him, Ma. Before I ever really had him."

Her mother was quiet for a moment. "Did you ever have him? Or did you just hope you would?"

The question cut deep because it was true. She'd built dreams around Aarav's future, woven herself into his story. But he'd never asked her to. He'd never promised anything beyond friendship.

"What do I do now?" Maya's voice was small, lost.

"You live." Her mother squeezed her hand. "You find your path, your dreams. Not ones built around someone else."

Maya looked at her roses—her sanctuary, her creation. She'd been so focused on fitting into Aarav's world that she'd forgotten to build her own.

"I wanted to start a community garden," she said slowly. "Remember? I talked about it years ago, but—"

"But you set it aside," her mother finished. "Waiting for the right time. Waiting for him."

"Maybe the right time is now." Maya stood, brushing dirt from her hands. "Maybe it's time to stop waiting."

Her mother smiled, sad but proud. "Maybe it is."

Three hearts are awakening to new realities. One glowing with hope. One determined to protect what he'd found. One learned to let go and reach for something truly hers.

The day stretched ahead, full of promise and pain in equal measure.

And in Kolkata's endless chaos, life moved forward—as it always did—whether hearts were ready or not.

Chapter 14

"Echoes of Childhood, Whispers of Love"—

Dusk spilled amber and gold across the Kohima hills as Kyan trudged home from the clubhouse. The heated debates about reclaiming their people's dignity in the plains still echoed in his mind, each memory pulsing at his temples. Since Billy's departure for Kolkata, it felt as if the village's spirit had vanished with her.

They had grown up side by side, chasing each other through wildflower meadows and tumbling down the hills. To him, she was always "Bill," the fearless tomboy with scraped knees and laughter like wind. When had she become the captivating Billy, whose presence now left him breathless?

His memory of the morning she left was as vivid as a painting he could never put away. She had come to thank Dan Uncle, the architect of her journey to Kolkata. Kyan, still savouring his morning well-brewed coffee with one of the best beans on the veranda after his daily workout, noticed a gentle stir at the gate.

Billy appeared, stepping into the morning light as if conjured from a dream. Sunlight played in her brown curls as she reached for the gate,

her fingers brushing a stray lock from her face. How had he missed the depth in those grey-blue eyes, vast as oceans, or the delicate curve of her nose, adorned with a traditional ring, lips, like rosebuds?

"Billy," he breathed, the word escaping his lips like a prayer.

She turned, and her smile was radiance itself. "Oh, Kyan! It's Bill, not Billy!" She laughed, a sound like silver bells, revealing teeth like pearls. "Where is Dan Uncle? I've come to say goodbye to him."

"Not to me?" The words slipped out before he could stop them, revealing more vulnerability than he intended.

Her expression softened slightly. "Not really, Kyan. I'm truly grateful to Uncle—without him, Ma would never have allowed me to leave."

"Oh, my darling Billy!" Dan Uncle's voice boomed as he emerged with open arms. "I'm so happy for you, dear girl! There's much you need to know before you go. Come, let me share some important things with you."

Without waiting for Kyan's response, Dan Uncle took her hand and guided her toward his study.

Kyan stood rooted, as if glimpsing her for the very first time. When had the childhood friend he knew become this mesmerizing woman? Her presence seemed to perfume the air, leaving his senses spinning.

For the first time, Kyan understood the true meaning of falling in love. Though he was handsome, wealthy, and well-connected, and even though other girls vied for his attention, he had always kept his heart guarded. His devotion belonged to the dream of an independent Nagaland, a place of harmony for all. His father was unaware of his covert involvement with the Council, yet he understood Kyan's dedication to uplifting their Angami people.

He had long nursed resentment toward those from the plains, even turning away from Pakhi because of her mixed heritage. Yet fate, with

its quiet mischief, had other intentions. How had he fallen for the one he once tried so hard to overlook?

A storm of questions battered his mind: Should he stop her from leaving? Should he run to her, confess his love, and beg her mother to let Pakhi stay? He felt willing to give up everything, even his own life, for a single embrace.

He stood motionless, lost in thought, as Dan Uncle reappeared with Billy trailing behind. Her eyes shimmered with tears he could not explain, and the sight cut through him. Every part of him ached to comfort her, to gently trace the lines of her face.

His knees shook beneath the weight of emotions he had never known—love and longing so tightly woven he could not tell them apart. The truth struck him hard: he should have begged Billy to stay.

"Billy," he called softly as she prepared to leave.

She turned, and in that moment, their eyes met across the courtyard. Something passed between them—a recognition, perhaps, of feelings long buried beneath childhood familiarity.

"Take care of yourself in Kolkata," he managed, his voice rougher than intended.

"I will," she whispered, and for a heartbeat, neither moved.

Then she was gone, then she was gone, and all that remained was the faint scent of wild orchid and the ache of words left unsaid, suspended in the morning air. As the figure disappeared down the path, he knew with absolute certainty that his heart would forever remain in Kohima, even as hers journeyed to the distant plains.

Chapter 15

Memories in the Rhododendron

Each day after Billy left started and ended with memories and moments shared with Billy. The air in Kohima's damp earthiness always transported Kyan back to memory lane on the lazy Sunday afternoon. He could almost hear the gentle wind whispering through the rhododendron groves and the drowsy hum of bees in his father's prized orchid garden.

This house—their sanctuary—nestled in the emerald hills like a precious stone. Its heritage timbers and weathered stones testified to his father's respected position in their community. The memories came flooding back with painful clarity: Billy scrambling up the moss-covered walls, her infectious laughter cascading through the valley like a mountain stream.

"Remember, Kyan?" He whispered to himself as if Billy were speaking to him, "Remember the dusty attic where sunbeams danced with forgotten dreams? The stories Uncle Dan wove on rainy evenings?"

She had always been Bill then, even when she reluctantly wore traditional dresses for tourists who visited their ancestral home. She was Uncle Dan's devoted shadow, his fierce little warrior princess, absorbing every lesson like parched earth drinking rain. He taught her

ancient ways, epic tales of their forebears, and the unbreakable strength that flowed through the Angami blood.

"Uncle Dan!" she would call out, her voice ringing with such pure affection that it made her father's heart swell with protective pride.

Then came the storm that shattered their world—the tempest that swept through their lives, leaving devastation in its wake. In its aftermath, his sister returned from the plains as a hollow echo of herself, her spirit broken by unspeakable violence. The shift in Kyan was immediate: the once-bright eyes that had sparkled with mischief now held only the vacant darkness of a soul that had been violated beyond repair. The whispers that followed her like ghosts became inescapable, and a suffocating shame crept in. Volcanic rage burned in Kyan's chest, rising until he could barely breathe, each feeling lurching into the next, overwhelming him.

The college boys responsible walked free, their laughter a cruel mockery echoing through the valley's silence. Political sons, untouchable in their privilege, protected by connections and corruption.

"The Council will see justice done," his friend had whispered during those dark days. "They protect our own when the system fails us."

And Kyan, his heart a raw wound that refused to heal, walked into those shadows willingly. He had bound himself with oaths that felt like shackles: no women, no distractions. The clan's survival came before all else. His father, bless his heart, believed his son was simply tending to Angami community affairs—mending disputes, building schools, and fostering unity. If only he knew the true nature of the work.

Now, watching Billy—no longer the tomboy Bill but a woman transformed—he saw strength and fierce beauty. Those sacred vows felt like a cage constructed from his own choices. He saw her as she truly was: a remarkable woman. The boy who had chased her through rhododendron thickets and shared her childhood dreams felt like someone from another lifetime.

"She's... she's extraordinary," he breathed, the admission hanging in the air like incense.

The Council's binding oath, the simmering anger, the promised vengeance—all of it seemed to dissolve. Overwhelming, aching need replaced it. He wanted to shield her from every shadow. He would stand between her and the darkness that had consumed their sister. He would wage war against the world if it meant keeping her safe.

Kolkata. The word crystallized in his mind, both prayer and plan. He would find work there and build a life in that distant city. He could be near her without overwhelming her.

Chapter 16

Between Two Worlds

Pakhi's eyes fluttered open to the clang of tram bells and coal smoke curling through her window. The acrid tang stung her throat—nothing like the pine-scented mornings of home.

"Uff, Kolkata," she whispered to the peeling ceiling. "What are you doing to me?"

Her cramped PG room felt less like shelter and more like a cage. The bathroom was perpetually damp. The food was an insult—dal as thin as water, rice boiled into oblivion. Every bite mocked her Naga roots, her tongue aching for Ma's smoked pork, for the bold fire of King Chilli, and for bamboo shoots that tasted of mountain rain.

Yesterday, she'd almost packed her bags. She had almost run home to the weathered stone walls and woodsmoke, seeking Papa's quiet strength and Ma's fierce love.

But then—

Aarav.

His name on her lips was like honey, liquid warmth flooding her chest. She pressed her hands to her burning cheeks.

"His eyes," she breathed. "The way he looked at me..."

She let herself remember. His gaze had been gentle, almost reverent, tracing the arch of her brow, pausing at her lips. She could still feel the ghost of his attention, the curve of her waist, the glint of her silver chain, the navel ring that caught light, and the bells at her ankles that sang with every step.

"Divine," he'd whispered. The word had sounded like a prayer.

"Is this what they call love at first sight?" She sat up, hugging her knees. "How can the heart recognize home so quickly?"

Nothing had prepared her for this. The dizzying recognition, the breathless certainty. It felt reckless and right in equal measure.

A knock startled her.

"Pakhi? Are you awake?" Ana's voice carried through the door.

"Coming!"

She splashed water on her face, trying to calm the flush in her cheeks. When she opened the door, both Ana and Prii stood there, grinning like conspirators.

"You're thinking about him." Prii's eyes sparkled. "Aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean." Pakhi's voice went too high.

"Pakhi." Ana crossed her arms. "You've been smiling at the ceiling for ten minutes. We could hear you sighing through the wall."

Heat flooded her face. "Was I that obvious?"

"Completely." Prii flopped onto the bed. "So? Tell us everything."

Pakhi sank beside her, suddenly needing to speak it aloud. "I can't stop thinking about him. His voice, his smile, the way he just... appeared when we needed him most." She twisted her hands together. "Is that foolish? We only just met."

"Foolish?" Ana's expression softened. "Maybe. But also, brave."

"What if Ma was wrong?" The words tumbled out before Pakhi could stop them. "About plain people. About Kolkata. What if there's kindness here, too?"

Prii squeezed her hand. "Then maybe you're exactly where you're supposed to be."

"But I miss home." Pakhi's voice cracked. "I miss everything about it. The air, the food, the silence. How can I feel about both? How can I ache for home and still want to stay?"

"Because you're caught between two worlds," Ana said quietly. "And maybe that's okay. Maybe you don't have to choose yet."

"But what if—" Pakhi stopped, the question too fragile to finish. *What if he doesn't feel the same? What if the gesture is just kindness, not something more?*

"He couldn't take his eyes off you," Prii said, reading her mind. "Trust me. Whatever you're feeling, he's feeling it too."

A laugh escaped Pakhi—half disbelief, half hope. "This is insane. I came here to study literature, not to fall in love."

"Life doesn't care about your plans." Ana grinned. "Besides, isn't such generosity exactly what all those poems are about? The unexpected, the impossible, the heart choosing for itself?"

Pakhi thought about the college thugs from yesterday and their crude taunts. *Chinkies*. They'd thought her people were easy prey, that they didn't belong.

But Aarav had looked at her like she was precious. Like she belonged exactly where she stood.

"They have no idea," she murmured, "about the wildfire that lives in mountain hearts."

"What?" Prii leaned closer.

"Nothing." Pakhi smiled, feeling something fierce and bright kindle in her chest. "Just remembering who I am."

She was Naga. She carried her ancestors' grit in her veins, the whispers of pines in her heart. She was mountain and mist, resilience and song. And if she chose to give her heart to a plains boy with gentle eyes—that was her choice to make.

"So, what now?" Ana asked. "What are you going to do?"

Pakhi looked out the window at Kolkata's endless chaos—the vendors and trams, the smoke and noise. Yesterday it felt suffocating. Today, it felt like a possibility.

"I'm going to stay," she said softly. "I'm going to see where this leads."

"Even though you're scared?" Prii asked.

"Especially because I'm scared." Pakhi met her friends' eyes. "Because something this big, this real—it's worth being scared for."

Ana pulled her into a hug, and Prii joined them; the three of them tangled together in that tiny room that smelled of dampness, smoke, and hope.

Outside, the city sang its endless song. And inside, Pakhi's heart drummed its own wild rhythm—caught between two worlds, choosing both, choosing love, choosing the terrifying beauty of letting herself be found.

Tomorrow, she might see him again.

Tomorrow, everything might change.

But today, at this moment, she let herself simply feel—the ache and the joy, the fear and the certainty, the impossible magic of a heart that had found its home in the most unexpected place.

Word Count: ~950 words

Chapter 17

Colours of the Heart

The college corridors buzzed with morning chaos, but for Pakhi, everything felt transformed. Colours seemed brighter, sounds, sharper—as if the world had been repainted overnight.

"Pakhi!" Ana waved a hand in front of her face. "Your glow is akin to that of a firefly. What's gotten into you?"

Before Pakhi could respond, a familiar voice called out.

"Good morning, ladies."

Pakhi turned, her heart fluttering. Aarav approached in a cream kurta and dark jeans, hair tumbling around his shoulders, looking like he'd stepped from a daydream.

"Aarav!" Prii smiled. "How are you feeling after yesterday?"

"Much better, thanks to all of you being safe." His eyes found Pakhi's and lingered. "I was hoping to catch you before classes."

Ana raised an eyebrow. "All of us, or...?"

Aarav's cheeks flushed. "There's a contemporary art exhibition tonight at the Academy of Fine Arts. The exhibition features artists who are fusing traditional Indian art with modern strokes. He paused,

glancing at Pakhi. "Would you like to join us? I think you'd appreciate the cultural blend."

Warmth bloomed in Pakhi's chest. "I'd love to. I've never been to a real exhibition before."

"Perfect! Maya and Subho will meet us there at seven. I'll pick you up from the PG at six-thirty."

Ana and Prii exchanged knowing glances as Aarav walked away.

Maya's House—Later That Day

Maya stood before her mirror, hands shaking as she held up outfit after outfit. The emerald salwar kameez? The black dress? Neither felt right.

"You've been staring at yourself for an hour," her mother called from the doorway. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Ma. Just deciding what to wear."

"Is Aarav picking you up as usual?"

Maya's throat tightened. "No. We're meeting him there. He has other plans first."

Her mother frowned. In all their years of friendship, Aarav had never failed to pick her up. It was their tradition.

After her mother left, Maya grabbed her phone and called Subho.

"Hello?"

"Did Aarav tell you we're meeting him at the exhibition?" Her voice wavered. "Instead of going together?"

A pause. "Yes. He's bringing that girl, Pakhi. Maya, are you okay with this?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" The lie came smoothly. "It's just... different."

But Subho, who had loved her silently for years, heard the pain she was hiding. "Maya, you don't have to pretend with me."

"I'm not pretending." She snapped, then softened. "Sorry, Subho. It's been a long day."

After hanging up, Maya stared at her reflection. Beautiful, accomplished, from a family everyone admired—everything Aarav should want.

So why did it feel like she was losing a battle she never knew she was in?

Pakhi's PG—Evening

Pakhi threaded jasmine blossoms into her hair, remembering her grandmother's garden. She wore a deep blue kurti embroidered with silver, white leggings, and anklets that chimed softly. A fine line of kohl traced her eyes.

"You look beautiful," Ana said. "But are you sure about this? Going with him alone?"

"We're meeting everyone at the exhibition," Pakhi protested.

"His friends," Prii said gently. "Who might not be thrilled about a newcomer? Just be careful, okay? Rich Kolkata boys aren't always what they seem."

"I know you're worried, but yesterday—when he looked at me—it felt true."

A car horn sounded outside.

In Aarav's Car

Aarav's breath caught as Pakhi emerged. She looked radiant, like she'd stepped from a timeless painting.

"You look stunning," he said, opening the car door.

"Thank you." She settled into the passenger seat. "Beautiful car."

"Birthday gift from my father. But it's never carried anyone as lovely as you."

Pakhi blushed, turning to the window as they wove through evening streets.

"Tell me about your home," Aarav said at a traffic light. "What's it like in the mountains?"

Her eyes lit up. "Like living inside a painting that changes with every season. Rhododendrons in spring, mist in winter. And the silence—real silence—where you can hear your own heart."

"It sounds magical. No wonder you carry that peace."

"What about you? What's it like being a Kolkata boy?"

His eyes grew distant. "Complicated. Expectations, family business, social circles. Sometimes I feel like a character in someone else's story."

"What story would you write for yourself?"

He looked at her, vulnerable. "I don't know. But meeting you—it felt like the first page of a new story."

At the Exhibition

Maya and Subho arrived at seven sharp, along with Ana and Prii. Maya kept glancing at her phone, pacing near the entrance.

"They're late," she said for the third time.

An announcement crackled: "Ladies and gentlemen, gallery doors close at eight. Last entry at eight sharp."

"Maya, relax." Subho's voice was gentle. "They'll be here."

"This isn't like Aarav. He's never late for our plans." Her voice trembled. "Never cared more about someone else's comfort than mine."

Subho's heart ached, but he had no words to ease her pain.

When Aarav and Pakhi appeared at seven forty-five, animated and laughing, Maya felt something crack inside her chest.

"Sorry we're late!" Aarav called, not sounding sorry. "We stopped for phuchka. Pakhi wanted to try it."

Maya forced a smile. "No problem. Shall we go in?"

They drifted through the galleries. Aarav described each piece to Pakhi with contagious enthusiasm, their heads tilting toward paintings in perfect synchrony.

"This represents the meeting of two worlds." He pointed to mountains merging with city skylines. "Do you see the warm colours representing the hills and the cool colours representing the urban landscape? But where they meet—this golden light..."

"Like sunrise," Pakhi breathed. "It's beautiful."

"Like you," Aarav murmured.

Maya's heart cracked a little more. Beside her, Subho noticed her clenched fists and gently touched her arm.

"Maya..."

"I'm fine," she whispered, but tears threatened.

They moved through the galleries like dancers in perfect rhythm, sharing secret smiles, hands brushing as they pointed out details. By the final gallery, Maya knew with profound certainty that her childhood dreams were drifting away like autumn leaves.

The last painting showed a yellow bird in flight, wings spread against storm clouds.

"It's called 'Freedom and Destiny,'" Aarav read. "The artist says it represents the courage to follow your heart despite uncertain skies."

Pakhi stared at it, thinking of her own name—Holud Pakhi, the yellow bird. "Sometimes the most beautiful flights happen when you trust the wind to carry you."

Aarav looked at her with such gentle affection that Maya had to turn away.

Subho stepped closer to Maya. "Let me take you home."

She nodded, unable to speak.

As they walked toward the exit, Maya glanced back once. Aarav and Pakhi stood before the yellow bird, lost in their world, their silhouettes bathed in gallery light.

In that moment, Maya understood. Love couldn't be controlled or crafted through familiarity and time. It slipped in quietly, forming connections that were unintended yet undeniable.

She'd lost him before she ever really had him.

Outside, the Kolkata night was cool. Subho opened the car door for her, his presence steady and sure.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For being here."

"Always," he said simply.

And as they drove away, Maya let herself lean into his quiet strength, wondering if perhaps she'd been looking at the wrong story all along.

Back inside, Aarav and Pakhi stood before the yellow bird, sensing with quiet certainty that their journey together was just beginning.

A flight in uncertain skies.

But together.

Chapter 18

Songs Between Classes

The college courtyard brimmed with the scent of rain-washed leaves. Pakhi sat beneath the banyan tree, literature book abandoned, watching Aarav approach. Three weeks since the art exhibition, and her heart still skipped every time she saw him.

"Good morning, beautiful." He settled beside her on the stone bench, close enough that she caught his cologne.

"You can't keep calling me that." Her cheeks flushed. "What if someone hears?"

"Let them." His brown eyes sparkled. "I'm only stating facts."

Morning sun painted her face gold. She wore a white dress, jasmine threaded through her braid—a habit from her grandmother back in Kohima.

"Tell me about your name," Aarav said, leaning closer. "Holud Pakhi—the yellow bird. There must be a story."

Her eyes lit up. "When I was born, a yellow hornbill appeared in our courtyard. It stayed for a week, singing from dawn to dusk. Ma said it was celebrating my arrival."

"The state bird of Nagaland." Aarav smiled. "I've been learning about your homeland. I want to understand what shaped you."

Before Pakhi could respond, heels clicked on stone.

"Aarav, there you are." Maya approached in a brown dress, her elegance effortless, but her voice edged. "We need to discuss the community garden project."

"Right, the project." Aarav's attention remained on Pakhi. "How's it progressing?"

Maya settled on his other side, creating a tense triangle. "Uncle LM approved full funding. We start next month." She glanced at Pakhi. "Of course, we'll need dedicated volunteers—people who understand the commitment."

The subtle jab hung in the air.

"I'd love to help," Pakhi said quietly. "In Kohima, we have community gardens everywhere. I grew up helping my grandmother tend vegetables and medicinal plants."

Maya's smile wavered.

"Your experience would be invaluable," Aarav said warmly, his hand inching closer to Pakhi's.

Later - College Canteen

The canteen smelled of cardamom tea. Pakhi and Aarav claimed their corner table by the mango tree.

"Try this." Aarav offered her a forkful of mishti doi. "From the sweet shop near my house. The owner's been making it the same way for forty years."

Pakhi leaned in. The gentle intimacy made Aarav's chest warm.

"It's divine." She closed her eyes. "Sweet but not overwhelming. Like a whispered promise."

"That's poetry," Aarav murmured. "You find beauty in everything."

When she opened her eyes, his gaze was intense. Sunlight ignited gold in his brown eyes.

"Pakhi." His hand covered hers on the table. "I need to tell you something."

"What?" Her heart hammered.

"I think I'm falling in love with you."

The words shimmered between them. Pakhi felt the world tilt, colours sharpen, and sounds transform to music. His fingers brushed hers gently, and understanding passed between them.

"Aarav..."

"You don't have to say anything now." He squeezed her hand. "I just needed you to know. Every time I see you, every time you smile—I fall a little deeper."

Tears filled her eyes. "I thought I was the only one feeling this way. I thought I was going crazy."

"We're both crazy then." Aarav laughed, lifting her hand to kiss her knuckles. "Beautifully, wonderfully crazy."

Across the canteen, Maya watched. Each tender gesture splintered her heart. She clutched her coffee cup until her knuckles whitened.

"They look happy," Subho observed quietly, settling beside her.

"Yes," Maya replied, voice steady despite the storm inside. "They do."

Evening - Café Coffee Day, Park Street

The café thrummed with life—students, couples, Bengali chatter, and clinking cups. Pakhi and Aarav nestled. They settled into a corner booth, with textbooks scattered around them in a half-hearted pretence.

"Tell me about your music," Pakhi said, stirring her cappuccino. "I've heard you humming but never singing properly."

Aarav's face lit up. "Music is my first language. Ma says I came out of the womb with a song on my lips."

"Sing for me." Her voice was soft. "Please?"

He glanced around, then leaned closer, voice dropping to an intimate whisper-song:

"Tumi ele na, bondhu amar,
Hridoy ghumiye thakte
Tumi ele na, shopner deshe.
Amar chokh jaga rakte...

Pranete pran mililo sokhi
Ei prothom dekhatei
Tumi ele, shudhu ele
Amar jibon sajatei."

His voice was rich and natural. The Bengali lyrics spoke of love's awakening.

Tears pricked Pakhi's eyes. "That's beautiful. What does it mean?"

"It means you didn't come when my heart was sleeping." His hand found hers across the table. "You came when I was awake enough to recognize what I was seeing. When I was ready to love properly."

The closeness overwhelmed her—his voice in her ears, his palm radiating warmth. She felt herself dissolve like sugar in tea.

"Your voice," she whispered. "It's like listening to water over river stones. Smooth and eternal."

"Sing with me," Aarav urged. "I know you can. I've heard you humming folk songs."

"I couldn't. Not here—"

"Then hum with me. Just for me."

She did. Their voices mingled softly beneath the café's hum—her mountain folk melodies twining with his classical Bengali notes, weaving a song that belonged only to them.

When their quiet duet ended, they sat in comfortable silence, hands intertwined, hearts beating in rhythm.

"Pakhi." His thumb traced circles on her palm. "Would you come somewhere special with me tomorrow?"

"Where?" Though she already knew she'd follow him anywhere.

"It's a surprise. But I promise it's beautiful. Somewhere worthy of you."

As they left, Pakhi glimpsed their reflection in rain-speckled glass—two silhouettes shimmering under neon glow, radiant with the promise of new love.

For the first time since arriving in Kolkata, she felt completely at home.

Chapter 19

Where Rivers Meet Hearts

Kolkata shimmered beneath the late afternoon sun as Aarav's car wound toward the Hooghly. Temple bells echoed in the distance, mixing with the scent of wet soil.

"You're going to love this place," Aarav said. "It's where I come when I need peace."

"Will there be many people?" Pakhi smoothed her flowing yellow dress, instinctively donning the colour of her spirit.

"Not at this hour. We'll have it almost to ourselves."

As they approached Princep Ghat, the memorial's Palladian columns rose against the river's gleam. Pakhi drew in a sharp breath.

"It's beautiful. Like something from a dream."

Aarav opened her door, his hand lingering on hers. "Wait until you see the river from the steps."

They wandered through the grounds, Pakhi's anklets chiming softly. Aarav guided her down the ancient stone steps to where the Hooghly stretched wide and serene.

"It's so peaceful," she whispered. "Another world."

"Sit with me." He settled on the wide steps. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Pakhi sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders nearly brushed. "I'm thinking about rivers. In Kohima, our streams sing as they tumble over stones. But this river feels ancient, full of stories."

"Like what stories?" He watched the way her profile caught the light.

She recalled the stories of those who had sat before her. Lovers, dreamers, people making important decisions." She turned to him. "What stories will we—"

"I hope," Aarav interrupted softly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "that the river will remember the day I told a mountain bird I loved her."

Pakhi's breath caught. "Aarav..."

"We've only known each other for a short time, but every moment feels significant." He took her hand. "So much in my world is dictated by others. Being with you feels like my choice. Something real."

She leaned into his touch. "I feel it too. This connection."

"May I kiss you?" His forehead almost touched hers.

Instead of answering, Pakhi closed the distance. Their lips met—tender at first, tentative, then deeper as they lost themselves. She tasted of cardamom and honey.

When they broke apart, both breathless, Pakhi whispered, "That was..."

"Perfect," Aarav finished. "You're perfect."

They sat quietly, Pakhi's head on his shoulder, watching the river catch the sun's orange and pink.

"Tell me about your family," Aarav said, playing with her fingers. "Your real family."

Pakhi smiled. "Ma is beautiful and strong, but she carries old sadness. She was a classical singer once, trained in Hindustani music. She gave it all up when she married Papa."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure. Sometimes I catch her humming while she cooks, and her voice is so beautiful it makes me want to cry. But she always stops when she realizes I'm listening."

"And your father?"

"Papa is music in human form. He can coax a song from any instrument. But he only sings for our church, nowhere else." She paused. "I feel there's an untold story there. Occasionally he looks at Ma with such depth, like they're sharing memories neither speaks about."

Aarav watched her closely. "That's what I want. That kind of love. The kind that changes you."

Pakhi lifted her head. "What about your family?"

His face clouded. "My mother is gentle, an artist at heart. She gave up singing when I was born. My father is powerful, always in control—of his world and the people he loves."

"Does that frighten you?"

"Sometimes." He looked away. "I never want to become that. Especially not with someone I love."

The sun dipped low, creating lengthy shadows around the ghat.

"Pakhi," Aarav turned to face her fully. "I need you to know something. My father has already decided who I should marry. It's Maya."

He let the words settle. "Our families have had this understanding since we were children."

Pakhi's heart clenched, but her voice stayed steady. "Do you love her?"

"I care about her. She's been part of my life forever. But love?" He shook his head. "Not in the same way that I am falling in love with you." With Maya, it feels like playing a role. With you, I'm finally myself."

"What does that mean for us?"

"It means I'm willing to fight for this. For us." He cupped her face. "Are you willing to fight too?"

Pakhi remembered her parents' love story, how they'd braved obstacles together. She pictured the yellow hornbill—a bird that journeys long distances to find its true home.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'm willing to fight."

The evening prayer sounded from the nearby temple, its melody gliding over the water. The call blended with distant tram bells and vendors closing their stalls, rooting their promise in Kolkata's rhythm.

"The secret of my name," Pakhi said suddenly, smiling through tears. "The hornbill that appeared when I was born stayed exactly seven days, singing from dawn to dusk. On the seventh day, it flew away, but not before teaching the other birds its song."

"What does that mean?"

"Papa said it meant I was meant to bring music to new places. But maybe..." She looked into his eyes. "Maybe it meant I was meant to fly far from home to find my mate. And to create new songs together."

Aarav kissed her again, conveying every unspoken promise he held. As the sun slipped behind the Hooghly, gilding them in its last light, neither saw the figure in the memorial's shadows.

A woman adjusted her stance, her brown silk dress rustling in the breeze. A metal bangle caught the dying sunlight as she watched them, her gaze intent. After a long moment, she turned and disappeared into the gathering dusk.

The river moved on, bearing their story with countless others.

"I love you, Holud Pakhi," Aarav whispered against her lips.

"And I love you, Aarav," she replied, her voice carrying the promise of mountains and flowing water.

As the first stars appeared above the Hooghly, they held each other close, knowing the road ahead would be difficult. Aarav would have to face his father and the arranged marriage. Pakhi would have to stand against cultural boundaries and family expectations.

But at this moment, at the river's edge, they had each other. And sometimes, love meant choosing courage over certainty, transformation over tradition.

Sometimes, it meant learning to fly.

Chapter 20

A Mother's Intuition (Priya and Pakhi)

As the church bells chimed, each resonant note seemed to echo within Priya, filling the room with an uncanny resonance that clung to her skin like the faint mist of incense still swirling up from her prayer mat. A restless unease lingered in her heart, shadowing her throughout the day like an uninvited guest. Fragments of her past wove through her mind—moments of youthful exuberance punctuated by choices that carried the weight of whispers and love once forbidden. Each memory throbbed with a singular yearning: the desperate wish for her daughter's safety as she navigated life's tumultuous and unpredictable tides.

The phone rang just as she was folding away her prayer mat.

"Ma?" Holud's voice came through the crackling connection, bright and musical as always, but today there was a fragile hesitancy beneath it. Priya felt her instincts prick, sensing a shift from Holud's usual cheerfulness.

"Pakhi, my little bird, how are you? You sound... different."

There was a soft laugh on the other end, the kind of laugh that seemed to bubble up from somewhere deep and joyful. "Different how, Ma?"

"I don't know. Happier, maybe? Like you're carrying some secret."

"Oh, Ma, you and your intuitions," Holud said. Yet her voice carried a warmth that hadn't been there in her previous calls. "I'm just... settling in well, I suppose. Kolkata is starting to feel less overwhelming."

Priya sat down heavily in her favourite chair, the one that faced the window overlooking their small garden. "Tell me about your days, Holud. What have you been doing?"

My classes continue to engage me, particularly the comparative literature seminar, which has prompted considerable personal reflection. Recently, we analysed a South Asian narrative centred on love persevering amid adversity. This resonated deeply with me, as it parallels the complexities I have encountered adapting to my new environment. The friendships I am cultivating here are quite diverse, and they have introduced me to perspectives that were previously unfamiliar and, at times, profoundly unsettling—as if they are gently dismantling long-held certainties. These experiences are incremental yet transformative, gradually allowing Kolkata to feel less alien and more intimate. In a sense, I am undergoing a process of self-renewal, questioning inherited assumptions and finding new capacities within myself. How do you relate to this kind of change, Ma?

There it was again—that particular lilt in Holud's voice when she mentioned friends. Priya had heard that tone before, twenty years ago, in her voice when she used to tell her mother about her "study sessions" with Rick.

"What kind of friends?" Priya asked.

"Just... college friends. There's a boy named Aarav who helped us when we had some trouble with local bullies on our first day. He's very kind, Ma. Gentle. He loves music just like Papa does."

Priya gripped the phone tighter, her heart pounding with sudden fear. Hearing Holud say Aarav's name with such gentle affection turned her unease into a rising tide of dread. As the warmth of her daughter's words wrapped around Aarav's name, Priya felt a constriction in her throat and a cold sweat dot her brow, each sensation a visceral echo of anxiety's grip.

"A boy," she said.

"Ma, don't start worrying. He's just a friend. A good friend who has been showing me around the city and introducing me to Kolkata's culture. Yesterday we went to this beautiful place by the river..."

As Holud painted pictures of Princep Ghat, Priya understood her daughter was not only describing places but quietly revealing the first stirrings of love.

"He sounds attentive," Priya said when Holud paused.

"He is. He's teaching me about Bengali culture, and I'm teaching him about ours. He's even started learning a few Naga folk songs. Ma, his voice is beautiful—rich and trained, but not pretentious. When he sings, it reminds me of Papa."

Priya closed her eyes. The echoes were unmistakable: a musical boy from the plains, cultures entwining, and the old magic of songs weaving hearts together.

"Pakhi," she said quietly, "be careful."

"Careful of what, Ma?"

"Just... be careful. The world is not always as kind as it seems. "

There was a pause at the other end. "Ma!"

A heavy silence grew between them, dense with memories neither dared to name.

"Ma," Holud said finally, her voice smaller now, "why did you never want to tell me the real reason you left Kolkata?"

Priya's heart froze. She had feared this question for years, and now it arrived as her daughter stepped onto the same perilous path she once walked.

"Some stories are better left buried, dear."

"But what if those stories could help me understand? Help me make better choices?"

"The best choice," Priya said firmly, "is to focus on your studies and come home as soon as your course is finished. Don't get... distracted."

Another pause. Then Holud said, with a new note of defiance that chilled Priya to the bone, "What if the distraction is the most beautiful thing that's ever happened to me?" Priya's heart raced as her mind cast forward to disparate visions of what this defiance could bring.

The phone nearly slipped from Priya's numb fingers. Those words—she had once spoken them to her own mother, just before her world unravelled.

"Holud," she whispered, "please tell me you haven't done anything foolish."

"Like what, Ma? Like falling in love? Like finding someone who truly sees me, really knows me, and thinks I'm worth getting to know? Like discovering that there are good people in the world who don't judge you by where you come from?"

In Holud's passionate words, Priya heard the echo of her own youthful voice, recalling how fiercely she once believed in love's promise.

"Ma? Are you there?"

"I'm here," Priya managed. "Pakhi, just... promise me you'll be careful. Promise me you won't trust too easily."

"I promise to be sensible," Holud said, but now her warmth had thinned, replaced by a new distance in her voice. Priya heard the quiet withdrawal—the first barrier rising between them. "Ma, I have to go. We're having a study session tonight."

After the call, Priya sat alone in the gathering darkness. Rick's familiar humming, once a comfort, now sent a chill through her.

When Rick came in, he found Priya still in her chair, staring out the window.

"Priya? What's wrong?"

She turned to Rick, the man for whom she had given up everything, their love marked by sacrifice and scars.

"She's in love," Priya said simply.

Rick went very still. "What?"

Our daughter. She's falling for a boy in Kolkata. I can hear it in her voice, that same note I once had when I spoke about you.

Rick sank into the chair across from her. "Are you certain?"

"A mother knows these things. She's walking the same path we did, Rick. And we both know how that path ends."

They sat in silence, memories of their own reckless love and their lingering shadows pressing in around them.

"What do we do?" Rick asked, finally.

Priya's voice faltered as she admitted, "I don't know." Rick reached across the space between them to take her hand. "Maybe it will be different this time. Maybe their story will have a happier ending."

Or maybe, Priya said, her voice thick with dread, the old debts of parents truly do find their children. Perhaps the goddess Kali is coming to collect, not from me, but from my daughter.

Outside, the solitary call of a nightbird reverberated through the valley, underscoring the quiet uncertainty that settled in the family home. Meanwhile, in Kolkata, Holud lay awake on her narrow bed, reflecting intently on the new emotional landscape that had emerged since meeting Aarav.

Chapter 21

Silent Witness

(Thoughts of the Past, 2000-2021)

Monsoon rain hammered the roof like a childhood tabla. Priya shifted in her dreams, fingers dancing across an unseen harmonium.

She ran through dark temple corridors, incense thick in the air. Gold ornaments weighed down her trembling hands. Angry voices echoed: "Thief! Sacrilege!" Kali's fierce eyes tracked her with silent judgment.

Priya jolted awake, pulse racing. The nightmare faded, but guilt remained—a constant shadow on her heart. Beside her, Rick slept peacefully, moonlight tangled in his curls.

"My Rick," she breathed, fingertips tracing his jaw.

Memory swept her back to their first encounter.

The college auditorium had overflowed that night. She'd volunteered as always—too timid to perform, but helplessly drawn to music's glow. Then Rick strode onstage, guitar in hand, and her world tilted.

"This song is called 'Pakhi Urey Jaye,'" he'd announced, voice melodious. "About a bird that flies beyond mountains to find its song."

His fingers danced across strings, breathing life into distant hills.

*"Pakhi urey jaye, megh er opare,
Swapner deshe, bridoy hare..."*

The bird flies beyond the clouds. To dreamlands, the heart is captivated...

Tears had slipped down her cheeks before she understood why. Her heart recognized something deep and true in his music.

"Do you remember our first song together?" Priya whispered to his sleeping form. "When you taught me to harmonize with your guitar?"

The memory unfurled. They'd sat by the Hooghly at sunset, water painted gold.

"Sing with me, Priya," he'd said, grey eyes gentle. "Your voice is like honey."

"I don't know the words. I'm trained in classical ragas. Your folk melodies are so different."

"Then make them up. Music isn't about perfect words—it's about perfect feeling."

She'd sung. Her voice wrapped around his, silk entwining silver. That evening, they created something that belonged to no one, but themselves.

In their darkened bedroom, Priya's tears fell silently onto Rick's face. A distant bamboo flute echoed through the night—some young villager practicing, just as Rick once had.

"We were so young," she whispered. "So alive with music and hope. We thought we were unbreakable."

Rick shifted, his hand seeking hers even in sleep. Their fingers laced together, fitting perfectly after all these years.

"My love," she breathed, pressing a kiss to his brow. "No matter the storm or darkness, this endures—our song, our refuge."

In his sleep, Rick hummed softly—their old melody about birds flying beyond clouds in search of dreams.

The song they'd once written spoke of freedom and flight. Now their own yellow bird had flown far, chasing her sky of possibility.

The irony cut deep. They'd written about soaring away, never imagining their daughter would become that winged dream, flying toward futures they couldn't shield or foresee.

Priya's gaze found the empty violin case in the corner—once vibrant with hope, now untouched. A silent testament to dreams that had taken flight.

"Holud Pakhi," she murmured as sleep claimed her. "My little yellow bird. May you find your song. Never lose your wings."

Her mind drifted to her daughter's future, the dreams she'd chase, and the paths she'd walk. What if she flew too far beyond their reach?

Rick's arm tightened around her protectively. Even in sleep, he hummed bars of their old song—the one about birds that fly beyond mountains to find their true home.

Outside, a yellow hornbill called from the rhododendron trees, its voice carrying both hope and warning.

Rick's eyes opened in the pre-dawn darkness. He'd been half-awake, aware of Priya's restless dreams.

"The nightmare again?" he asked softly.

She nodded against his chest. "The temple. The theft. It never leaves me."

"You saved me," Rick said firmly. "That's what matters."

"But what if—" Her voice caught. "What if our sins follow Pakhi? What if the past catches up?"

Rick was quiet for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was steel wrapped in velvet. "Then we protect her. Whatever it costs, we protect our little bird from the storms that destroyed us."

"Can we?" Priya looked up at him, eyes haunted. "Can we really keep her safe from everything we've done?"

"We have to try." He kissed her forehead. "That's what parents do. We carry the weight so our children can fly free."

Even as he spoke, they both understood that certain destinies were unavoidable. Some debts must be paid—if not by the parents, then by the children who carry their blood and burden into an unforgiving world.

Outside their window, dawn brushed the mountains. The hornbill called again, its cry echoing through the mist.

A warning.

A promise.

A song that would not be silenced.

Chapter 22

The Last Paradise (Back to 2002)

Kolkata, May 2002 - The Memory

The first year and a few months of the second year passed on like it was yesterday. Priya and Rick's love for each other went beyond the boundaries of all human shackles. It was the summer of 2002.

"Priya, come with me to Shantiniketan this weekend," Rick had said, his guitar case slung over his shoulder while they sat beside the banks of the River Ganges. "There's a Baul festival. The music there... It's like nothing you've ever heard."

Priya had hesitated, her classical training warring with curiosity. "My parents will never allow it. A young woman traveling alone with a boy? Papa would have a heart attack."

"Then don't tell them," Rick had said with that lopsided grin that always made her resolve crumble.

"Rick!" She had laughed, scandalized. "You're asking me to lie to my father—a temple priest!"

"I understand, Priya. But when will you get another chance to hear Kartik Das Baul perform?"

And God help her, she had lied. She told elaborate, detailed lies. With love as her motivation, the lies came so easily.

Shantiniketan—The Last Paradise

The train pulled into Bolpur at sunset, the sky stained a saffron and rose hue. Priya wore a deep purple skirt and silver-threaded blouse that caught the light. Her loose hair fell down her back.

"Look at this place," she had breathed, stepping onto the platform. "It feels... magical."

Rick had booked them separate rooms at a small boutique hotel, propriety maintained even in rebellion. But they had spent every waking moment together, drawn to each other like music to silence.

The Baul festival was in full swing in the Chorak Polli area. They sat cross-legged on durrie carpets, surrounded by hundreds of other music lovers as the Bauls began their mystical songs.

An elderly Baul with wild hair and painted eyes began to sing, his voice rising like incense:

"Mon re, kothay pabi tare

Je tomay bhalobashe.....

Priya's trained ear immediately caught the intricate spiritual metaphors woven through the folk melody. "This is extraordinary," she whispered to Rick. "They're not just singing about love—they're singing about the search for the divine through human connection."

Rick's eyes shone. "Sing with them."

"What? No, I couldn't—"

"Please, Priya. Let them hear your voice. Let yourself be free."

And a miraculous thing happened. The lead Baul seemed to sense her hesitation. He beckoned to her, and when she joined the circle, he began a new verse:

"Praner bandhu, praner bandhu

Kothay hariye geli.....”

Trembling, Priya added her voice, her classical training merging seamlessly with their earthy spirituality. In that moment, the music wasn't just sound—it was a bridge between worlds, a conduit for everything unspoken. As her voice lifted, it was as if her soul soared beyond the confines of her body, seeking a union so profound it transcended both heaven and earth.

"Bhalobasar noukay chori

Beye jabo dur sagore....”

Rick couldn't resist joining in, his voice weaving around hers in perfect harmony:

"Ei path dhore, oi path dhore

Khuje berai tomaye.....”

English

O heart, where will you find the one

Who truly loves you

Beyond river currents, behind the clouds

What lies hidden there

The crowd had gone silent, then erupted in appreciation. Even the other Bauls nodded in approval.

"You have found each other in song," the old Baul had told them afterward. "This is the highest form of love—when two souls recognize their divine connection through music."

Rick had been transfixed. "Priya, that was... transcendent. Our voices together... It's like we were meant to sing as one."

The Night That Changed Everything

That evening, they had returned to the hotel, both still high on music and applause. The painted sky reflected their euphoria—deep purples melting into gold, stars beginning their nightly dance.

Rick had walked Priya to her room; neither of them wanted the day to end.

"Thank you," she had said, her hand on the doorknob. "For bringing me here. For making me feel... alive."

"Priya..." Rick's voice was rough with emotion. "I need to tell you something."

She turned, and in her dark eyes he saw raw longing and fear, matching his own silent ache.

"I love you," he said simply. "I've loved you since the first day" you volunteered for our music practice. I love your dedication, your voice, and your laugh. I love how you make me want to be better than I am."

Priya's breath caught. "Rick..."

"I know it's impossible. I know your family, your background—everything is against us. But I had to tell you. Especially here, especially after tonight."

She had stepped closer.

"Show me," she whispered. "Show me what impossible love feels like."

Rick's control shattered. He kissed her with all the pent-up longing of months, and she melted into him like she was coming home.

"My room," she breathed against his lips. "Please."

The Sacred and Profane

In her hotel room, with moonlight streaming through gauze curtains and the distant sound of night birds singing, they had loved each other with the desperation of those who knew their time was borrowed.

Rick's hands trembled as he traced the curve of her neck, her collarbone, and the silver chain that rested against her heart.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured, his voice thick with wonder. "Like a goddess come to earth."

Priya arched beneath his touch, her classical reserve dissolving into pure feeling. "With you," she whispered, "I don't have to be anyone but myself."

Their lovemaking was a symphony—gentle crescendos building to passionate peaks, soft interludes of whispered endearments, and the rhythm of heartbeats and sighs creating music more profound than any they had performed.

"I love you," she had cried out as pleasure overwhelmed her, the words torn from her soul. "I love you, Rick. Whatever comes, remember this. Remember us."

They had held each other afterward, skin to skin, hearts beating in synchrony as the moon travelled across the sky.

"What happens now?" Rick had asked, his fingers threading through her hair.

"I don't know," Priya had admitted. "But I can't go back to pretending. I can no longer live without you."

"Then we'll find a way," he had promised, pressing kisses to her temple. "Whatever it takes, we'll be together."

Chapter 23

Kali's Wrath

May 2002

The temple air pressed down on Priya's chest like stone. She knelt before Kali Mata, feeling the goddess's fierce gaze pierce through her soul.

Twenty years had passed, since that cursed night. The memory still crashed over her, raw as a fresh wound.

The Betrayal—Kolkata, 2002

Rick's voice on the phone had been hollow, desperate. "Priya, they've arrested me. Neev destroyed everything. The album I created—he's claiming I stole every composition from him."

"That's impossible! Those songs came from your heart!"

"He has documents with my signature and witnesses who'll swear they saw me stealing his notebook. The media's calling it the biggest plagiarism scandal in Indian music."

The newspapers had been merciless:

"TRIBAL BOY STEALS COMPOSITIONS"
"YELLOW HORNBILL BAND EXPOSED AS FRAUDS"
**"NORTHEASTERN SINGER'S DESPERATE
PLAGIARISM"**

Rick's band endured hours of interrogation before being sent back to Nagaland in disgrace. The industry slammed its doors.

"They want fifty lakhs for bail," Rick whispered, voice breaking. "If I don't get it by tomorrow, they're transferring me to Tihar. You know what happens to people like me there. A Naga boy with a scandal... I won't survive a week."

"Your family—your father has money—"

"No!" Rick's voice turned fierce. "If Papa finds out, the shame will destroy him. This could kill him. I'd rather die in prison than break my father's heart."

The Desperate Act

That night, Priya stood in the temple that had shaped her entire life. The Kali Mata temple in North Kolkata, where her grandfather and her father once led prayers and where she first sang morning aartis.

"Ma," she whispered to the deity. "Forgive me."

Her hands trembled as she took gold ornaments from the chest—necklaces, earrings, and bangles. Each felt heavier than the last.

Just until Rick is safe, she told herself. I'll put everything back when this is over.

But she knew it was a lie.

Ramesh Kaka, the old temple guard who had watched her grow up, fell prey to deceit. "Just checking Ma's jewellery for the festival," she said, forcing a smile that tasted like ash.

The Discovery

By morning, the theft was discovered.

The media circled again: **"CLASSICAL SINGER STEALS FROM GODDESS TO SAVE BOYFRIEND."**

Her father's call came, his voice was like ice. "You are dead to us. Your name will never be spoken in this house again."

Her mother's words cut deeper. "I carried you for nine months, thinking I nurtured a devotee. Instead, I gave birth to a thief who would steal from Kali Ma herself. You are cursed, Priya."

The gharana of classical music disowned her publicly. Her guru gave a statement: "This girl was never truly dedicated to our tradition. A real classical singer would die before defiling the divine."

The Escape

With the stolen gold, Rick secured bail. But Kolkata was no longer safe. Their faces were splashed across every news channel.

That night, they vanished into darkness, bound for Nagaland.

"We can never return," Priya whispered as the train left Howrah.

Rick held her close, both crying. "Your music, your family, your whole life—you've lost everything for me."

"I chose love," she replied, though her heart was breaking. "But the price... the price is so high."

The Aftermath

In Nagaland, Rick's family welcomed Priya with open arms, unaware of the entire truth. His mother fussed over them. His father showed quiet support through small kindnesses.

Priya discovered she was pregnant—their love child from the Shantiniketan trip. Rick's family arranged a church wedding without forcing her to change her religion.

Holud was born in February 2003.

But everything else had changed.

Priya never touched the harmonium again. Her voice, once celebrated, now only whispers lullabies. Guilt had stolen her song.

Rick tried to revive his music, but the joy had vanished. Each melody echoed Priya's sacrifice. He turned to social work in search of redemption through service. He sang only for the church.

The Continuing Fear

Even after twenty years, Priya lived in constant terror. Every knock at their door made her heart leap. Every newspaper might resurrect the scandal. Whenever Holud asked about Kolkata, Priya's blood ran cold.

"She can never know," Priya would whisper to Rick in the dark. "If Holud learns what I did, it will destroy her."

They believed their struggles—Rick's failed ventures, Priya's chronic illnesses, opportunities slipping through their fingers—were divine punishment for her sacrilege.

Despite everything lost, their love only deepened. They were bound by more than affection—by guilt, secrets, and the knowledge of what it meant to lose everything for love.

The Present Threat

Now Holud was in Kolkata. Priya's nightmares returned stronger than ever. The city that once shattered their lives now sheltered their daughter.

Every call from Holud sent Priya's heart racing. Every newspaper made her search for signs that the past was resurfacing.

"What if someone recognizes her as our daughter?" she asked Rick. "What if they connect her to us? What if the temple authorities are still looking for justice?"

Rick would hold her close, but even he couldn't promise their past would stay buried.

Some sins echo through generations.

In Kolkata, in the same Kali temple Priya had once robbed, the goddess waited with endless patience. If not by the mother, then perhaps by the daughter—who unknowingly carried both her blood and her burden.

The people whispered that Kali's justice was inevitable. That debts unpaid by one generation would be collected from the next.

And somewhere in the hills of Nagaland, a yellow hornbill sang its haunting call—a reminder that every bird must eventually return home.

Even if home means facing the storms you once fled.

Chapter 24

Love Story in Kolkata

April 2022 - Present

The college music room was their hidden refuge. Three weeks after the art exhibition, Pakhi and Aarav drifted here between classes, drawn to the hush where old harmoniums and sleek keyboards stood side by side.

"Play it again," Pakhi said, settling beside him. Afternoon light created golden patterns on the floor.

Aarav's fingers moved across the keys, a melody incomplete. "I started this after I met you, but I can't find the ending."

"Maybe some songs don't need endings. Maybe they just keep growing."

Their eyes locked. The air thickened with unspoken words.

"Pakhi, we need to talk about what we've been avoiding."

She'd felt this conversation approaching like distant thunder. "About Maya?"

"About everything. My father's plans, your family's secrets. The worlds we come from." He took her hand. "I need to know if you're willing to fight for this. For us."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Never." His grip tightened. "But it's complicated. My father planned my future, including marriage to Maya."

"And what do you want?"

"I want to write music that matters. I want to wake up living my truth." He lifted her hand to his lips. "And I want you beside me."

The College Canteen—Later That Week

Over shared fish fry with mustard sauce, their conversation flowed in Bengali and English, tides shifting between languages.

"I hear you whisper in your sleep."

Pakhi's spoon stilled. "How do you—"

"I watch over you. I love you, Pakhi. Tell me about the shadows."

She set her spoon down. "There are things about my family I can't unravel. Ma carries old pain in her eyes. Papa shields us from something I can't see. I feel secrets hovering just beyond reach."

"We all have family shadows." He covered her hand. "The question is whether we let them dictate our future."

Maya's voice cut through the moment. "There you are, Aarav. I've been looking everywhere."

She glided to their table, her elegant churidar a quiet reminder of her polished roots. "The community garden project needs your input. Uncle LM is asking—"

"Actually, I'm planning a trip this weekend," Aarav interrupted gently. "I need space to think."

Hope flickered in Maya's eyes. "A trip? Where? I could—"

"Alone." His voice was kind but firm. "I need to clear my head about some decisions."

After she left, Pakhi asked, "What decisions?"

"About what I'm willing to sacrifice for you." He squeezed her hand. "Will you come away with me? Mukutmonipur. The hills might remind you of home."

Pakhi's heart raced. "Aarav, I couldn't. What would people think? What would Ma—"

"What do you want, Pakhi? Not what others expect. What do you want?"

She stared at their intertwined fingers. "Let me think."

That Evening—Pakhi's Phone Call

Pakhi sat on her narrow bed, phone trembling in her hands.

"Ma, it's me."

"Billy! You sound breathless."

The lie slipped out like silk, burning her tongue. "Some girls are organizing a cultural immersion trip this weekend. We're visiting traditional craft villages for our literature project."

"Which girls?"

"A few from my department. You don't know them. It's supervised, Ma. Very safe."

A pause. Pakhi held her breath.

"Be careful, Billy. Call me when you arrive."

"I love you, Ma."

The guilt twisted sharply in her stomach. She'd never lied to her mother about anything that mattered.

Meanwhile—Aarav's Confrontation

LM tended his prized adeniums when Aarav entered the study.

"Papa, I'm going away for the weekend. To think."

LM looked up, eyes sharp. "About what?"

"My future. Whether to follow your path or choose my own."

"This is about that hill girl."

"Her name is Pakhi. And yes—it's about her, Maya, the company, and my life. Not your script."

LM stood, imposing. "She'll never fit our world."

"Maybe I don't want a world she can't join." Aarav's voice strengthened. "I need space to think without your voice or Maya's influencing me."

"Fine. Take your weekend." LM's smile was cold. "But remember—some choices can't be undone."

As Aarav left, LM reached for his phone. His network would ensure he knew exactly where his son went—and with whom.

The Next Morning—Departure

Aarav arrived early. Both were tense, caught between fear and exhilaration.

"Second thoughts?" he asked.

"Many. It feels like I'm crossing a line I can't uncross."

"We both are." He started the engine. "Some lines are meant to be crossed."

As the city faded, the road twisted into green silence. Hills beckoned to Pakhi's soul, stirring old longing.

Neither noticed the black sedan following at a distance nor the telephoto lens trained on them from the roadside rest stop.

Mukutmonipur—The Journey

Hills rose like emerald dreams beneath a brooding sky. Pakhi breathed in the mountain air, laced with the scent of pine and wildflowers.

"Different from your Nagaland hills?" Aarav asked.

"Different trees, different birds. But the same feeling." She smiled. "Like the earth breathes slower here. Like time moves differently."

They checked into a modest hillside resort—separate cottages preserving propriety while granting freedom to explore what bloomed between them.

That night, they circled a bonfire as local musicians played haunting Santali folk songs. Drums pulsed like heartbeats. Flutes wove through smoke and starlight.

"Dance with me," Aarav said, extending his hand.

"Here? In front of everyone?"

"Here, under stars, where no one knows our story except us."

She let him pull her up. Her deep midnight blue dress, traced with silver, shimmered in firelight. Anklet bells sang with each step.

"I love how you move," he whispered against her ear. "Like you're dancing with the wind itself."

"In Nagaland, we believe dance is conversation with the spirits of the land. Each step tells them who we are."

"What are you telling them now?"

Pakhi met his eyes. "That I've found the person I want to dance with for the rest of my life."

His arms tightened around her. The world narrowed to firelight and music and the rhythm of their hearts beating in sync.

The Next Morning—By the Lake

They wandered the lakeshore as mist curled from the water like the breath of ancient gods. With jasmine braided in her hair, Pakhi wore a sun gold yellow kurta—sunlight against grey dawn.

"My mother would have loved this place," she said suddenly.

"Tell me about her."

"Sometimes I see her gazing at old photographs, eyes so sad it breaks my heart. There's a whole chapter of her life she's never let me read."

Aarav stopped and turned to face her. "What if we both come from broken stories? What if that's why we found each other—to write a new one?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I love you. Not just your beauty, but your strength, your independence. The way you make me want to be braver than I am." He cupped her face. "Whatever shadows our families cast, whatever challenges we face—I want to face them with you."

Tears slipped down her cheeks. "I love you too. But love alone might not be enough."

"Then we'll make it enough." His voice was fierce. "We'll fight for it, protect it, nurture it until it's strong enough to withstand anything."

Their lips met as mist swirled around them, the hills standing sentinel.

Neither saw the figure across the water, camera in hand, already feeding images to LM's network.

Their beautiful, bold weekend had been captured. The evidence was racing toward Kolkata, where Maya's desperation grew, and LM's plans sharpened.

But for now, in the golden hush of morning, there was only love—pure, brave, and defiant.

Ready to face whatever storms waited beyond the hills.

Chapter 25

The Green-Eyed Monster

The Monday sun, usually welcome to Maya, mocked her through the window. A dull ache throbbed behind her eyes—proof of her sleepless weekend wrestling with emotions that threatened to overwhelm her.

Saturday was torture. She waited by her phone, expecting Aarav to call, explain his absence, or invite her to join his mysterious trip. Instead, silence—complete and devastating—stretched through the weekend like an accusation.

"How could he just disappear like that?" she muttered to her reflection, her voice thick with unshed tears. "How could he be so thoughtless?"

But deep down, Maya knew it wasn't thoughtlessness. The careful way he'd avoided mentioning his destination and the deliberate vagueness about needing "space to think"—it all pointed to one terrifying conclusion. He hadn't gone alone.

She'd called Subho late Sunday evening, her voice trembling with barely contained panic. "Meet me at Burlington tomorrow morning," she'd pleaded. "Please, Subho. I can't handle this situation alone."

Cafe Burlington, their regular haunt of shared laughter and whispered secrets, felt hollow without Aarav. The empty corner booth where the three once sat mocked her.

As Maya poured out her heart, tears streaked her makeup. Subho ached with helpless sympathy but knew his role: friend, confidante, reliable—never chosen.

"I love him, Subho," she sobbed, her voice cracking like glass. "I've always loved him. Every birthday party we attended together, every family function where our parents smiled knowingly—I thought it meant something. I thought we meant something."

"Maya," Subho said gently, his voice strained, "maybe this trip was exactly what he said—just time to think. You know how the pressure of the music industry is getting to him. Maybe—"

"No." Maya's voice turned sharp and crystalline with sudden clarity. "He's with her. That hill girl. I know it."

Subho watched helplessly as certainty hardened over Maya's features, freezing her former warmth into sharp desperation that blazed from her strained eyes.

"She's nothing like us, Subho. She doesn't understand our world, our expectations, or our families. What could he possibly see in her?"

The question lingered, raw and wounded. Subho knew the answer—he saw it in Aarav's eyes when he looked at Pakhi, the same wonder and fascination Subho felt for Maya. But saying so would worsen her pain.

"Maybe," he said carefully, "you should talk to Uncle LM. If anyone knows where Aarav went—"

"Uncle already knows," Maya interrupted, wiping her eyes with shaking hands. "I called him yesterday evening. He was... strange about it. Angry, but also calculating. Like he was already planning something."

The evening in the cafe dragged on with Maya checking her phone obsessively, jumping at every notification. As time passed without a word from Aarav, her composure began to fracture.

"They should be back by now if it was just a day trip," she said to Subho as they sipped their favourite hazelnut latte. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless they stayed overnight somewhere." The words came out like poison, each syllable burning her throat. "Together."

Subho watched as jealousy twisted Maya's features into someone he barely recognized. The girl he'd loved for years was vanishing, replaced by someone consumed with possession and rage.

"Maya, you're spying. This isn't like you."

"Isn't it?" She laughed bitterly. "Maybe this is me. Maybe I'm just another girl replaced by what's newer, exotic, and intriguing."

Her voice turned venomous. "That tribal girl with her innocent act and folk songs—what does she know about building a life, about family, or about responsibility? She's a distraction, Subho. A novelty, Aarav will tire of once he realizes what he's risking."

Subho felt a chill. This wasn't the Maya he knew—the one who volunteered and championed women's education. This was jealousy, poisoning everything.

"Maya, listen to yourself. This isn't who you are."

But Maya was beyond listening. The weekend crystallized into betrayal. Every shared moment became evidence of her inadequacy, every smile a twisting knife.

"He's making a mistake," she said coldly. "Someone needs to help him before he ruins his future."

As she walked away, leaving Subho at the cafe, he felt a terrible premonition. Maya was slipping away, replaced by someone willing to fight dirty for what she thought was hers.

And somewhere in the hills of Mukutmonipur, Aarav and Pakhi remained blissfully unaware that their beautiful weekend of love had set in motion forces that would soon threaten to tear their world apart.

The green-eyed monster was loose, ravenous, and unstoppable. It would not rest until it had devoured every happiness in its path.

Chapter 26

Truths and Consequences

The evening air in their cramped PG room pressed in, thick with unspoken tension. Pakhi unpacked her bag from Mukutmonipur, the web of lies she'd spun now clinging to her like stale smoke.

Ana and Prii sat on their beds, anxiety and hurt flickering in their eyes.

"So," Ana broke the silence, voice neutral. "How was your cultural immersion?"

Pakhi's hands stilled on her kurta. The sarcasm was unmistakable.

"It was... enlightening."

"Strange that Ana and I weren't invited to this college trip," Prii said softly.

The accusation hung in the air. Pakhi's cheeks burned.

"We called the college, Pakhi." Ana stood, moving closer. "There was no cultural trip organized this weekend."

The silence crashed down, heavy as stone. Pakhi sank onto her bed, guilt crushing her chest.

"Where were you really?" Prii asked gently. "And please, don't lie to us again. We're your friends."

Pakhi looked up, meeting Ana's eyes—hard with worry and anger. Prii's gaze shimmered with pain.

"I was in Mukutmonipur," she said quietly. "With Aarav."

Ana exhaled sharply. "Pakhi, what have you done?"

"We stayed in separate cottages. Nothing happened. We just needed time—"

"Away from reality?" Ana's voice hardened. "You lied to Priya Aunty. The woman who worries about you more than anyone."

Pakhi flinched as if slapped. "It wasn't like that—"

"Then what was it like?" Prii interrupted, her gentleness replaced by genuine anger. "Because from where we're sitting, you've forgotten why we came to Kolkata."

"What do you mean?"

Ana's voice was steady and deliberate. "We came here to study. To build careers, to make our families proud, to prove that girls from the hills can succeed anywhere. Remember? That was our pact."

"I haven't forgotten that," Pakhi said weakly.

"Haven't you? When did you last talk about literature with the same passion as you talk about Aarav?" Prii pressed.

Pakhi's throat tightened. No words came.

"You're drowning, Pakhi," Ana said. "And we're watching it happen."

"He loves me," Pakhi's voice strengthened. "With him, I feel seen. Real. He challenges me."

"What about his family, Maya? Are your worlds completely different?" Prii asked.

"Love conquers that."

Ana laughed bitterly. "This isn't a movie. It's been three weeks, and already you're lying, skipping studies, and sneaking away. What's next? Dropping out?"

"No one's dropping out."

Prii stood and took Pakhi's hands. "We love you. You're like our sister. But we're watching you lose yourself, and it's breaking our hearts."

"I'm not lost. I'm finally living, not just existing."

"At what cost?" Ana asked. "Your integrity? Your mother's trust? Your ambitions? Us? What are you willing to sacrifice, Pakhi?"

The question hit hard. Pakhi felt torn—the warm tide of love pulling her toward Aarav, the cold reality of Ana's words shaking her awake. Fear of disappointing her mother, losing her friends, and betraying her dreams loomed large. Yet a defiant voice whispered, urging her to hold onto the freedom she'd tasted.

"You're being dramatic—"

"Are we?" Prii's voice cracked. "You lied to Priya Auntie. She trusted you. How would she feel knowing the truth?"

For the first time since Mukutmonipur, icy doubt split through Pakhi's certainty. Her mother's trusting face rose before her, guilt twisting sharply in her stomach.

"She doesn't have to know."

"Lies always resurface," Ana said. "And they destroy everything."

"We're not asking you to stop seeing him," Prii said gently. "Just be smart. Remember who you are and what you want."

"And be honest," Ana added. "Start with your mother."

Pakhi pulled her hands free and retreated to the window. The Kolkata skyline loomed outside, dazzling yet oppressive. The distant call to prayer echoed, flooding her with longing for home and the self she'd left behind.

"I love him," she whispered. "Maybe he's worth it."

Ana and Prii exchanged glances, worry deepening in their eyes.

"Promise you won't lose your dreams for him," Prii said.

Pakhi nodded, but the promise felt hollow. The pull of love—aching, reckless, undeniable—drowned out every sensible word her friends offered.

As they prepared for bed in tense silence, none of them noticed the text that lit up Pakhi's phone:

"I miss you already. When can I see you again? - A"

Her heart raced as she typed back: *"Tomorrow. Always tomorrow."*

But beneath her reply lurked an unwelcome thought: exam results drop tomorrow. Love might soon clash with her ambitions, pushing her further from the dreams she once held dear.

In that moment, the truth stung—she was drowning.

But unlike her friends, she felt a desperate comfort in sinking, unsure if she even wanted rescue.

Chapter 27

The Hornbill's Echo in a Palace of Shadows

Aarav lay sprawled on his bed, afternoon sun casting shadows across the opulent room. He'd never believed in the transformative power of love. His childhood had inoculated him against such sentimentality.

His parents' relationship had been his education in matters of the heart.

He remembered the muffled sobs from his mother's room, the guttural sounds of his father's brutality seeping through walls. He'd asked, innocent eyes wide, "Ma, what's happening? Is there an animal in there?"

To protect her child from the terrible realities of the world, his mother, ensnared in shame and terror, would evoke stories of untamed animals and valiant rescues.

Then, one day, he was no longer a child. He'd seen the raw pain in her eyes, years of agony finally breaking free.

"No more, Ma," he'd whispered, holding her close. "I'm here now. I'll protect you."

That was the day his mother's tears became a torrent, washing over him, revealing the desolate landscape of her soul. And the day he understood: his father was the beast.

He'd grown up in the gilded cage of LM Palace, living alongside a queen shattered by her king. He, the prince, was powerless to save her.

He'd learned the truth eventually—how LM had seen Su at a music competition, her voice a desperate plea for her dying father. How his father, the Lord of Music, had made his desire a command. The marriage was arranged, a transaction cloaked as a fairy tale.

But the fairy tale ended on the wedding night, revealing the beast beneath the mask.

Aarav had grown to despise his father—not just for the violence, but for the theft. LM had stolen Su's voice, her dreams, and her very self. And for what? Power. Control. Possession.

I will never become him, Aarav had vowed silently, watching his mother fade year by year. *I will never cage what I love*.

Then came Pakhi.

A creature of the hills, a vibrant splash of colour against the muted tones of his life. The yellow hornbill had brought with her a love he never thought possible.

Her eyes—that mesmerizing blend of grey and blue—held entire skies within them. When she looked at him, he felt seen in a way that terrified and thrilled him. Not as LM's son, not as the heir to an empire, but simply as Aarav. As himself.

He thought of her laughter, bright as mountain streams. The way jasmine tangled in her hair. Her anklets singing with every step. The curve of her neck when she tilted her head, considering his words with that serious, thoughtful expression that made his chest ache.

Pakhi, he thought, heart swelling with tenderness that surprised him.
You are changing me.

He imagined her in his arms, safe and cherished. He wanted to hold her gently, to explore the wonder of her not with hunger, but with reverence. To learn the constellation of freckles on her shoulders, to trace the delicate bones of her wrists, to kiss her eyelids closed and feel her breath against his neck.

He wanted to give her everything his mother never had—freedom, choice, and voice.

He wanted to love her the way his father never learned how.

"Jishu! Are you still sleeping?" His mother's voice carried warmth and concern. "Get up! Subho is waiting. And what about Maya? Is she alright?"

"Ma!" He pulled her close, burying his face in her soft stomach—a gesture from childhood, pure comfort. "I have so much to tell you. Tonight, I promise."

Her hand stroked his hair, gentle. "Are you talking about the girl from the hills? The one who makes you smile like this?"

He looked up, startled. "You know?"

"A mother knows," Su said softly. "I see it in your eyes. The way you look now—it's how I looked once, before..." She trailed off, then smiled. "Tell me about her tonight. I want to know who's captured my son's heart."

"She's everything, Ma," he whispered. "Everything I didn't know I needed."

Su's eyes glistened. "Then don't let your father's shadow fall on her. Protect her, beta. Protect what you love before it's too late."

He rushed to the washroom, smile playing on his lips. His hornbill awaited. His Pakhi.

He'd bring her the world if she asked. Today, he'd simply bring her himself—his whole heart, unguarded and true.

The lingering scent of sandalwood, his mother's gentle touch, and the memory of Pakhi's soft voice—all swirled together, familiar and unknown, terrifying and thrilling.

He was a prince awakening from a long, dark slumber.

And Pakhi—his yellow hornbill—was the sun that had finally pierced the shadows, teaching him that love didn't have to be a cage.

It could be wings.

Chapter 28

A Glimmer of Colour

Su exhaled, silence pressing in like a heavy shroud. Aarav's hurried departure had left scattered belongings and unspoken promises.

She moved through his space with ritual grace—folding towels, smoothing shirts. This quiet choreography was her secret language of love, spoken where words could not safely go.

His room mirrored his guarded spirit: stark black and white, all sharp lines and order. No warmth, no softness, no dreams. The gentle greys that coloured her life were nowhere to be found.

She sank onto his vast bed, cool silk shocking against her skin. "Jishu," she whispered, "when did you become so skilled at hiding your heart?"

His phone rested on the mahogany table, screen still glowing. Her fingers scrolled through the gallery, driven by a mother's need to understand the new spark in her son's eyes.

And then, she saw her.

A gasp escaped—raw, involuntary.

"Oh my God. Who are you, beautiful child?"

The girl was otherworldly. Skin glowing like pearls touched by morning light, hair tumbling in chocolate waves that shimmered like spun silk. But it was her eyes—blue-grey as monsoon clouds, deep and wild as distant mountains—that stole Su's breath.

A tattoo peeked from beneath her pink kurta: wild orchids, intricate and celebratory. At her navel, a diamond ring sparkled—quiet defiance, strength claimed as her own.

In the photo, the girl laughed with her head thrown back, joy so unguarded that Su felt a reluctant smile tug at her lips. That laughter was innocent, purity that pierced Su with memories of her youth, before she learned dreams had a price.

"Where did my son find such light?" she murmured, scrolling with trembling fingers.

Image after image: the girl by a river, dupatta caught in breeze; her fingers laced with Aarav's as if they'd always belonged together; her eyes brimming with tenderness that squeezed Su's heart.

"Is this what love looks like when it's real? When it's chosen instead of forced?"

In each photograph, her son transformed. The armour melted away, leaving him open, vulnerable, and unmistakably alive. This was the Aarav she'd always wished for—unafraid to love, unafraid to be happy.

"Maya," she said suddenly, understanding flooding through her. "Oh, poor Maya."

Maya's absence suddenly made sense. Maya had been a constant presence in Su's life since childhood, and Su had grown accustomed to her daily visits, even though Aarav maintained a polite distance. She knew LM and Maya's father were old friends, their business empires intertwined, their hopes anchored in marriage between their children.

Su had sensed Maya's deep affection and watched the girl's face transform whenever Aarav entered the room. But she'd also seen Aarav's brotherly distance, his failure to return that warmth.

"I told myself he was just young," she murmured, guilt heavy in her voice. "That love would grow naturally. But how can love be arranged when the heart has already been chosen?"

Yet as a mother who'd endured twenty years in this shadowed house, Su knew the peril that came with such beauty. The danger was immediate and real. She could almost hear alarm bells ringing through the palace hush.

She'd learned long ago to keep her opinions locked away with her tears, to swallow words along with hopes. The silence had begun on her wedding night—a stark lesson in the price of resistance, in what happened to women who dared want something different than what LM decided.

"But this is my son," she said fiercely, surprising herself with the venom in her voice. "My child. Not his possession to manipulate."

Something fierce and ancient awakened inside her, overpowering the helplessness that had ruled for so long.

He will not tolerate this, she thought, voice cold with certainty. When he finds out—and he will—he will destroy her.

Su drifted to the window, pressing her palm to cold glass. The flawless gardens encircling their palace-prison spread below. Every blossom handpicked by LM, every path lay to suit his taste. Here, nothing grew unless he allowed it.

"Not this time," she whispered, determination flaring in her chest, burning away years of helplessness. Her reflection met her gaze, eyes blazing with fierceness she barely recognized. "This time, love will not be the price of ambition."

She had to warn Aarav today, before LM's web of informants delivered the news, before the machinery of ruin began grinding. She would call him after classes. If necessary, confront him face-to-face, even if it meant risking LM's ire.

Each moment wasted brought them closer to disaster.

"Bhagwan," she breathed, closing her eyes and pressing her forehead against glass. "Give me the strength to save them both. Give me the courage I never had to save myself."

The phone slid from her grasp onto white sheets. The girl's face disappeared as the screen faded, but her presence lingered—a sign that somewhere in this city, a yellow bird had found her son and given him a song.

For the first time in twenty years, Suranjana felt something awaken: not just hope, but wild, protective love that could move mountains for her child's happiness.

Color had finally seeped into the black-and-white maze of LM Palace.

She would give everything before letting that light be snuffed out.

Yet insidious fear crept in, whispering a question she couldn't dismiss: *Would her actions be enough, or would she be too late?*

Chapter 29

The Night of Broken Melodies

The soft hum of an unfinished lullaby lingered in Suranjana's mind as she stood in the half-light of her son's room, her phone trembling in her grasp. The memory pulsed, raw and unhealed, as if the wound had only just been opened.

Twenty Years Ago—Kolkata, January 2002

The morning of the competition arrived, gilded with hope. Su faced the fractured mirror in their humble flat, smoothing the white salwar kameez her mother had adorned with silver stitches. The disjointed mirror and gentle cloth echoed her yearning for wholeness and triumph.

"Sanju dear, you look like Saraswati herself," her mother whispered. "Today, your voice will save us all."

Her father rested in the next room, each strained breath a cruel reminder of the treatment they could never afford. Thirty years at the company had ended with nothing—no pension, no medical care—just bills threatening to pull them under.

"Su, are you ready?" Partha's voice floated up from the narrow street. Her heart fluttered—Partha, her classmate, her hidden love, her steadfast ally.

"You can win this, Su," he said, his eyes blazing with belief. "Your voice... it's touched by the divine."

For months, he had guided her on his rooftop, their voices weaving through intricate ragas. Though talented himself, he chose to be her anchor.

"What if I fail?" she whispered.

"Then we'll find another way," he promised. "But today, just sing. Sing for your father, for your mother, for us."

The auditorium of the Bengal Music Academy brimmed with Kolkata's elite. When her moment arrived, she stepped onto the stage with Partha at her side, his tabla pulsing beneath her soaring voice. She chose Raga Yaman, the raga of yearning, of hope that defies despair.

"Piya milan ko aaj..." she began. Her voice swept through the hall, saturated with her father's decline, quivering with a daughter's desperate devotion. A young man in expensive clothes leaned forward with unsettling intensity. But she pushed the distraction aside, losing herself in the music.

When her final note faded, silence lingered before applause crashed over her. Musicians wiped away tears.

"That was it," Partha whispered. "You've won."

As the announcement filled the auditorium, Su stood frozen. The winner—someone else—received the award that meant her father's treatment and her family's survival. The young judge's pointed gaze and strategic smile suggested impropriety, but her disappointment eclipsed everything else.

"There must be some mistake," Partha said, voice tight with disbelief. "Everyone heard you sing."

But there was no error, only hidden manipulation she would uncover much later.

Backstage, Su crumpled, sobs wracking her body. She fell to the floor like a discarded sari.

"Su, listen." Partha knelt beside her. "This isn't over. Give me one year—just one year. I'll take every singing job I can find. We'll get the money for Uncle's treatment."

"One year," she whispered, clutching his hands.

The Next Morning

"Su! Come quickly! Important people at our door!"

Through the window, Su saw a gleaming Rolls-Royce wedged awkwardly in their narrow lane. Neighbors clustered, whispering. A street vendor paused, eyes wide.

Three emerged: a distinguished older couple and the keen-eyed young judge from the night before.

Her father, despite his illness, had put on his best kurta and sat with dignity.

"We are the Mukherjee family," the woman said warmly, her silk saree catching the light. "We own the music company that organized yesterday's competition. Our son was mesmerized by your daughter's performance. We've come to ask for her hand in marriage."

Su's heart lurched.

"Marriage?" Her mother stammered. "But we barely know—"

"Love doesn't follow schedules," Mr. Mukherjee said smoothly. "When my son found the girl he wanted to spend his life with, we knew we had to act quickly."

Mrs. Mukherjee continued gently, "We understand this is sudden. But your father's medical treatment and your family's financial

burdens—consider them resolved. Our daughter-in-law's family will want for nothing."

Her parents looked at each other with desperate hope.

"Aakash chand haate paoa," her father whispered—the moon fallen from the sky into our hands.

"We'd like the wedding within the month," Mr. Mukherjee added.

Throughout the negotiation, no one asked Su. Her father's declining health and the mounting debts—they converged, leaving no room for her voice. The prospect of rescue was an ultimatum cloaked in opulence.

When Mrs. Mukherjee pressed antique gold bangles into her palms, they seared her skin—gilded shackles in disguise.

Evening - Park Street Café

Su met Partha at their usual café, where they had planned her career and whispered about their future. Her hands shook as she told him about the proposal, the acceptance of it, and the wedding planned for next month.

His expression shifted from confusion to disbelief, finally settling into devastation so profound it hollowed him out.

"You could have said no, Su," he said, voice empty. "I asked for one year—just one year—because I believed in us."

"Partha, you don't understand. My father—"

"Your father would have survived!" His voice rose. "I would have found a way. Your family always takes the path of least resistance."

"That's not fair," she whispered. "You know that's not who I am."

"Do I?" His eyes were cold, unrecognizable. "The Su I knew would have fought for what we had. Would have believed in our love enough to wait."

"I don't want to see your face again," he said as he stood to leave. "Don't try to contact me. Don't pretend you ever loved me."

Those were his last words. Later, she would learn he had become world-renowned, performing from Mumbai to New York. But he never forgave her, never reached out, and never acknowledged she had existed.

The Wedding Day—February 2002

The wedding became a lavish spectacle. Her in-laws showered her with gifts. Her father's health rebounded with real care. Her family's debts melted away.

On her wedding night, she wore a red Benarasi saree worth more than her family's yearly earnings, scented with sandalwood and rose. She whispered that gratitude might become love.

LM arrived past midnight, reeking of alcohol and cigarettes.

"So, you're my prize," he said, circling her like a predator. "The voice that enchanted me so much, I had to rig the competition to have you."

Her blood froze.

"What do you mean?"

"I own the judges, the organizers, and the entire musical establishment of this city. When I want something, I take it. And I wanted you."

What followed was not intimacy but violence—dominance that left her physically broken, blood-stained silk sheets. Her hand found the gold bangles, their metallic ring a subdued defiance. As she softly intoned a familiar raga, the melody became a fragile declaration of selfhood in a world of disempowerment.

When little Aarav was born, though not of love, Su poured her heart into him.

Present Day

Su jolted free from memory, her body quivering with remembered pain. Even after twenty years, phantom bruises lingered, and Partha's voice still echoed with blame. But worse was the fear of watching her son stumble into a life of sacrifice and silent dreams.

As she moved to leave Aarav's room, she caught sight of Pakhi's face glowing on the phone screen. Her heart was clenched with recognition. This girl had the same light in her eyes that Su once possessed, the same innocent belief that love could conquer all.

"Not this time," she whispered to the photograph. "This time, love will have a champion."

She would warn Aarav. She would reveal the truth about his father. Maybe, by saving her son's happiness, she could finally redeem the choices she had been too afraid to make.

The shattered melody of her youth would not echo into the next generation. Not while she still had a voice.

Chapter 30

Back To Kohima Hills: The Hornbill Hearth Community (Present May 2022)

Inside the central meeting hall, John Angami stood before a large map of Nagaland and its surrounding areas. His weathered fingers traced the lifelines of migration and the web of educational centres they had built. At sixty-eight, Rick's father radiated quiet authority, his silver hair and deeply lined face bearing witness to a lifetime spent defending his people's dignity.

"The question before us today," John said to the assembled council members, "is not whether we continue our work, but how we adapt to the changing challenges our children face in the plains."

Twelve figures gathered around the circular table, each leading a double life: esteemed professionals in daylight, covert operatives after dusk, all fuelled by personal encounters with injustice. Dr. Kevileno Angami, a psychiatrist, led trauma counselling and wove intelligence networks through Northeastern colleges, her resolve sharpened by cases like Lyna's. Advocate Vezau Angami ran legal aid clinics that doubled as listening posts for stories the system ignored, his frustration with neglect turning into quiet resistance. Professor Mengu Angami's research chronicled both the fading of culture and the threats to their people, his scholarship a shield for generations yet to come.

At the table's head, Priya sat draped in a yellow handloom shawl adorned with Angami patterns. Once a shattered soul fleeing Kolkata, she had become the quiet force steering this clandestine community. Her resolve, forged in trauma and a fierce desire to shield others from similar pain, ran deeper than even Rick or Dan could ever guess.

"Kyan has requested to address the council today," John announced, his voice carrying a note of concern. "His sister's condition continues to deteriorate, and I fear his patience is at its end."

John Angami, both Priya's father-in-law and Pakhi's grandfather, had shaped this organization from the ashes of grief and the steel of determination after nearly losing his son to the same system.

The door swung open, and Kyan strode in, his arrival shifting the room's energy in an instant. He had developed into a towering, broad-shouldered figure that exuded an intensity that caused others to automatically yield.

"Auntie," he said. His voice was raw, shaking, as if fury flickered just beneath the surface. "I cannot wait any longer."

Priya's face softened with a mother's worry. She had watched Kyan grow from a gentle boy into a young man hardened by his sister's ordeal, his kindness now edged with anger. "Son! Tell us what's troubling you."

"What's troubling me?" Kyan's composure broke, his voice raw with pain. "My sister sits in that room every day, trapped in her nightmare. Yesterday, she screamed for four hours—four, Auntie! And the monsters who did this walk free in Kolkata, probably laughing as they stalk their next victim."

Professor Mengu leaned forward. "Kyan, we all share your pain. Lyna is like a daughter to all of us. However, we cannot let emotions drive us to actions that will destroy everything we have built under John Sir.

"Built for what?" Kyan's voice rose. "So what? Built for what?" Kyan's voice climbed, frustration spilling over. "So we can write

reports? File complaints that vanish into bureaucratic voids? Offer comfort after the wounds are made, instead of stopping them?"

"Lower your voice in this sacred space, grandson. "We are not your enemies," spoke John Angami with authority.

Kyan's jaw tightened, but he obeyed. "I apologize, John Pa. But I cannot accept endless patience. Our people still suffer."

Dr. Kevileno spoke gently. "What exactly are you proposing?"

With his fingers grazing the handle of a concealed blade, Kyan's hand slipped into his jacket. His breath quickened at the thought of retribution, and his eyes darkened with determination. "I want to go to Kolkata. I want to find these men and make them pay for what they've done.

A thick silence settled, weighted with fears no one dared voice.

Priya finally spoke, her voice carrying the wisdom of someone who had lost everything to vengeance once before. "Son, I understand your rage. God knows, I understand it better than anyone in this room. My choices were once fuelled by the same pain and desire for retribution."

She rose and walked to the window, watching Mithun gaze in tranquil silence. "When I first arrived in these hills, I was shattered and desperate. I craved vengeance. I wanted to tear down everyone who had stolen my life, Rick's career, and our future."

Kyan listened, every muscle taut, fists clenched so tightly his knuckles blanched—a storm barely held at bay.

"Your father, our best friend, my father-in-law, and the elders of this community taught me something precious."

John Angami stood slowly, his presence commanding immediate attention. "Kyan, your pain is valid. Your anger is justified. But your proposed solution is not worthy of the Angami blood that flows in your veins."

"Then what is worthy, John Pa?" That was what he always called him. "Should I watch my sister waste away while her attackers live

freely? Do we pretend reports and workshops will restore her smile, her dreams, and her ability to trust?"

Kyan's words, heavy with pain, brought tears to more than one face. The silence that followed pressed down, thick and suffocating.

Priya returned to her seat and took Kyan's hands in hers. "Son, there's something else. Something that changes everything."

"What do you mean?"

"Billy. She's in Kolkata now, attending the same college where..." Priya's voice trailed off.

Kyan's face went white. "So...?"

"I'm saying this isn't just about justice for Lyna anymore, is it? It's about protecting Billy and the girls, too."

Agreed," said Dr. Kevileno. "And it would allow us to identify support networks already in place, as well as potential vulnerabilities."

Priya watched Kyan closely. She remembered him and her daughter as children, racing through these hills, Kyan always calling her "Bill" with easy indifference—never a hint of romance, only a brotherly protectiveness, sometimes tinged with exasperation at her wild ways and tomboyish antics.

But lately, something had changed—so subtle only someone with Priya's insight would have noticed. The way he inquired about "Bill's" safety during weekend dinners and the tension in his jaw when Rick spoke of their daughter's struggles, and the soft way he now murmured "Billy" instead of "Bill," as if the name itself had grown heavier.

Rick and Dan remained oblivious, still hopeful that Kyan and Pakhi would one day find each other, believing any feelings would blossom in their own time. They had no inkling that change was already underway, buried beneath politics and family ties. Yet Pakhi's recent mention of Aarav cast doubt in Priya's mind. And Priya resolved to ask her daughter about him that weekend.

"The project has merit," Priya said finally. "But such an operation would require careful coordination. You would need to check on our existing assets—the students we've placed in various institutions, the families we support, and the girls who might be vulnerable to the same treatment that destroyed your sister."

Her emphasis on the last point was deliberate. Kyan's expression tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Of course, Auntie. I would prioritize the safety of all our people there, especially the most vulnerable."

"Including Pakhi," she said quietly, testing her words.

For a moment, Kyan's mask slipped completely. The desperate love, the fierce protectiveness, the barely controlled fear—it all flashed across his features before he could recover his composure.

"Including my... including Bill," he corrected himself quickly, but the damage was done.

John Angami moved to stand behind Kyan, placing a firm hand on his shoulder. "The Hornbill Hearth Community was founded on the belief that we can protect our people through strength, but not through violence. Through unity, but not through hatred. If you cannot accept these principles, then perhaps you need to find another path."

The ultimatum hung in the air like a cloud of smoke.

"I have a proposal," he said finally, his voice carefully measured. "There's been talk of establishing a cultural documentation project in Kolkata—recording the experiences of our students, understanding the specific challenges they face in metropolitan institutions."

Several council members exchanged glances. This was exactly the kind of legitimate cover their operations needed.

"I could head this project," Kyan continued. "I would spend six months there, conducting interviews and building networks with our community members. It would give us valuable intelligence while maintaining our public facade."

What Kyan could not voice in this room of sharp minds was his desperate need to be near Billy. The idea of her walking those perilous streets alone made his chest seize with fear.

"Take all the time you need," Priya said softly. "But remember, son—the moment we let anger make our decisions for us, we lose not just our humanity but also our effectiveness."

As Kyan's footsteps echoed down the corridor, the council remained in thoughtful silence. Outside, mithun grazed undisturbed, oblivious to the storm gathering in a single young man.

"He'll make the right choice," John said finally, though his voice carried more hope than certainty.

"I pray you're right, Daddy. For all our sakes."

Chapter 31

Kohima To Kolkata: The Shadow of the Plains (Kolkata May 2022)

As the plane dipped toward Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose International Airport, Kyan felt as if he were crossing into a new universe. He pressed his forehead to the window, mesmerized by Kolkata unfurling below, a restless and endless cityscape that swallowed the horizon. The scent of the humid air, rich with a hint of exhaust and spices, wafted through the aircraft vents, tugging at a memory of the hills after the rain, when the earth smelled fresh and the air was tinged with the sweet scent of wildflowers.

His heart pounded as he wove through the throng of arrivals. Nerves and hope wrestled inside him while he searched the sea of faces. Then, near the taxi stand, he found them—three beacons of home, their grins wide, arms outstretched, eyes alight with unmistakable joy.

"Kyan!" Ana called out, waving enthusiastically.

Prii hugged him. "We can't believe you're here! When Pakhi told us about your research project, we were so excited."

And then he saw Pakhi—Billy, as she would always be in his memories. She lingered behind the others, dressed in a plain red kurta and jeans, her hair tumbling freely. Kyan's heart skipped; she was

changed, no longer the shy mountain girl. Her back was straight, her eyes were unwavering, and a new confidence shone through, although the old warmth still flickered beneath.

"Hello, Bill," he said, his voice rougher than he'd intended.

"Kyan!" She smiled, but there was something reserved in her expression, a distance that hadn't been there in Kohima. "It's so good to see you. How was your flight?" She shifted her weight slightly, her eyes flickering away for a moment before meeting his gaze again.

They spilled into the city, swept along by Ana's infectious energy. "Come on, we're starving! The best dhaba near our place isn't. Naga, but it's worth it."

A short while later, they settled around a small table at the dhaba. "The first month was terrible," Prii admitted. "We felt so out of place, like everyone was staring at us."

There was an incident on our first day," Pakhi said. "Some local boys tried to intimidate us. At first, it left us shaken, and we felt very vulnerable. We had help."

"What kind of help?" Kyan asked, his voice sharp.

Suddenly, before anyone could answer, a familiar voice called out from the entrance, shifting the energy at their table.

"Pakhi! Ana, Prii!"

Kyan turned to see a young man approaching their table—tall, well-dressed, with an easy confidence that immediately set Kyan's teeth on edge. As the young man arrived, Kyan's shoulders tensed; he was handsome in the polished way of city boys, with styled hair and clothes that probably cost more than most people in Kohima earned in a month.

"Aarav!" Pakhi's face broke into an unmistakable glow, her eyes shining in a way that sent an unfamiliar, cold ache through Kyan's chest. "Come meet my friend from home."

Aarav slid into the empty chair beside Pakhi with casual familiarity, and Kyan noticed how naturally she leaned slightly toward him, how her entire demeanour softened in his presence.

Kyan took the offered hand, resisting the urge to pull back. His smile appeared strained as he looked at Aarav. "How did you help them?"

Aarav extended his hand with a genuine smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Kyan. The girls often talk about home. You must be proud of them—they're doing amazingly well here."

Kyan took the hand, noting the firm grip. "How did you help them?"

"Some local 'troublemakers' were giving my friends a hard time outside the college," Aarav explained. "Nothing too serious, just typical bullying behaviour. My friends and I made sure they understood that kind of behaviour wasn't acceptable."

"And after that?" Kyan pressed.

"Then we reported it to the college authorities. The boys involved were suspended for a week and had to attend sensitivity training sessions."

Kyan felt his frustration rise. "That's all? Suspension and training?"

Aarav looked surprised by his intensity. "Well, yes. The goal was to change their behaviour, not escalate the situation."

"Sometimes escalation is necessary," Kyan said quietly, his eyes fixed on Aarav's face.

An uncomfortable silence rippled across the table. Pakhi's fingers curled tightly around her glass, knuckles whitening as she darted worried glances between the two men.

"Anyway," she said, "that's done now. Aarav, are you staying for lunch?"

"I'd love to," Aarav replied, but his eyes remained cautiously on Kyan, wariness tightening his smile.

While they ordered tandoori chicken, reshmi kebab, and parathas, Kyan watched the quiet choreography between Pakhi and the city boy. When conversation drifted elsewhere, they shared a silence that spoke of easy understanding, their connection deepening with each unspoken word.

Anyone with eyes could see it: they were tumbling into love, or perhaps had already landed there without even noticing.

So, Kyan, what brings you to Kolkata? The girls mentioned research.

"Cultural documentation. I'm exploring how our people adapt to cities, their challenges." Kyan paused, drawing in a deep breath as he felt the weight of his mission. "It's not just academic. It's personal. My sister's experience inspired me to undertake this project—she lost her way when she moved and struggled to fit in. I want to understand better how we can help our community hold onto their identity while navigating city life."

"Sounds fascinating. I'd like to learn more." Araav said.

"Our culture isn't just for outsiders' entertainment," he said, voice quiet.

Pakhi's eyes flashed. "Kyan, that's not fair. Aarav genuinely wants to understand—" Her voice sharpened, irritation and disappointment clear in her tone.

"Is he? Or just collecting experiences?" Kyan asked, not looking away from Aarav.

Aarav's expression hardened, his jaw tightening. "I think you're judging me without knowing anything about me."

"I know enough," Kyan said. "You're from the plains. Your people have treated ours as less for years."

"That's a generalization—"

Lunch dragged on, tension thick in the air, and Kyan's mind raced. He had come to Kolkata for research and secret protection duties. Yet, throughout the meal, he was haunted by the memory of his sister, once

vibrant and joyous, now silent and withdrawn after a similar entanglement. Her future, once bright, had dimmed to shadows in their mountain home. This image crystallized his new resolve: Pakhi must be pulled away from this threat before she slips too far.

He thought about his sister, broken and silent in her room back home. He thought about all the stories they'd documented of hill girls destroyed by plains boys who promised love but delivered only shame and abandonment.

Pakhi deserved more than heartbreak. She needed shielding from her own trusting heart, even if she was blind to the risks that Kyan saw so clearly.

Leaving the dhaba, Kyan watched Aarav walk close to Pakhi, their words low and private. A cold certainty rooted itself in Kyan's chest as he trailed behind.

In that moment, the scent of wildflowers after the rain, a memory of the hills, seemed to drift through the crowded streets of Kolkata. Reminded of the hills that cradled him, he felt an urge to bring Pakhi back. This pull toward the familiar became an echo as strong as the distant roll of thunder he had heard through the pines many times before, suggesting a storm was brewing ahead.

Chapter 32

The Rosebud and the Shadowed Palace

The Rosebud

Present Day—May 2022

The invitation slipped in with breakfast, as unassuming as morning tea.

"Ma, I'd like to bring someone for lunch today. A friend from college. You'll like her."

Su's Darjeeling tea froze halfway to her lips. The clink of silver against china pierced the air. In eighteen years, not once had a girl crossed their threshold at his invitation.

"Of course, son. What's her name?"

"Pakhi. Holud Pakhi." The way he tasted the name—like honey—told her everything.

"Will Maya and Subho join us?"

Arav shifted uncomfortably. "Not today. Just Pakhi."

Long before sunrise, Su began preparations. She stood outside Aarav's room, watching him sleep restlessly, one hand curled protectively over his chest.

My beautiful boy, she thought. Yet beneath love crept a chill—change was coming, and not everyone would greet it kindly.

By afternoon, the dining room had transformed: basmati pulao jewelled with cashews, golden dal fragrant with panch phoron, katla kalia glistening in gravy, nolen gurer payesh where palm jaggery lent smoky sweetness.

She longed for perfection for the girl who'd set her son's eyes aglow.

From the veranda, Su watched Aarav circle the car to open the passenger door with tenderness she'd never seen.

Pakhi emerged like a poem—rose-hued kurta, white palazzo, tiny flowers woven through her hair. Her face stole Su's breath.

As they approached, Pakhi's eyes widened in wonder at the palace. No calculation—only honest delight in beauty.

"Ma, this is Pakhi."

Pakhi pressed palms together in perfect namaste. "Namaskar, Auntie. Thank you for inviting me to your beautiful home."

Her voice sang with the lilting music of hills, and something inside Su's chest unlatched—a door long shut swinging open.

"Come, dear," Su said, the endearment flowing naturally.

Over lunch, Su observed their quiet dance. He offered her the choicest fish without thinking; she passed him water before he asked. They moved with effortless rhythm.

Su's heart twisted. She loved Maya—had watched her blossom. But watching Aarav with Pakhi, Su understood why those plans had crumbled. This wasn't infatuation. This was recognition.

"This kalia is incredible, Auntie," Pakhi said. "My mother makes something similar—she's half-Bengali herself. Her family's from North Kolkata."

Su felt a flutter of recognition. "Does she ever visit?"

Pakhi's expression grew sad. "No. Some falling out with her family before she married. She never talks about it, but I sense pain. Sometimes I catch her looking at old photographs..."

"That must be difficult."

"It is. But she found happiness in Nagaland with my father. They have such a beautiful love story." Pakhi smiled at Aarav. "The kind that crosses all boundaries."

The implication wasn't lost on anyone.

When Pakhi tasted the payesh, she sighed. "Auntie, this tastes like happiness itself."

Aarav laughed—a sound so free, Su realized she hadn't heard it in months.

As afternoon faded, Pakhi pressed palms together in farewell. "I hope I can come again soon."

"You're welcome anytime," Su replied, meaning it. "This house could use more laughter."

She stood as the car vanished, sending a silent prayer skyward.

Let them find happiness. Let this fragile beauty survive the shadows.

When she turned inside, LM stood in the doorway, face unreadable.

"So," he said quietly. "Aarav brought someone home."

"A friend from college."

"Just a friend?" Steel beneath silk. "You prepared quite an elaborate meal for a 'friend.'"

"I wanted to show proper hospitality."

"While Maya—practically family—sits at home wondering why she's excluded?"

"That's between Aarav and Maya."

"Is it?" His eyes glittered. "Or between you and your conscience? You welcomed this... outsider... with open arms."

"She's not an outsider. She's a lovely girl—"

"Who's turned our son's head with hill girl charm? Who threatens everything we've planned?"

"Maybe what we planned isn't what he wants."

LM's face darkened. "Since when do eighteen-year-old boys know what they want? Since when do we let infatuation dictate family alliances?"

"It's not infatuation," Su said firmly. "I saw them together. The warmth in his eyes. This is real."

"This is foolishness. And you've made it worse."

Su straightened her spine. "I was being a good hostess. Nothing more."

"Don't play innocent, Suranjana. I've built an empire by reading people. You weren't being polite. You were giving your blessing."

"And what if I was? What if I put my son's happiness above your business calculations?"

LM's hand shot out, gripping her wrist. "Then you'd be making a dangerous mistake. Maya's family represents business, connections, standing. What does this hill girl represent? A fascination that will fade?"

He leaned closer. "Marriage is about building dynasties, securing futures, maintaining order."

He released her wrist, leaving red marks.

"You will not encourage this further. You will not invite her again. You will help guide Aarav back to his senses."

"And if I refuse?"

LM's smile was cold. "You won't. Because you know what happens when you cross me. You've learned that lesson before."

Part II: The Storm Breaks

Next Morning

Sunlight spilled through the chandelier, scattering rainbows across the marble. But one rainbow seemed to shatter, its colours dissolving like a herald of discord.

At the mahogany table, LM sat in his white kurta, silent and formidable, scanning reports with predatory focus.

Su slipped in quietly, her powder blue saree whispering. Breakfasts with Maya and Subho let her pretend they were a real family—the closest she'd come to normalcy in years.

But today, Maya's chair sat empty.

LM's gaze swept the table, missing nothing. "Where is Maya this morning?"

Subho cleared his throat. "She mentioned a family commitment. Wedding preparations."

LM set his coffee down with deliberate precision. The click reverberated through sudden silence. "How thoughtful of her to prioritize family obligations."

He paused, letting silence stretch uncomfortably.

"Speaking of new faces, I noticed we had a guest yesterday. A young lady I don't recall meeting."

Aarav's fork froze. "Just a friend from college, Papa."

"Nothing significant?" LM repeated slowly. "Interesting. Your mother seemed to think she was significant enough to prepare quite an elaborate feast."

Su felt her pulse quicken. "She was a guest. I was being hospitable."

"Tell me, son, what's this friend's name?"

"Pakhi," Aarav replied reluctantly. "Holud Pakhi."

"And she's from where?"

"Nagaland," Subho interjected quickly.

The atmosphere changed instantly. LM's coffee cup struck his plate with a sharp clatter.

"Nagaland," LM said, voice dropping to a whisper.

Su watched her husband's face transform. The mask of civility fell, exposing cold calculation she remembered from twenty years ago.

LM shoved his chair back with a harsh scrape. Rising, he seemed to fill the room, his presence swelling like a storm.

"Papa—"

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" LM's voice was dangerously quiet. "Did you think you could parade some primitive hill girl through my house and I would overlook it?"

"She's not primitive," Aarav said, voice rising. "She's intelligent, educated"

"She's a distraction. A pretty face who's clouded your judgment, so you've forgotten your responsibilities, your heritage, your future."

"What about Maya?" LM continued, voice gaining momentum. "A girl who's been part of this family since childhood, who loves you, who's been waiting?"

"Maya and I are friends. Nothing more."

"Friends?" LM laughed without humour. "Friends don't wait for years. Friends don't build their future around hope."

Su gathered courage. "Perhaps Maya's feelings are her own responsibility. Perhaps giving her space—"

"Silence!" LM's voice cracked like a whip. "You've meddled enough."

He turned to Aarav, eyes blazing. "Let me make something clear. I've spent thirty years building this empire. Thirty years of planning, alliances, and calculated risks. Every connection was too secure not just my future, but yours."

Aarav stood slowly. "I never asked you to plan my life."

"Didn't you? Every luxury, every opportunity—all came from the foundation I built. And now you want to throw it away for some tribal girl who doesn't understand the world she's stepping into?"

"Her name is Pakhi. And she understands more about honour and dignity than most in your precious social circle."

LM's smile was cold as a blade. "How quaint. What will her honour mean when society discovers my son married beneath his station? When my alliances crumble because I couldn't control my family?"

"Maybe those alliances aren't worth preserving if they're built on such shallow foundations."

For a moment, Su thought LM might strike his son. The fury in his eyes was volcanic.

Instead, his voice became deadly quiet.

"You have one week. One week to end this foolish obsession and apologize to Maya. One week to remember who you are and what you owe this family."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you'll learn what happens when privileged boys forget their place. You'll discover exactly what I'm willing to do to protect what I've built."

"You can't control me forever."

LM's laugh was sharp and mirthless. "Can't I? You live under my roof, spend my money, and use connections I cultivated. You think you're independent? You're a child playing in a rebellion."

"Then maybe it's time I stopped being a child."

The challenge hung between them.

LM's expression shifted—dangerous calm settling over his features. "Be very careful, son. You don't want to force my hand. When I move, I move decisively. And everyone in my way... regrets it."

Part III: The Emperor's Fury

The mahogany door thudded shut behind Su, sealing her in like a coffin lid. LM's study exuded calculated authority—every detail meant to unnerve.

LM stood at the vast window, silhouette against his flawless gardens. Even motionless, he dominated.

"Suranjana. Where is Maya?"

"I don't know—"

"For three weeks, that girl has avoided us. Three weeks. And you pretend you don't know why?"

He spun, eyes blazing. Su stepped backward. "It's that tribal girl you brought into my house."

"She was just a guest—"

"A guest!" LM snapped. "You rolled out the red carpet. Finest china. Best silverware. Your grandmother's payesh recipe. That wasn't hospitality. That was a coronation."

He paced, expensive shoes striking marble with sharp clicks. Each sound ticked down to catastrophe.

"Tell me about this Pakhi. What dirt do you have on her family, her past?"

"She's a student. Intelligent, polite—"

"These hill people stalk the scent of wealth for miles. They invade our cities with wide eyes and guileless smiles, hunting for rich families to worm into."

"That's not fair. You don't know her—"

"I don't need to know her. I know her kind. Primitive. They play exotic, reel in gullible boys from decent families."

Su flinched, recalling Pakhi's gentle presence.

"These people are parasites. They leech onto success. Bleed it dry. Then vanish."

"You're being unreasonable—"

"Unreasonable?" He spun, eyes wild. "I'll tell you what's unreasonable—discarding thirty years of strategy for a jungle girl who'll never belong."

Su had never seen him so agitated. Yet beneath fury, she sensed something else: fear.

"Maya comes from one of Kolkata's most respected families. Her father controls half the entertainment distribution. Their Delhi connections could open doors that would take us decades."

"So, this is business."

"Business is everything! Relationships, alliances—each one serves our purpose."

He halted mid-stride, stare intense. "Maya loves our son. Genuinely. Deeply. She would be devoted, proper. A mother who'd raise our grandchildren with values befitting their station."

"But Aarav doesn't love her. You can't force love."

"What did you say?" Barely audible, but more menacing than any shout.

"Love can't be arranged like a business deal—"

"Love?" LM laughed, sharp and cold. "You want to lecture me about love? You—who married me for security. For status. To drag your pathetic family from poverty?"

Each word hit like a blow. "That's not true."

"Isn't it? If your father hadn't been dying, if your family weren't drowning in debt, would you have noticed me? Ever?"

Su's mouth opened, but no words came.

"Thought so. Save the romantic fables. In my world, love is a luxury we can't afford."

He stalked to his desk, straightening papers with jerky hands.

"Aarav's obsession ends now. That tribal girl will never undo my legacy."

"And if Aarav refuses?"

LM's smile was icy. "Then he'll learn the cost of defiance. He'll see how far I go to shield this family from filth."

The threat lingered, thick as smoke.

"What are you saying?"

"Sometimes, to save our children from stupidity, we do what must be done. Cruel? Maybe. But necessary."

Su felt ice-cold terror. "LM, you can't—"

"I'll do whatever it takes to protect this family. I always have. I always will."

There was a note in his voice—old secrets, hidden sins. Su realized she was looking at a stranger. Or maybe, after twenty-four years, finally seeing her husband's true face.

"Now, persuade our son. If you fail, I'll handle it—personally."

"What does that mean?"

LM's eyes glittered. "I make problems vanish. Permanently."

As Su left, legs shaking, the truth struck with icy certainty. The man she married was capable of anything.

But so was she.

The shattered melody of her youth would not echo into the next generation. Not while she still had a voice.

She caught sight of Pakhi's face still glowing on Aarav's phone screen. This girl had the same light Su once possessed, the same innocent belief that love could conquer all.

"Not this time," she whispered. "This time, love will have a champion."

She would warn Aarav. She would reveal the truth about his father. Maybe, by saving her son's happiness, she could finally redeem the choices she'd been too afraid to make.

The emperor's fury was loose. But the rosebud in the shadowed palace would not wither without a fight—even if Su's battle had to remain hidden in the dark.

Even if it cost her everything.

Chapter 33

Unseen Threads

Days slipped into golden evenings as Aarav and Pakhi uncovered Kolkata's secret corners. They browsed the ageless aisles of the College Street bookshops, where dusty volumes whispered stories that longed to be discovered. At the riverside ghats, the ebb and flow of the tide seemed to dance with Pakhi's laughter, echoing the rhythm of time as it pressed softly against their unspoken stories. Together, they lost themselves in coffee shops tucked away in winding lanes, their words mingling like rivers meeting at last.

"Tell me about your dreams," Aarav said one afternoon as they sat by the Hooghly, watching boats drift past like lazy thoughts.

"Which ones?" Pakhi asked, her eyes reflecting the shimmer of the water. "The ones I had as a child, or the ones that started the day I met you?"

"Both."

She was quiet for a moment, gathering her thoughts like flowers for a garland. "When I was small, I dreamed of becoming a storyteller like my grandfather used to be. I wanted to collect all the folk tales of our people and preserve them before they disappeared into silence."

"And now?"

"Now I dream of sharing those stories with someone who understands their beauty. Someone who sees magic in simple things." She looked at him with eyes that held entire universes. "I dream of a love that bridges worlds."

Aarav felt something shift and settle in his chest, like a puzzle piece finding its perfect place. "Pakhi, there's something I want to show you. Something that feels important, though I can't explain why."

"What is it?"

"There's a Kali temple in North Kolkata that Ma used to visit with her maternal relatives. I'd like to take you there next weekend, if you're willing. And afterward, we could visit the old family farmhouse nearby."

"The Kali temple?" she whispered, her voice barely audible above the river's gentle lapping. "In North Kolkata?"

"Yes. Why? What's wrong?"

Before Aarav had arrived, she had promised herself a pilgrimage: to visit the temple where her mother once prayed and the neighbourhood where Priya's childhood unfolded before love swept her away to Nagaland's hills.

She had quietly asked Dan's Uncle for the address, copied it with care into her diary, and planned a solitary pilgrimage—a way to reach out to the mother who often felt like a distant memory.

"Aarav," she said slowly, her voice thick with wonder and something that might have been fear, "what's the exact location of this temple?"

He spoke the address, and it slipped from his lips like a key unlocking a forgotten door. It was the very place she had chosen, the same temple, the same neighbourhood, the sacred ground where her mother's dreams had both begun and ended.

"Is everything all right?" Aarav asked, concern creasing his features as he watched her face cycle through amazement, confusion, and something approaching awe.

"My mother," Pakhi whispered, her eyes wide with realization. "She grew up in that exact neighbourhood and used to pray at the local temple. " That very temple."

For a heartbeat, silence stretched between them. The river's evening music—lapping water, distant horns, and birds calling home—faded until only the rhythm of their breath remained.

"How is that possible?" Aarav asked finally.

"I don't know." Pakhi's voice was filled with wonder. "In a city of fifteen million people, with thousands of temples, how do we find each other? How do our lives intersect at the exact place where my mother's story began?"

Aarav lifted their joined hands, pressing her palm against his heart. "Maybe it's not a coincidence at all. Maybe it's something larger—something that was always meant to happen."

"Fate?" she breathed.

"Destiny," he corrected gently. "The kind that weaves itself through generations, connecting hearts across time and space and all the obstacles that should have kept them apart."

Pakhi felt tears gather in her eyes—tears of wonder, of recognition, of something that felt like coming home to a place she'd never been. "My mother always says that Kali Ma protects true love. That she clears the path for souls who are meant to find each other."

"Then maybe we should trust her guidance," Aarav said.

The thought sent shivers racing through Pakhi. To stand where her mother once stood, to bring the man she loved to that sacred ground where her mother's heart first dreamed and felt, was like closing a circle left open for years. It was as if she were answering a prayer spoken long before her time.

"Yes," she said, her voice barely a whisper but filled with absolute certainty. "I want that more than anything."

As evening draped the river in gold and violet, neither noticed the figure lurking in the shadowed parking lot. LM's private investigator, gripping a sleek corporate badge alongside his camera, lowered the device after capturing the moment. As the monsoon sky settled once more over the city, its weight felt different now—laden not only with clouds and looming shadows, but also with the promise of renewal and hope, a gentle reminder that even the heaviest burdens could carry the seeds of new beginnings.

Chapter 34

The Wild Bison's Descent

June 2022

Kyan sat in his air-conditioned Airbnb, MacBook Pro aglow with surveillance feeds, bank statements, digital trails. His tools outmatched that of John Pa, yet what he uncovered sent ice through his veins.

Three faces glared from the screen—the men who had trapped Pakhi and her friends. Now their names, addresses, and ties to his sister stood exposed.

Rohit Mazumder, 22, engineering student and part-time music producer. Amit Ghosh, 21, son of a local leader, freelance in entertainment work. Vikram Gupta, 23, whose family ran several nightclubs, hired for "talent scouting."

But the fourth profile ignited his fury—Arjun Sengupta, 24, blood-linked to powerful politicians. This ringleader had fooled Lyna, then engineered her ruin.

Kyan dug deeper. These weren't aimless troublemakers; they operated as a tightly-knit network. Students strategically placed in colleges, not for learning but for spying and recruiting. This web echoed earlier injustices—a history of exploitation by those in power, where

young students became pawns in larger games. This systemic corruption resonated with the collective wounds his people bore.

His phone buzzed—video call from Dr. Kevileno.

"Kyan," worries clear on her face. "I've tried reaching you for days."

He hesitated. "The same. She remains silent, trapped. Some days she's just a shadow, staring blankly, waiting for something to pull her back from the edge."

The silence stretched.

"You look like you haven't slept in weeks."

Kyan adjusted the angle of his laptop screen so that she could see it clearly. "I found them, Auntie. All four. The ones who destroyed my sister."

Dr. Kevileno leaned in, studying the images. "This is vital evidence. Take it to the authorities now."

Kyan's laugh was bitter. "Which authorities? Police who dismissed her case? Judges who can be bought? The system protects these animals while victims suffer."

What if the path I choose risks not just my safety but the moral fabric I hold onto? The thought flickered through his mind. *Yet every time I think of Lyna's silence replacing her laughter, the rage threatens to consume everything.*

"The community, then. John Pa, Priya, the council—"

"I already told them about the three who harassed Pakhi."

Dr. Kevileno's expression grew troubled. "Kyan, what exactly are you planning?"

"I'm going home. I'll present this to the community. Let them decide what justice my sister deserves."

"And the fourth man? The mastermind?"

Kyan's face hardened. "Arjun has powerful connections. Bringing him down needs more—strategy, patience, unity. Someone backs him."

"You're talking about vigilante justice."

"I'm talking about protection! While we wait, how many more Lynas? How many more hill girls?" He paused, voice dropping. "And now there's Billy. Pakhi. Here, trusting the same kind of boy. I can't let it happen again."

Dr. Kevileno eyed him carefully. "Your feelings for Pakhi are clouding your judgment, aren't they?"

"My feelings help me see clearly. She belongs with us, safe. Not with a plains boy who'll discard her for someone 'suitable.'"

Deep down, he wondered what Pakhi herself thought about all this. Did she see affection or control in his protective resolve? Her laughter often hinted at dreams of her own, perhaps finding intrigue in worlds unfamiliar to him. Pakhi might have seen her own path—a choice not for someone else to decide but for her to explore.

"Listen to yourself. You're making her choices for her. That's not love—that's possession."

Her words hit him, but his resolve solidified. "Sometimes love means making hard decisions. Sometimes you're the wolf, not the sheep."

"Your father raised you to be better than this."

"John Pa built a community of Mithun—peaceful, domesticated, more prey than predator." Kyan recalled his grandmother's story about a wild bison that roamed the hills, fighting hunters who tried to trap it. A creature of legend, fierce and unyielding, whose spirit could never be tamed. The wild bison survived by fighting back, which serves as a symbol of resilience and defiance."

Dr. Kevileno was silent. "John Pa is worried. The Hornbill Hearth Community calls you home. Dan doesn't even know what's happened—he thinks you're on a project."

"Maybe I need to lose myself to become what they need. Maybe it's time for a community that acts."

"And if the elders refuse to sanction this path?"

Kyan's smile was cold. "I'll find others who understand. The younger ones. We're tired of watching peace fail us."

After the call, Kyan gathered his files, evidence, and schemes. As his fingers brushed the documents' hard edges, doubt crept in more insidiously. *Was he truly helping Lyna, or was this an escape from his own failures?*

Yet beneath the surface, fear whispered that even armed with evidence, they might refuse to act, leaving him alone in his quest.

As he packed, the ache in his chest pressed down harder. Each memory of Pakhi's laughter mingling with that city boy's voice sent panic scraping at his insides. Every day he waited, she drifted further away, inching toward the same shadows that had claimed Lyna.

He stared at her photo on his phone—a stolen moment, her laughter radiant and unguarded. Pure, gentle, beautiful.

"Let them have you, Billy," he whispered to the image. "Whatever it takes, whatever I have to become, I'll bring you home where you belong."

The flight to Kohima was booked for the next morning. He would present his evidence, rally support, then return to Kolkata with the backing and resources needed to end this properly.

The man returning to Kolkata might be unrecognizable—to his community, even to himself.

The wild bison inside him was stirring, and once set free, it could never be caged again.

The Flight Home

Kyan hovered over the group chat, thumb frozen above the screen. The blinking cursor taunted him. *How could he announce his departure without it sounding like betrayal?*

Finally, he typed, "Emergency at home. Had to leave suddenly. Will be back soon. Take care of yourselves."

He pressed send before doubt could paralyze him, then shut off his phone in a rush. He couldn't face any of their replies, especially Pakhi's. Her gentle concern during their last call had nearly undone him.

If only she knew what the city had turned him into.

For weeks, Kyan had become a stranger to himself. The focused, purposeful young man who stepped into Kolkata had disappeared. In his place there was someone restless, haunted, and driven by thoughts that refused to let go.

It began with mounting work pressure, deadlines, and isolation from being far from home. A confrontation with his supervisor had shaken his confidence, leaving him doubting his abilities. Every attempt to connect with friends felt strained. Pakhi's growing absence deepened his sense of loss.

Everywhere he went, the city's cacophony seemed muffled, yet pressed against his senses with oppressive weight. He found no solace in vibrant street markets or sweet, spicy aromas. Even at night, the bustling city outside his window felt distant. Instead of the soothing scent of rain on hot pavement, he tasted the metallic tang of sleepless nights—a constant reminder of how far he'd drifted.

He drifted through the city like a ghost. Days spent chasing shadows tied to his sister's pain. Nights brought gnawing ache for Pakhi, who now missed their meetings more often than not. Ana and Prii's secretive smiles said it all: he knew where Pakhi was, and dreaded who she was with.

The plains boy. The golden city son, born to privilege, who collected everything with ease, and now wanted Pakhi as well.

She's walking into a trap, he thought as he buckled in. She has no idea how easily these people use girls, then toss them aside.

Yet a voice, echoing Dr. Kevileno's, whispered that this urge to protect Pakhi was only a mask. Something darker, more possessive, was taking root within him.

As the plane thundered down the runway, exhaustion finally caught up. The seatbelt's metallic click resonated through the cabin like chains clinking shut. For the first time in weeks, he drifted into deep sleep, though his dreams twisted restlessly.

In his dream, he wandered the green hills of Kohima, and Pakhi was there as she once was—laughing, light-hearted, calling him by name with childhood warmth. Yet she was changed. No longer the self-reliant woman she'd grown into, but someone who turned to him for everything, who needed his shelter, who belonged only to him.

"You're mine, Billy," he heard himself saying, words coming from somewhere deep and primal. "You always have been. You just forgot when you went to that place."

Dream-Pakhi smiled and nodded, leaning into his embrace. "I'm sorry I left, Kyan. I should have listened. I should have stayed where I belong."

In the dream, the plains boy with his effortless charm and costly clothes did not exist. The city's temptations had vanished. There was only Pakhi, only Kyan, and the world as it should have been.

Even in sleep, a part of him recoiled. This was not love, but ownership. Not care, but control. Pakhi had her own dreams, her own will, her own right to choose her path.

Kyan jerked awake as turbulence rattled the plane. Sweat glued his shirt to his skin, heart racing from dreams that left him sick with self-disgust.

What am I becoming? This isn't how I was raised.

He thought about his father, Dan, who had always taught him that strength meant protecting others' choices, not controlling them. He thought about his grandfather's stories of warriors who fought for justice, not for possession of other people.

But then his thoughts turned to Lyna—silent and shattered, alone in her room back home. Rage surged through him, finding expression in memory of his grandfather telling him tales of Angh's vow, a pledge by village warriors to protect their kin and community at all costs. A solemn oath his ancestors had taken under the ancient Naga morung, surrounded by the hearth's warmth and the echo of drums.

He recalled the day he found Lyna, her face bruised from an encounter she never detailed but which spoke volumes in its silence. The system had failed her. The community's patience had failed her.

Someone had to act, to make sure Lyna's fate was never repeated.

Someone had to make sure Pakhi was safe, even if she didn't understand the danger.

Fear gripped him. *Where was the line between care and obsession?* Did he want Pakhi safe in Nagaland for her sake, or because he needed her near and needed her to be more than a friend?

I need help, he realized with crystal clarity. The thought unsettled him, drawing out a shameful sting. *I'm losing myself. I need my community to help me see clearly again, to remind me who I'm supposed to be.*

Yet even as he admitted this, another part of his mind was already plotting. He would gather his evidence, rally his community for a stronger response. When he returned to Kolkata, he would not be alone—he would have allies and resources to confront every threat.

Including the threat to Pakhi, whether she recognized it as a threat or not.

He saw the contradiction in himself: reaching for help while secretly preparing to keep walking a dangerous road. The thought of Pakhi choosing a life beyond his reach, or loving someone else, was almost more than he could bear.

Yet deep down, he fleetingly considered the true cost of his obsession. If he pursued possession over Pakhi's independence, he risked losing the trust of his community and the very values he was raised to uphold. This internal trade-off loomed large, highlighting the irrational cost of his jealousy and threatening the fabric of his integrity.

As the plane dipped toward Dimapur, Kyan's hands tightened on the armrests. Ahead, the mountains pierced the horizon with stern authority, as if reminding him of the inescapable decisions he was about to face. The peaks loomed like prison bars—a foreboding reminder of the trap he was weaving, not only for Pakhi but for himself.

He braced himself for the coming conversations. He would have to be cautious, calculating. No one could glimpse how far he'd fallen or how tangled his thoughts had grown.

He would present himself as the concerned protector, the dedicated investigator, the young man seeking guidance from his elders.

He would never confess the dreams where Pakhi was his alone. He would hide the schemes forming in his mind, and the cold certainty that anyone in his way would have to disappear.

Some truths were too dangerous to share, even with family. Especially with family.

The plane touched down on Nagaland soil, and Kyan closed his eyes, offering a prayer to Jesus that his community could save him from what he was becoming. His faith, though often overshadowed by inner turmoil, was a guiding light in moments of doubt. He felt the weight of his guilt, not just as personal failure, but as deviation from the moral compass Christianity had instilled in him. Yet this same belief whispered hope into his weary heart, suggesting redemption was still within reach if he chose to turn back.

But deep inside, he doubted if he truly wanted to be saved.

Worse still, he wondered if this new, ruthless self was exactly who he needed to become to claim what he desired.

And that terrified him most of all.

Chapter 35

The Fracture

Dan left Priya's house that afternoon with thunder pounding in his mind. Not the monsoon rumbling over Kohima's hills, but the sound of trust shattering between him and those he once called family.

He had come seeking comfort, maybe even courage to confront Kyan's unraveling. Instead, he was ambushed by a truth that sliced straight to his heart.

Priya confessed without preamble, her honesty as sudden and cold as a plunge into icy water. Relief and fear warred on her face as she braced for what would come next.

"Dan," she said, voice steady despite Rick's tears beside her, "there's something you need to know about what Kyan did in Kolkata. About what I sanctioned him to do."

Earlier That Afternoon

"Kyan tracked down three men in Kolkata." Priya drew a thick envelope from the table, spreading out photos—blurry images capturing clandestine exchanges, shadowed figures slipping into alleys. "His notes detailed their crimes and their connection to Lyna's assault with unwavering precision."

She paused, taking a deep breath. "But when he reported back... his proposals went far beyond what the community could sanction."

The words struck like stones. Dan stood rooted, shock icing over his thoughts, until cold realization seeped in—disbelief transforming into burning betrayal.

"What kind of proposals?" His voice was dangerously quiet.

"Vigilante justice," Priya said simply. "He wanted our approval to... eliminate them. To form what he called a 'wild bison' faction—one that would take direct, violent action when legal channels failed."

"My son..." Dan's voice trembled.

"We denied his request immediately," Priya continued quickly. "The council voted unanimously to reject his approach. That's why we called him back—not to celebrate his findings, but to redirect him, to remind him of our principles."

Rick, who had been sitting in stunned silence, finally found his voice. "But Priya... you've been running this secret organization all these years? You and my father?"

Priya turned to her husband, regret evident. "John Pa and I founded the shadow network twenty-four years ago, after what happened to us in Kolkata. We kept it from you and Dan to protect you—you both held public positions, reputations that couldn't be tarnished."

"You kept it from me because you knew I'd never approve," Rick said, voice hollow.

"The network operates on Mithun principles," Priya insisted. "Legal advocacy, intelligence gathering, protection through community organizing—always peaceful methods. We document injustices, pressure authorities through proper channels, provide safe houses, and support."

"Then what the hell happened to my son?" Dan's voice exploded into fury. "How did the young man I sent to Kolkata become someone proposing murder?"

Priya met his gaze steadily. "Because you would have said no. Because you believe so deeply in the system, Dan, even when that system has failed your own daughter."

"The system may be flawed, but it's what separates us from animals!" Dan was on his feet now, pacing like a caged creature. "And now my son wants to become a murderer because you sent him to hunt down criminals like some avenging angel?"

"We sent him to gather intelligence, to document evidence for legal channels," Priya said firmly. "The transformation in him wasn't our intention. That's why we called him back immediately when we saw what he was becoming."

"But the damage is done! He's seen those men, lived with rage and grief for weeks, and now he wants to form his own faction to do what you wouldn't let him do!"

Rick's voice was hollow. "My father—the man who always preached community welfare and legal advocacy—was running a secret intelligence operation?"

"Your father understood that sometimes protection requires information the authorities don't want us to have," Priya said quietly. "To fight injustice, we first need to know who our enemies are, what they're planning, how they operate."

"That's called espionage," Dan said bitterly. "Under the guise of a welfare organization. My family helped establish that organization!"

"We document cases the system ignores," Priya insisted. "We create safe houses for victims with nowhere else to turn. We gather evidence that corrupt police departments 'lose.' We always operate within the law. That's the Mithun way—steady, organized, patient."

"But Kyan doesn't want to be patient anymore," Rick said quietly. "He wants to be the wild bison. He wants to charge."

Silence swallowed the room, tension thickening with every ragged breath.

"We called Kyan back immediately," Priya said firmly. "The council unanimously rejected his approach. We adhere to Mithun principles—no violence, only legal advocacy and community protection through proper channels."

"But the seed is planted," Dan said, voice hollow with dread. "He's already down that path, convinced that violence is the answer."

"We will redirect him," Priya insisted. "That's why John Pa and the elders want to meet with him, to remind him of our values—"

"My son didn't need 'redirecting' until you involved him in your secret operations!" Dan interrupted. "He was a good boy, a principled young man. And now he's planning murders and talking about vigilante gangs!"

"I never wanted this," Priya said, reaching toward him, but he pulled away sharply.

"No. You wanted information. You wanted an operative. You wanted to use my son's pain over his sister to further your shadow network. And now you've created something you can't control."

Rick spoke again, voice barely above a whisper. "Priya, I didn't know. All these years, I thought you were helping with community welfare. I had no idea there was this... other side."

"I kept it from you to protect you," Priya said, reaching for her husband's hand, but he pulled away. "Both you and Dan have public positions, reputations to maintain. The less you knew, the safer you were."

"Safer?" Rick's laugh was hollow. "My wife has been running a vigilante organization, and I'm supposed to feel safer not knowing?"

"The Angami have always protected their own," Priya insisted. "We were warriors long before colonization attempted to make us passive. That spirit didn't die just because we started wearing Western clothes and speaking English."

"There's a difference between cultural pride and organized murder," Dan said coldly.

"Is there?" Priya challenged. "When is the system designed to destroy us? When does the legal framework protect the privileged and grind the vulnerable into dust? At what point does self-defense become justified?"

Dan paused, considering her words. "It's when protection becomes persecution, Priya. When the lines blur between defending those, we love and becoming oppressors ourselves. It's a slippery slope."

Yet doubt crept in. He remembered being forced to turn a blind eye to injustices his family suffered, bound by laws he took an oath to uphold. Could he have been naïve to believe justice could be achieved through prescribed channels? His father's stories haunted him—ancestors who faced oppression and rose defiantly. Had he betrayed that legacy by clinging to a system that repeatedly failed them?

"This wasn't self-defence," Dan said. "This was revenge."

"And what's wrong with revenge when justice is impossible?" Priya's voice rose with passion, though hesitation briefly shadowed her eyes. "Your daughter lies in that room, Dan. A living ghost because three men decided she was entertainment. And the fourth man, the one who orchestrated it all, still walks free because his family has the right connections. Tell me, what should we do? Wait patiently while more girls are destroyed?"

The question hung heavy with years of pain and frustration.

"I should report this," Dan said finally. "I should go to the authorities right now and expose everything."

"And destroy how many families? The council members who voted for action—they have children, grandchildren, and entire communities depending on them. Would you tear all that apart?"

"You should have thought of that before you sanctioned it."

"I thought of nothing but protecting our people," Priya said fiercely. "Which is more than the system ever did for us."

Dan turned to leave but paused at the door. "When Kyan returns, I will deal with him myself. He will face consequences for what he's done, even if I have to turn in my own son."

"Dan—" Rick started, but his friend cut him off.

"And you, Rick," Dan said, voice breaking. "I don't know if I can forgive you for not seeing this, for not stopping it. For marrying someone who could become this."

Rick flinched as if struck. "I swear to you, I didn't know. You have to believe me."

"I want to," Dan said. "But right now, I don't know what to believe anymore."

Later, at Dan's Home

Only the clink of ice in Dan's glass broke the silence. He poured his third whiskey in as many hours, watching amber swirl catch the lamplight. The comfort and meaning these walls once offered had vanished, replaced by heavy emptiness pressing down on him.

He trudged down the corridor and paused at Lyna's half-open door. Afternoon light sifted through gauze curtains, bathing his daughter's still form in gentle glow.

For two years, she had lain like this. For two years, he watched his wife wither from grief until she faded away, leaving him alone with this beautiful, broken shell.

"I wanted justice for you, baby," he whispered, sinking into the chair beside her bed. "I pursued it through every proper channel. The police, the lawyers, the courts—I exhausted every avenue."

But the system had failed. Evidence had disappeared. Witnesses had recanted. Money and influence had created an impenetrable wall around the guilty.

Now Kyan had crashed through that wall. He wanted justice—but with blood and violence.

"But not like this," Dan said, voice cracking. "Not by turning your brother into a killer. Not by staining his hands with murder, no matter how justified it might feel."

He took another long drink, feeling the burn.

His son—his last anchor in this world—had been swept into Priya's shadow network, twisted by rage and grief into someone Dan could hardly recognize.

The legal system might have failed Lyna, but Dan was a man of law, a respected leader in Angami society. He had built his reputation on principle, on the belief that civilization required rules, that justice must follow process even when that process was painfully slow.

"Terrorism," he muttered. "That's what they'll call it. And they'll be right."

His mind kept circling back to Priya's words, to the uncomfortable truth beneath her justifications. The system was failing their people. Again and again, he had seen it. Bright young students from the hills destroyed by prejudice and violence in the cities, their attackers protected by money and connections, their victims dismissed as troublemakers.

But the answer couldn't be vigilante murder. It couldn't be turning their youth into killers.

He remembered an old Angami proverb his father often recited: *Feed the white wolf, for the black one devours all in its hunger*. The path ventured into darkness—a path where unresolved grievances might resurrect into an endless cycle of revenge, threatening to consume them all.

When Kyan returned—and he would return, Dan was certain—they would have a reckoning. Father and son, face to face, with the truth laid bare between them.

And if necessary, Dan would do what the law required. He would surrender his own son to face justice for his crimes.

The decision settled in his chest like ice, cold and heavy and absolutely certain.

"Forgive me," he whispered, whether to his daughter, his son, or his absent wife, he wasn't sure. "But I cannot let this stand. I cannot let us become the very thing we're fighting against."

Outside, evening draped Kohima's hills in gold and shadow. Somewhere in that beautiful, wounded land, the Angami people he loved were splitting along hidden fault lines: those clinging to the system, those who had abandoned it, the patient Mithun and the wild bison, the light and the darkness threatening to swallow them all.

Dan finished his glass and poured another, certain that sleep would not find him tonight.

Perhaps it never would, now that he had glimpsed the monsters lurking behind even the dearest faces.

Chapter 36

The Path of Understanding

Rick sat in the old stone house that had sheltered his marriage for twenty years, but tonight it felt more like a cell than a refuge. The air was heavy with the chill of wet stone, a singular, haunting scent that seeped into the depths of his being. It mirrored the fracture within their lives, a deep and unsettling one. He had survived exile, rejection, and the slow, stubborn work of rebuilding, but never before had their bond felt so irreparably cracked.

As Rick sat in silence, the sound of the door opening pulled him from his thoughts. He looked up to find John Angami—his father—standing in the doorway with the quiet authority that had made him a respected elder of their community.

"May I come in?" John asked, though he'd never needed permission.

Rick gestured to the chair. "Does Priya know you're here?"

"She does. But what I say is from me, not her," John replied, sitting down.

Rick's jaw tightened. He looked away, masking hurt. "Then say it," he snapped. "How did you both keep secrets from me?"

John was quiet for a moment. "Do you remember the day you came back from Kolkata? Twenty years ago, broken by lies and manipulation?"

"Of course I remember," Rick said. "It's not something you forget."

"Do you remember what I told you that day, when you sat here convinced your life was over?"

Rick's throat tightened at the memory. "You said... You said that sometimes the world breaks us so it can rebuild us into something stronger."

"I believed that then, and I still do. But I didn't tell you Priya came to me that week. She told me about the theft, the band's downfall, and the powerful people preying on others."

Rick clenched his hands. "So you started a secret organization without telling me?"

We wanted to protect others from what you and Priya suffered. We founded the Hornbill Hearth Community with this mission in mind. It began with a small group of like-minded individuals who had experienced or witnessed injustice. They decided to take some action. Priya approached those she trusted, bringing together educators, advocates, and community leaders. Professor Mengu and Advocate Vezau were among them. Each contributed unique skills to form the foundation. The organization now advocates for the vulnerable and secretly gathers intelligence. Its public face pushes for change, while its private side anticipates threats. Daily operations involve various roles, including case documentation, legal assistance, and community outreach. Members often work undercover to gather evidence of injustices, which are then analyzed and securely stored to prevent tampering. Regular meetings are held to discuss strategies and assess risks, ensuring the safety of everyone involved.

"You mean spying."

"I mean that we need to understand threats before they impact us. "Knowledge is power, and we've lacked it because we didn't see the systems that harm us."

Before Rick could reply, the door The door swung open once more, and footsteps murmured along the hallway as figures glided into the room, their eyes darting with silent messages Dr. Kevileno, Advocate Vezau, Professor Mengu, and three other respected community members entered, their presence weighted with intent. Rick's heart sank as he realized this was no ordinary talk but a council gathered for judgment.

"We asked John to gather us here tonight," Dr. Kevileno said, taking a seat. "Because we need you to understand what Priya and your father built, and why it matters."

"I'm listening," Rick said, still wary.

Professor Mengu spoke first. "Twenty years ago, I was teaching at a university in Delhi. A brilliant Naga student came to me after being assaulted by three of her classmates. She had evidence, witnesses, and everything needed for justice. I helped her file a police report, confident the system would work.

The memory of that day is vivid—the sound of her sharp, startled gasp echoing in the quiet hallway, the air heavy with a metallic tang, as if even the building itself held its breath in shock. Her presence, usually a vibrant energy in my classroom, was reduced to a trembling whisper, her eyes darting as if trying to escape the confines of the past. He paused, pain evident in his eyes.

"The police lost the evidence. The witnesses recanted under pressure. The girl's family was threatened. Within a month, she'd dropped out and returned home. Six months later, I learned she'd taken her life."

The room went silent.

"That's when Priya contacted me." Professor Mengu continued. "She said she was building a network to document these cases, to create a

database that couldn't be 'lost.' She wanted to track patterns that the official system refused to see. She asked if I would help gather information from the academic community. Beyond academia, there were similar stories—unreported or suppressed cases of injustice within our villages, health services, and labour unions. These made our efforts even more urgent. One case involved a young nurse in a remote hospital who reported an incident of malpractice that endangered patients' lives. With the network's intervention, the evidence she collected was preserved and sent to higher authorities. This led to a thorough investigation. Corrupt officials were removed. Hospital procedures were reformed. Healthcare in that community improved as a result."

Advocate Vezau leaned forward. "I saw the legal system fail again and again when the accused had connections. Priya showed me how to preserve evidence that couldn't be erased or buried."

"But we never sanction violence," Dr. Kevileno said. "We only document, advocate for change, pressure authorities, and provide support. We don't become the criminals we fight."

Rick looked at the professionals in the room. "Why didn't any of you tell me?"

"Because you're a music lover and conqueror of humanity with love and empathy. This was not meant for you." John said. "If you were tied to underground activities, it could compromise your work."

"And because Priya loved you," Dr. Kevileno added. "Some intelligence implicates powerful people. Priya kept you separate to keep you safe."

"Safe from what?" Rick demanded. "From the truth about my wife?"

"Several of our members have been threatened. One member's practice was raided after they provided evidence, and another lost his job due to false complaints. Priya wanted to protect you from these consequences," Advocate Vezau said.

John leaned forward, his expression intense. "Son, I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to answer honestly. If you had known about this network twenty years ago, would you have joined it?"

Rick opened his mouth to respond, then faltered, caught in a surge of conflicting emotions. Flashes of their past—the desperate nights, the familiar ache of powerlessness—tightened his chest. For an instant, pride flickered: the thought of standing with them, fighting injustice. He worried that embracing this hidden world might mean losing his identity as the man who fought openly, as well as the musician and advocate who had always placed honesty at his core. The moral weight pressed down, heavy and inescapable.

"Would you have documented injustices, kept evidence, and offered help, all while building your public career and living a double life?" Priya knew that music was your life and was quite certain that one day you would enter the public world, so she wanted to protect you for that eventuality. And she protected you for twenty years. She has so much trust in you and your music."

"I don't know," Rick said, struggling with it.

"That's why Priya didn't tell you. You're open and honest—you couldn't have lived that double life. It's what makes you good," John said.

Professor Mengu spoke again. "What Priya and John built isn't about violence or revenge. It's about survival. About giving our people, the tools to protect themselves when the system that is designed to protect them fails."

"The path is twisted," Dr. Kevileno said. "Secret networks exist in grey areas, but the alternative is helplessness and watching harm done to our children."

Rick felt something inside him fracture. The heat of anger bled away, replaced by a hollowness that made his hands tremble. "For twenty years," he whispered, voice trembling, "I thought I knew every inch of my wife. Now I realize there's a part of her I never touched—a world she kept hidden from me."

"She's been living it so you could continue living yours," John said firmly. "Every case she documented, every safe house she maintained, and every piece of evidence she preserved—she did it all while being your partner, raising your daughter, supporting your comeback to music, and maintaining your home." She carried that burden alone so you wouldn't have to."

"That's not fair to her either," Rick said.

"No, it's not," Priya said as she appeared in the doorway. She stood there, still in the yellow saree she'd worn that morning, her eyes red but her posture strong. "But it was my choice to make. Just like it was your father's choice to help me build this network."

As Priya entered, the council members quietly began to excuse themselves, sensing that the emotional tenor had changed and recognizing this conversation now belonged to husband and wife.

Before he left, John placed a hand on Rick's shoulder. "Your mother never knew either. I kept it from her for the same reasons Priya kept it from you. And when she found out, three years before she passed, she told me she understood. "Love means shielding those we cherish from burdens they shouldn't have to bear," she said.

When the others left, Rick and Priya remained in the room that had been the cradle of their twenty years together. The air throbbed with uncertainty and ache, silence expanding between them, thick with the heat of old memories and the chill of new separation.

"I'm not angry you did it. I'm angry you didn't tell me."

"It wasn't about trust," Priya replied, moving closer. "It was about love. The time I spent in that network involved gathering intelligence, helping victims, and fighting battles that the system won't fight—I did it so Pakhi could grow up in a world that might be slightly safer for her. This is to ensure that what happened to us, to Lyna, and to countless others occurs less frequently.

"We're supposed to face things together," Rick said, voice breaking. "That's marriage."

Some battles," Priya said, taking his hands, "require different kinds of soldiers. I wanted you to come back and fight in the light, Rick. I wanted you to come back and fight in the light through your music, cultural work, and public advocacy. You represent the best of who we are, the beauty and dignity of our people." Her voice wavered slightly. "But I carry guilt too, Rick. About Kyan. About Dan. About how my work—work meant to protect our people—has fractured the most important friendships of my life."

She paused, tears finally breaking through her composure. "Dan won't even look at me now. Dan, who once fought alongside me, feels betrayed because of the choices I made without consulting him, leaving a bitter rift between us." She took a deep breath, steadying herself. "As for Kyan, I sent him to gather intelligence using the Mithun approach, but his overwhelming pain over Lyna's death twisted his intentions.

. Despite our attempts to bring her attackers to justice, the evidence was buried under bureaucratic indifference and intimidation. Kyan, once a gentle soul, was shattered when Lyna, his sister, was lost to violence in a system that failed to protect her. I should have seen how his trauma was consuming him, how it pushed him toward be

Additionally, I sense the change in Pakhi, which is unfathomable, and I can also feel that it has had a devastating effect on Kyan. "

Rick pulled her closer. "That's not your fault—"

"Isn't it?" Priya asked. "John and the council, they've been helping me understand that the Mithun way isn't just about methods—it's about knowing when to act and when to hold back. When to trust our people with knowledge and when to protect them from it. We made choices based on what we thought was right, but those choices have consequences."

"The council helped you see this?"

Priya nodded, her fingers unconsciously reaching for the carved horn talisman that hung around her neck, a small but potent symbol of the Mithun etched into its surface.

"Even when we lead, we must remain part of the community and be accountable to its principles. This trust in the collective is a guide for me, a reminder that true leadership respects and cultivates the bonds that bind us. I lost sight of that and thought I could manage everything alone, make all the hard choices, and carry all the burdens."

She looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes. "John told me that leadership sometimes means admitting when our methods fail, when our decisions hurt the people we're trying to protect. The Mithun way values patience, yes, but also humility. This willingness to admit mistakes and learn from them is essential.

"You're learning now," Rick said gently.

I'm trying. The community is helping me see that strength isn't about carrying everything alone—it's about sharing the weight, seeking counsel, and admitting when we've strayed from our principles. And they're right. I strayed from our principles by keeping you in the dark. I thought I could protect you by using deception instead of trust.

"For twenty years," Rick whispered.

For twenty years," she confirmed. "And if I had to do it again, knowing it would cost me your trust, I would still do it. The alternative would be to witness the destruction of our people while we remain powerless. Each time I saw the faces of those we were able to save, the relief in their eyes, I knew I had to go on. It was a choice filled with sorrow, driven by love and necessity, even if it meant sacrificing parts of myself."

Rick pulled her into his arms then, holding her as he hadn't since the revelation. "Promise me," he said into her hair. "Promise me no more secrets this big."

"I promise," Priya said. The network exists, and it will continue to exist; however, you will now be part of the conversations. No more shadows between us. As we move forward, we will combine our strengths. Your voice will be instrumental in shaping the path.

They stood like that for a long time, two people who had built a life from the ruins of broken dreams, now rebuilding trust after it had been cracked by necessary secrets.

"Papa was right," Rick said finally. "Sometimes the world breaks us so it can rebuild us stronger. But I didn't know that applied to marriages too."

"Everything that breaks can be repaired," Priya said, pulling back to look at him. "If both people are willing to do the work."

"Then let's do the work," Rick said. "Together this time. No more shadows."

Outside, the Kohima night settled over the hills where Angami ancestors had carved out life, braved battles, and endured the impossible. In one house, two people who loved each other learned that trust, like bone, can fracture and heal, growing stronger at its scars.

Chapter 37

The Schism

The BMW glided along serpentine roads from Dimapur to Kohima, its black surface gleaming like a blade. Inside, Kyan sat taut and silent, every muscle wound tight with anticipation.

Once, his father's name had been whispered in corridors of power—twice an MP, a future Chief Minister. But after Lyna's assault, Dan vanished from public life, his power crumbling into impotence. None of it had been enough to win justice for his daughter.

Now Dan haunted the family's colonial-era library, a ghost among dusty books and sepia-toned memories, seeking solace with Rick and Priya—old friends who, like him, once believed in institutions and the slow machinery of change.

Kyan's faith in institutions had vanished, leaving only a raw, throbbing void. The turning point came during a sleepless night poring over files—a report of Lyna's attacker walking free due to a technicality, a loophole the very system meant to protect had provided. This shattered what little faith he had left.

Justice for Lyna, he now believed, demanded tearing down the system that betrayed her.

"Straight to the meeting grounds," he instructed the driver, his voice carrying an edge that hadn't been there two months ago. "No stops."

In Kolkata, he had spent two relentless months tracking three men—the same ones who had tormented Pakhi. He moved with the patience John and Priya had instilled in him, collecting evidence piece by carefully.

Financial trails linking the men to a shadowy network. Messages tying them to a string of assaults. A chilling pattern—vulnerable students hunted with methodical cruelty. Coded messages hinting at directives from higher powers, a mysterious figure known as "The Broker."

He was assembling a case so solid that even the most corrupt officials would struggle to ignore it.

And then he saw them together.

Aarav and Pakhi by the river as the sun bled into the horizon. Her head nestled on his shoulder, his arm draped possessively around her waist. The easy closeness between them, the trust shining in her eyes, struck Kyan like a thunderclap.

In that instant, every careful plan evaporated, replaced by a single, searing urge: he had to act. *Now*. Before Pakhi slipped away—claimed by privilege, by the plains, by a boy who could never truly deserve her.

That night, he hunted one of the three, his fist clenched around a knife until his knuckles blanched, rage coursing through him like wildfire. He drew so near he could almost feel the man's pulse—close enough to—

But something stopped him. Not conscience. Not training. Cold calculation.

If he acted now, in this state, he would get nothing. No information about the network. No names of masterminds. No justice for Lyna. Just three dead bodies and his own rage momentarily satisfied.

So he retreated, slipping back into the shadows. As he gathered more evidence, cold dread crept in: the three men were only pawns. His near-miss had almost allowed the true architects to remain hidden.

The agony of that discovery, mixed with the daily torment of watching Pakhi drift further into Aarav's orbit, changed him at his core. The Hornbill Hearth's careful strategies—files, advocacy, slow persuasion—now felt not just useless but dangerous.

Each day spent building a case was another day the predators roamed free, another day Pakhi edged toward a future he could not accept.

The Breaking

The meeting grounds lay hidden within the forest's heart, where ancient trees kept silent watch. Torches sputtered, flames painting restless shadows across gathered faces. The air was thick with moss and damp earth, while distant drumbeats reverberated through the trees like a living pulse.

Priya stood before the Hornbill Hearth, the weight of the Sekrenyi festival's gravity setting her apart. She watched Kyan enter, his stride marked by the certainty of someone who had crossed a line he could never return from.

During his two months in Kolkata, betrayal and corruption at every turn had carved away the warmth from his eyes, leaving them flinty and cold. Priya's heart ached as she saw the fortress that had replaced his once effortless smile.

"Let's discuss your findings from Kolkata," Priya said, voice steady. "The council reviewed your reports. The evidence is substantial."

Kyan stood tall. "That evidence will vanish once it reaches authorities—buried by the same system that destroyed my sister."

"We have protocols," Dr. Kevileno said. "We can ensure it reaches incorruptible—"

"There is no such thing as incorruptible in that city," he cut her off, voice cold and controlled. "I've seen how deep the network runs. The three men I tracked are connected to music industry operations, political protection, and systematic targeting of vulnerable students. And behind them is someone whose influence extends far beyond what our documentation can address."

John leaned forward. "Which is why we must be patient. Build cases that can't be dismissed—"

"While more girls suffer? While my sister stays silent? While Pakhi—" He stopped, jaw tight.

The mention of Pakhi created a ripple of unease. Several members exchanged glances.

"Kyan," Priya said gently, "your concern for Pakhi is understandable, but—"

"You don't understand." He dropped a folded paper at her feet. "I resign from the Hornbill Hearth. The Mithun approach is cowardice dressed as principle."

Stunned hush swept through the clearing. Priya's heart hammered, betrayal and disbelief rippling through the group like a sudden chill.

"The Mithun way has protected us," John replied. "Advocacy, community support, documentation—"

"It failed," Kyan cut in. "It failed my sister. It failed so many others. I'm starting the Wild Bison for those who know that real protection sometimes demands more than paperwork."

He turned to the assembly. "Who else is done watching us shuffle papers while nothing changes? Who's ready to do something real?"

Silence stretched. Then hands rose hesitantly but steadily. One by one, nearly a third of the younger members stood. They approached and dropped their papers at Priya's feet.

"Kyan's been talking to us," a young man said. "While you debated protocols, he showed how the system protects predators. We're done being patient."

"This isn't what we stand for," Priya said, voice breaking. "Violence will only—"

"We never said violence," Kyan replied. "We promised action. Direct protection. Safeguarding our community. Ensuring predators know consequences await them."

The ambiguity was deliberate. Priya recognized it immediately—coded language to recruit for a more sinister purpose while keeping actions deniable.

"If you leave," John said, standing tall, "you leave our protection, guidance, and moral foundation. We can't vouch for you."

"So be it," Kyan said, voice final. He faced the others. "Meet at the northern clearing in one hour. Bring only your courage and trust."

As Kyan and his followers melted into the night, those left behind sat frozen. Nearly a third of their community had splintered off, taking with them years of hard-won trust.

Priya slumped into her chair, resignation papers strewn at her feet like autumn leaves. Her hands trembled uncontrollably. Numbness crept in as failure pressed on her chest.

"How did I miss this?" she whispered. "How did I not see the discontent growing?"

"You were trying to hold too much together," Rick said quietly—the first time he'd spoken directly to her in the council for weeks. "Trying to protect everyone while keeping secrets from those who should have been your partners."

She looked at him, tears streaming. "I've lost them. Lost the young people who were supposed to carry this forward."

"You lost them because they needed guidance and found a charismatic leader who promised simpler answers," Dr. Kevileno said

sadly. "Kyan is offering what the Mithun way can't—immediate gratification of their rage."

"But where will that rage lead them?" Professor Mengu asked. "What will they become?"

No one had an answer.

The Farewell

Kyan came home as darkness thickened over Kohima. The colonial mansion of his childhood felt shrunken, as if his spirit had already left before his body would. Floorboards groaned under his footsteps like weary sentinels. Faded photographs lined the walls, their sepia tones whispering of better days long past.

He steered clear of his father's study, unable to meet those gentle, searching eyes just yet. He scrubbed away Kolkata's dust in a hurried bath. The cook had made his favourite pork with rice, but he ate without tasting, every bite hollow.

Before leaving, he had three stops to make.

First, Lyna's room. The door groaned as he eased it open. Everything was untouched—her books, her clothes, the lingering trace of her perfume. He knelt by her bed, fingers brushing the pillow where she was fast asleep now with medication.

"I tried their way, sis," he whispered. "Gathered evidence, followed protocols. But it's not enough. It will never be enough to make them pay for what they did to you."

He rose slowly, committing every detail to memory, aware he might not see this room again.

Next, Natasha's room. His fifteen-year-old sister was sprawled on her bed, engrossed in her phone, blissfully unaware of how fragile safety really was.

Be safe, he thought from the doorway, heart heavy with unspoken fears. *Even if I have to become something frightening to protect you.*

At last, he could no longer avoid it. He had to face his father.

Dan was waiting in his study, sitting behind the massive mahogany desk—once a symbol of power and influence, now a monument to futility. All that political capital, all those connections, and not one had helped Lyna. Dan's shoulders slumped, his face shadowed by exhaustion and sorrow.

"Why, Kyan?" Dan's voice was quiet, but each word carried the weight of a father's breaking heart. "Why did you do this?"

Kyan stood in the doorway, backpack over one shoulder, feeling the distance already opening between them.

"You never once considered your family," Dan said, voice taut. "Our values, our name, the legacy we built. Why throw it all away for this path?"

The words broke something in Kyan. He dropped his bag and moved to his father, sinking to his knees and laying his head in Dan's lap like he had as a child fleeing nightmares.

Silence enveloped the room. Only the steady ticking of the clock filled the void, each tick marking the weight of unspoken words. Then Kyan's anguish burst free, sobs wracking his body, raw and unrestrained.

For his father, who sacrificed his political career pursuing justice. For Lyna, trapped in her silent prison. For Natasha, who would grow up in a fractured family. For his mother, who had died from the grief of watching them all suffer.

"Papa," he sobbed, "I can't watch anymore. Can't watch the system fail us again and again. Can't watch good people destroyed while their attackers walk free."

Dan's hand trembled as he stroked his son's hair. "But violence isn't the answer, son. Becoming like them doesn't honour your sister—it dishonours everything she was."

Kyan looked up, face wet with tears. "Tell me, Papa. You tried the political way. Priya Aunty tried the legal way. Nothing worked. Nothing changed. How many more Lynas before we stop being patient?" He paused, voice growing more urgent. "Is it justice if it comes too late, or is it vengeance if it gets us there faster? What do we truly choose, Papa?"

Dan had no answer. That was the terrible truth—he had exhausted every proper channel and achieved nothing.

In the silence, Dan's thoughts raced. *Was there still a moral high ground when inaction only permitted injustice? Would choosing a path of vengeance truly honor his daughter, or perpetuate the cycle of violence that had taken her? Could he fault Kyan for seeking change, even at drastic costs?*

But recalling how easily morality could erode in the face of despair, he feared what his son might become.

"Then I go alone," Kyan said, standing and wiping his face. "But I go."

"Go for this, and you're no longer my son," Dan said, voice breaking, each word final and heavy.

The words hung between them like a death sentence.

Kyan picked up his backpack. "Then remember me as I was, Papa. Not as what I'm becoming."

As he walked toward the door, Dan called out one last time: "When this path leads where I know it will—when you realize violence only breeds more violence—you can come home. The door will always be open."

But Kyan was already gone, disappearing into the night where his new followers waited in the shadows of the forest, fists tightened around burning torches, casting flickering light upon their determined faces.

Behind him, Dan remained alone in his study, encircled by books and memories—a father who had lost one child to violence and now watched another slip away, lured by the hope of vengeance.

Outside, evening draped Kohima's hills in gold and shadow. Somewhere in that beautiful, wounded land, the Angami people were splitting along hidden fault lines: the patient Mithun and the wild bison, the light and the darkness threatening to swallow them all.

The schism was complete.

Chapter 38

Hidden Threads (October 2022)

October sunlight slipped softly through the attic window, wrapping Pakhi's room in a golden hush. She stretched beneath her quilt, relishing the crisp air. The faint scent of drying paint lingered in the room, mingling with the cool aroma of fallen leaves wafting in. Her fingertips wandered over the new paint, still marvelling at how everything felt transformed.

A room of her own at last. After two months squeezed in with Ana and Prii, Anjali Aunty had worked a quiet wonder, conjuring bedrooms from the rooftop corners and even tucking in a little kitchenette for tea and midnight snacks. However, the constraints of the space were palpable.

Pakhi found herself reflecting on how the new, tight quarters affected her. It was nothing like her parents' sprawling colonial cottage in Kohima, with its stone walls and sweeping views of the hills. Nor did it match her grandparents' grand chateau or the cozy, well-appointed homes of Prii and Ana.

Yet this modest attic had quietly become her sanctuary.

Pakhi couldn't understand how Anjali Aunty—a widow with property troubles and limited financial means—had convinced her

strict mother. Priya had insisted on hostels, vetted places, and maximum security. Yet after a few calls with Anjali Aunty, she gave her blessing.

"It's an excellent option, dear," Ma had said with such relief that Pakhi had felt confused by the intensity of her response.

Naive and hopeful, Pakhi had no inkling of the hidden currents swirling beneath her everyday life, threads that tied her mother's shadowed past to this unassuming PG in ways she could never guess.

The phone call before Pakhi's arrival to Kolkata:

Priya sat in her Kohima study, phone pressed to her ear with trembling hands, speaking in rapid Bengali that Rick couldn't quite follow from the next room.

"Anju, tui janish ami koto tension-e achi. Pakhi ke Kolkata pathabo ki pathabo na—ei niye ami ghum haracchi. (Anju, you know how much tension I'm in. Whether to send Pakhi to Kolkata or not—I'm losing sleep over this.)"

"Priya, ami bujhte parchi," Anjali's warm voice came through the line. "But you can't keep her locked away forever. She needs to live her life."

"But that city..." Priya's voice cracked. "That cursed city that destroyed us. How can I send my daughter there? What if—"

"What if she finds out?" Anjali finished gently. "Priya, she's not you. Times have changed. And more importantly, she'll have me. I'll watch over her like she's my own."

Priya wiped her eyes and took a deep breath, catching herself within the cascade of old memories. At that moment, the distant sound of temple bells, carried on the night breeze, reverberated through her like an echo from her past. She heard not just the echo of those bells but also saw the flicker of her father's disapproving eyes. "The case is still open, Anju. Technically, we're still fugitives. If anyone connects her to me, to that night, to what we did..." Her voice trailed off. "No one will,"

Anjali said firmly. "It's been twenty years." "But I haven't forgotten anything," Priya whispered. "I still wake up at night seeing Baba's face when he disowned me. Still hear Ma saying I'm dead to them. Still remember running through those streets with stolen goods in my bag, terrified every policeman would recognize me."

"And Rick?" Anjali asked softly. "Does he know you're this afraid?"

"Rick knows I don't want her in Kolkata. He doesn't know it's not just about Neev and the music scandal. He doesn't know about my nightmares that Kali Ma will finally claim her due—if not from me, then from my daughter."

Anjali was quiet for a moment. "Listen to me, Priya. I have this PG now. It's small and not fancy, but it's safe. Let me call Pakhi, make it seem like I found her number through the college office. I'll say I'm looking for outstation students; make it casual. You just agree when she brings it to you."

"You would do this for me?"

Priya, you're more than a childhood friend. You're my sister. We grew up together, sharing secrets and dreams. Remember when Pijush told us he loved me? You convinced my parents to let us marry.

Priya smiled through her tears. "You two were so in love. How I envied you—being able to marry for love without losing everything."

"You didn't lose everything. You have Rick, you have Pakhi, you built a beautiful life."

"A life apart," Priya said quietly. "A life where I can never return to my parents, never pray at the temple where I grew up, never walk the streets of my childhood without fear."

"Then let Pakhi have what you couldn't," Anjali urged. "Let her experience this city without your ghosts haunting her. I'll protect her, Priya. Only your trust allows me to take on this responsibility."

"She can never know," Priya said urgently. "She must never know about the theft, the case, or her legal guilt." She must stay innocent of all that darkness."

"She will," Anjali promised. "To her, I'll just be a kind landlady. Nothing more."

Two weeks after the girls arrived, at first, the PG pressed in on them. The three girls, accustomed to comfort and breathing room, stared in dismay at the cramped quarters, the stained walls, the lone window letting in a sliver of light. single window.

"We can't stay here," Ana had declared immediately. "There are modern apartments just two streets over. We've already paid three months' advance, but let's cut our losses."

Prii nodded vigorously. "This is worse than I imagined. Ma would never let me stay in these conditions."

But Pakhi remembered her mother's unusually firm tone on the phone: "You will stay with Anjali Aunty. This is not negotiable."

When she had tried to suggest alternatives, Priya's sharp response ended the discussion: "I did not agree to send you to Kolkata so you could live unsupervised in some..."fancy flat. Anjali Aunty or you come home. Those are your options."

So they stayed. And slowly, something quietly miraculous began to unfold.

Anjali Aunty's warmth began to transform not just the space but their hearts as well. She cooked for them—real food, home-cooked Bengali meals that tasted of love and care rather than hostel blandness. She listened to their college stories and their fears and dreams with the patient attention of a mother.

"Aunty, why do you live alone?" Pakhi asked one evening over dinner. "Where is Uncle?"

Anjali's eyes clouded. "He passed away three years ago. Heart attack. Very sudden."

"You must be so lonely," Prii said softly.

I was lonely, Anjali admitted. After Pijush died, the house felt empty. Property dealers pressured me to sell and sent goons to scare me. But you three arrived, and the house feels alive again.

Ana's observation lingered in the room, her voice a curious note breaking the strands of newfound warmth. "The goons stopped coming," Ana observed. "That's strange, isn't it? They were harassing you for months."

Anjali smiled. Maybe you girls bring good luck. Or maybe... She didn't mention the quiet call: "Your property is under protection. No more trouble." She thought Priya called in favours but stayed silent.

As weeks passed, Anjali used her modest savings—and money Priya sent secretly—to create bedrooms, paint walls, and add comfort to the rooftop spaces.

"Aunty, you didn't have to do all this," Pakhi protested, seeing how much Anjali had spent.

She never said it, but every time she looked at Pakhi's grey-blue eyes though Priya had deep brown ones and silent elegance, she saw Priya in her former form.

Late one night - Anjali's private conversation

"Priya, she's settling in well," Anjali reported in a hushed call after the girls had gone to sleep. "Happy, safe, making friends."

"Has she mentioned... anything about our family history? About Kolkata?"

"Nothing. She's curious about Bengali culture because of you, but she has no idea about the deeper connections. To her, I'm just a kind landlady who happened to find her number."

"And the boy?" Priya asked carefully. "Aarav. I've heard her mention him on our calls."

Anjali hesitated. "There's something there, Priya. I can see it in her eyes when she talks about him. The same look you had when you spoke about Rick."

"No," Priya's voice turned sharp with panic. "Not again. Not my daughter repeating my mistakes—"

"It's not a mistake if it's real love," Anjali interrupted gently. "And maybe it won't end in tragedy this time. Times are different now."

"Or maybe history repeats itself," Priya said softly. "Maybe Kali Ma's debt follows through generations. Maybe what I never repaid will have to be paid by my daughter."

After the call ended, Anjali lingered at the window, gazing into the Kolkata night, troubled by the thought that her friend might be right. Perhaps some sins really did cast shadows that stretched across generations.

She wondered what would unfold when Pakhi finally uncovered the truth about her own identity and about the choices her mother made in this city for the sake of love. The yellow hornbill, Anjali mused, had returned to the city where her parents' story first took flight. Now, only time would tell if she would soar on her own or be grounded by secrets she had yet to discover.

Chapter 39

The Crimson Dawn

Dawn's first light slipped through the curtains, gilding the room in gold and rose. Pakhi stirred, heart galloping with the anticipation that had stolen her sleep. Today was no ordinary day. Today, she would have Aarav all to herself.

The thought was sweet enough to make her shiver.

She rose with a dancer's grace, bare feet gliding silently over cold floor. The house slumbered on—Prii and Ana adrift in dreams, Anjali Mashi cocooned in her quiet room. Only Pakhi's breath stirred the hush. This was her stolen hour, her private ritual before a day that felt like the start of a new world.

The bathroom mirror reflected a girl transformed by love. Her grey-blue eyes—inherited from her British ancestors on her father's side—sparkled with an inner light. These eyes had always been both blessing and curse, drawing admiration while marking her as different. No amount of makeup could recreate the authenticity they now held.

She had dreamed of this feeling, read about it in books, heard it whispered in songs. Yet nothing prepared her for the reality of Aarav's name on her lips—the way it made her pulse quicken and her breath catch.

The red saree waited on her bed, a silent promise. Her mother had chosen it with loving precision before leaving Kohima. The silk whispered stories of women who had worn red for love across generations. Pakhi's fingers shook as she draped it, the fabric folding itself around her like a blessing.

Her wild curls tumbled over her shoulders, untamed and radiant. Orchid clips from home pinned them in place. Every piece of jewellery was a memory: a diamond navel ring glinting like a star caught in daylight, a delicate nose ring transforming her into the heroine of her grandmother's stories.

Kohl turned her eyes into stormy seas. She added the final touches: blush blooming on her cheeks, alive with excitement; gloss on lips that had whispered Aarav's name into the night; and a small red bindi—a bold mark of heritage and longing.

Anjali Mashi knew. She always knew. Love was impossible to hide from a woman who had loved deeply and lost, who could read every secret smile and stolen glance.

The engine's low hum outside sent her heart soaring. Through the window, she glimpsed the Range Rover—sleek, powerful—and Aarav behind the wheel. Her Aarav, prince of a music empire she barely understood. Yet all that mattered was the way he looked at her, steadying her and lifting her in the same breath.

The plan was simple, almost sacred. First, the Kali temple, to seek blessings for the delicate, beautiful thing blossoming between them. Then the farmhouse, a haven where their masks could slip away. And finally, the secret that made her heart race—meeting her maternal grandparents in disguise, tracing her mother's footsteps, daring to write her own story.

She moved toward the door, pausing as her reflection caught her eye. The girl staring back was a stranger her mother might not recognize—bold, sensual, brimming with possibility. Yet she was still Pakhi, daughter of the hills, her veins humming with the songs of her people.

The morning air kissed her skin as she stepped outside. There was Aarav, emerging from the red Range Rover that echoed her daring saree. His smile made fairy tales feel real.

His eyes found hers across the space between them. The world seemed to tilt, reshaping itself around this moment, this choice, this wild leap into love.

"You know," she called out, breaking the spell with a teasing glint, "if you keep smiling like that, I may have to change my plans."

Aarav chuckled, sliding his sunglasses down his nose. "And I thought my charm was priceless."

Their laughter echoed in the morning air, grounding the magic in shared understanding.

His hand found hers, warm and steady, and Pakhi felt her doubts wash away. Whatever secrets her parents kept, whatever dangers waited in the shadows, she chose this moment. This love was hers—fierce and unwavering—and in her heart she promised to guard it with newfound devotion.

The red saree swirled around her like a living flame. She felt beautiful, desired, and vibrantly alive.

The Desecrated Temple

The Kali temple loomed over Kolkata's bonedi para, its weathered stones heavy with twenty years of silent accusation. At four, while the city slumbered, Abha awoke in the room where she had both raised her daughter and first arrived as a trembling sixteen-year-old bride, bound to a man nearly twice her age.

Twenty years had passed since Priya's sudden disappearance—a night marked by panic and disbelief. The jewels of Mother Kali, sacred and irreplaceable, vanished alongside her. Each morning, Abha would recall fragments of that night: Priya's furtive glance, hushed footsteps.

Each day, memories unravelled like new pages as Abha pieced together her daughter's silent rebellion driven by forbidden love.

Priya's heart had been a battleground where devotion clashed with profound yearning for freedom—a hunger growing inside her like a tide against constrained shores. It was not just the tribal boy from the far northeast that she chose, but the promise of a life dictated by her own choices, a world where her love could exist freely.

Abha's hands, lined by years of sorrow, shook as she performed her morning ablutions—the same ritual she had learned as a timid child-bride, torn from her studies in tenth standard. Her parents, humble Brahmins, had leapt at the chance to marry her into the illustrious Mukhopadhyay family. Her sharp features were praised, yet her dark skin was a silent burden in a land that worshipped Kali but prized fair brides.

Thakur Krishna Chandra Mukhopadhyay had sought a bride whose horoscope bore the right marks, whose stars would align with his fate. When her janam kundali matched, the marriage was hastily arranged.

She was never truly his wife. He treated her with respect, always calling her "choto"—the little one—but between them stretched a gulf too wide to cross: years, learning, intellect she could never match. Their union was built on ritual, not romance, on reverence, not desire.

For ten years, their marriage was little more than a formality. After Devika's birth—their miracle after a decade of longing—he never again set foot in her room. Their daughter was born of duty, not love.

The irony cut deep: her daughter, the most devout of all, had tended every detail of the goddess's worship. Born after ten years of desperate prayers, she was named Devika—the little goddess—though to everyone she was Priya, the beloved.

Thakur Krishna Chandra Mukhopadhyay, the main purohit of the Kali Bari near Shobhabazar Rajbari, was a man of unwavering principles. The Mukhopadhyay family rose to prominence during British rule when palace people granted them this property as a legacy. For generations, they kept the sacred flame and guarded tradition.

Until Priya destroyed it all.

Abha remembered the night her husband called the entire family together, his voice thundering with rage that seemed to shake the very pillars of their ancestral home.

"She is dead to us," he had declared, face twisted with pain beyond anger. "Remove her name from the trustee list. Remove her from my will. She will not touch my body after death, for her hands are stained with sacrilege."

Those words haunted the halls for twenty years, a curse that emptied their home, leaving only ghosts of laughter and devotion that once filled its rooms.

Within the community, relationships with outsiders, especially those from unfamiliar tribes, were viewed with suspicion and disdain. The notion of marrying outside the caste threatened not just family lines but the societal fabric that maintained order and tradition. For families like the Mukhopadhyays, whose lineage was rooted in ritual and reverence, Priya's act represented more than personal breach—it was a stark challenge to the expectations and unwritten rules that governed their world.

Abha moved through morning rituals mechanically, her mind replaying questions that had haunted her for nearly two decades. *Was it love? Flight? Or both? What emotions had driven her daughter to such an act?*

The temple bells rang out, and Abha felt the old ache return. As she had for twenty years, she would serve the goddess alone, mourning the daughter who had been her brightest joy and now her heaviest sorrow.

Morning light slipped through ancient windows, casting shadows that danced with memories. In their shifting shapes, Abha lost herself in dreams—of little Devika darting through halls, silver anklets ringing, laughter echoing off sacred stone.

She would see her daughter as she had been: first as a toddler with chubby hands reaching for the goddess's flowers, then as a young girl solemnly learning morning prayers, her small voice pure and devoted.

The dream would shift, showing Devika growing into a beautiful young woman, her dark brown eyes reflecting the sacred lamp's flame, her hands steady as she dressed the goddess with fresh flowers and silk.

In these dreams, Abha watched her daughter's face glow with an inner light, a faith so deep it seemed otherworldly. This was the child born after ten years of pleading with the goddess, a gift she once believed heaven-sent.

But the dream always shifted, as dreams do, and Devika's face would change—her eyes searching past the temple walls, drawn by a call stronger than any prayer. The devotion would dim, replaced by another kind of longing.

Abha would wake with tears on her cheeks and the sharp taste of loss in her mouth.

But today, something was different.

Today, as she moved through the temple courtyard, she heard soft footsteps at the entrance. Looking up from her prayers, she saw a young couple entering—a handsome young man and beside him, a girl in a red saree, her unruly curls catching the morning light.

The world seemed to stop. Time folded in on itself, and twenty years vanished.

The girl covered her head and folded her hands in prayer, moving with grace that touched Abha's heart—just as Devika used to do.

Abha's heart hammered. For a moment, she thought she was still dreaming. The girl's profile, her posture, her reverence—it was as if years of betrayal and grief were only a nightmare.

The girl in red turned, revealing grey-blue eyes that spoke of faraway places, not Bengal. Yet the curve of her cheek, the tilt of her head, the silent prayer—those belonged to Devika.

Around her neck was a delicate northeastern bead necklace, its intricate patterns quietly whispering of mixed heritage, a blend of cultures woven into her very existence. As she glanced around the

temple with awe and apprehension, her fingers briefly traced the beads, perhaps searching for courage or comfort.

Her lips moved silently in prayer, carrying hope that echoed softly through the hallowed space.

Abha's knees buckled.

The granddaughter she had never known, carrying their blood but not their name, now stood before the temple her mother had once defiled, offering prayers to the goddess Devika had betrayed.

The irony was so sharp that Abha could not tell whether to laugh or cry.

But she was not mistaken. Blood speaks truth.

The years between them dissolved like smoke before the sacred flame, and for a single, precious moment, Abha felt her daughter had finally come home.

Chapter 40

The Unspoken Recognition

Pakhi stood spellbound before the radiant idol of Goddess Kali. The cool brass under her fingertips anchored her to the sacred space. The flickering lamp cast wild shadows in her grey-blue eyes. The goddess seemed to peer straight into her spirit, her fierce face both fearsome and strangely tender.

"She's so beautiful," Pakhi whispered to Aarav, voice filled with genuine reverence. "I've never seen Kali Ma depicted with such... such maternal fierceness."

Aarav found himself captivated. His friends from the music world would have fidgeted here, but Pakhi looked as if she belonged, born to stand before sacred altars.

"My grandmother used to say that Kali Ma shows different faces to different people," he replied softly. "To some, she's the destroyer of evil. To others, the protective mother."

"What does she show you?" Pakhi asked, turning to look at him with those eyes that seemed to hold mountains and sky.

Aarav hesitated, uncertainty flickering briefly. After a breath's pause, resolve crystallized. "Today... today she shows me love. She shows me someone I want to protect, the way she protects her devotees."

Hidden in the shadows, Abha observed every gesture. The girl's reverence, the way she moved—each detail struck a chord. Something in the boy's voice, in the way his gaze lingered on Pakhi, stirred echoes of another young man from a lifetime ago.

"Excuse me," a gentle voice called out.

Pakhi and Aarav turned. An elderly woman approached, her white saree pristine despite her age. Her eyes, clouded yet sharp, missed nothing.

"Are you... Are you here for the first time?" Abha asked, voice trembling slightly.

"Yes, Thakur Maa," Pakhi replied respectfully. "My friend brought me here. I've heard so much about this temple's history."

"History," Abha repeated, the word heavy with meaning. "Yes, this temple has a lot of history. Tell me, child, what is your name?"

"Pakhi," she answered, then hesitated. "Pakhi... Angami."

The world spun. Abha's worn hands clutched the pillar for support as recognition and sorrow surged through her. *Angami*. The name resounded in her memory with breathtaking intensity, stirring emotions dormant for twenty years. Memories of Devika flooded back—her vibrant laughter, the defiant spirit that led her away to love a man from another world.

"And you, son?" Abha managed to ask Aarav, her eyes never left Pakhi's face.

"Aarav Mukherjee," he replied with a respectful bow. "My family has been coming to this temple for generations."

"Mukherjee," Abha murmured, recognition dawning. "The music family? The House of Lords?"

"Yes, Thakur Maa. My grandfather started the music company, though I'm trying to find my own path."

Abha nodded, her mind racing. *Music. Another young musician. Another love story unfolding.*

"Child," she said to Pakhi, voice barely above a whisper, "your eyes... they are unusual for our land. Where do you come from?"

"Kohima, Thakur Maa. From Nagaland."

The confirmation struck like a blow. Abha's body quivered as if the ground had shifted beneath her feet. Her heart thudded wildly. Grief mingled with yearning, and a wild, fragile hope surged through her, stealing her breath. *Here was her granddaughter—the child she had never held, bearing the name of the man who had taken her daughter, speaking of the distant land that had become her daughter's sanctuary.*

"Nagaland," Abha echoed, voice trembling. "The land of the hornbill."

Pakhi's face lit up with surprise and joy. "Yes! You know about our state bird? Most people here don't..."

"I know," Abha said quietly. "I know more than you might think, child."

Abha searched Pakhi's face. The gentle curve of her cheek was unmistakably Devika, but those remarkable eyes told stories of distant mountains. Yet Pakhi's innate reverence so vividly echoed young Devika that it left Abha breathless. Then, as if the past reached out to the present, Pakhi unconsciously touched her earlobe—a gesture tiny yet so familiar that Abha's heart skipped a beat. *It was the same unconscious movement Devika used to make.*

"Would you like to offer special prayers?" Abha asked suddenly. "I can arrange for a private pooja if you wish."

"Oh, that's very kind, but we wouldn't want to trouble you," Pakhi said quickly.

"No trouble," Abha insisted, eyes drinking in her granddaughter's face. "Sometimes the goddess calls certain people to her. I think... I think she has called you here today."

Aarav glanced between the two women, feeling a current he could not name. The air seemed heavy with unspoken truths.

"If it's not too much trouble," he offered gently, "we would be honoured."

Abha nodded, heart racing. She would have time to hear her granddaughter's voice, learn about her life—a piece of her lost daughter after twenty years.

"Come," she said, gesturing toward the inner sanctum. "Let us pray together. Sometimes the goddess has messages for those who seek her with pure hearts."

Tears for a Stranger

"Raja!" Abha called, voice authoritative. "Come here, son. We need a special pooja for our guests."

A young man in his thirties stepped out, his crisp dhoti whispering with each movement. The sacred thread across his chest caught the lamplight. He bowed deeply to Abha, then offered a gentle nod to Pakhi and Aarav.

"Yes, Thakur Maa. What should I prepare?"

"The full prayers," Abha replied, eyes on Pakhi. "Flowers, fruits, sweets. Make it special."

As Raja disappeared, Pakhi's gaze wandered around the temple. The air hummed with incense and memory, making her feel both comforted and strangely out of place.

"Thakur Maa," Pakhi asked gently, "may I ask about Thakur Moshai? Is he... is he in the temple today?"

Abha's face immediately clouded over, mouth tightening as she lowered her eyes. "No, Ma! Thakur Moshai left us long back. He... he is no more."

Tears welled in Pakhi's eyes before she could speak, a sharp ache blooming in her chest. A wave of sorrow swept over her, as if she were mourning someone she had never known but somehow missed all her life.

"I'm so sorry," Pakhi whispered, voice thick. "I don't know why, but... I feel such sadness."

Abha stared in wonder as tears traced silent paths down her granddaughter's cheeks. *She feels it*, Abha realized. *She senses the bond, even in the dark.*

"He was a great man," Abha said softly, memories flooding back. "A scholar, a devotee. In his last few months..." Her voice caught. "In his last few months, I used to sit by his bedside. Even when he couldn't speak, his eyes were still so stern, so unforgiving."

"Unforgiving?" Aarav asked gently.

Abha's hands trembled. "There were... There were things he could never forgive. People he could never forgive."

Pakhi stepped closer, her young heart moved by the old woman's pain. "What kind of things, Thakur Maa?"

"Betrayal," Abha whispered. "The kind of betrayal that breaks a father's heart forever."

A hush settled over the temple, broken only by the faint clatter of ritual items Raja arranged. An unexplainable urge tugged at Pakhi.

"Thakur Maa," she said hesitantly, "do you have children? Family?"

Abha seemed to shrink, shoulders caving as her fingers twisted the edge of her saree. The silence stretched so long that Pakhi's heart pounded with worry that she had gone too far.

Finally, in a voice barely above a whisper, Abha replied, "I had a daughter. She... she is not with us anymore."

The words fell with heavy, unyielding finality. Yet in Abha's eyes, Pakhi glimpsed not only sorrow but fierce longing, her gaze darting away as if chasing words that refused to come.

"I'm sorry," Pakhi said quietly. "I didn't mean to bring up painful memories."

"Sometimes," Abha said, looking directly into Pakhi's grey-blue eyes, "the goddess brings people into our lives when we need them most. Even if we don't understand why."

The pooja unfolded with Raja's voice weaving ancient Sanskrit verses through the air. As the verses rose and fell, Pakhi and Aarav placed their flowers with tender reverence, whispering prayers that seemed to echo in the very stones.

Abha's gaze remained fixed on her granddaughter, her heart a tumult of joy and sorrow. Pakhi moved with unconscious grace—her careful lighting of the diya cast warm glow dancing across her features. Her gentle touch at the goddess's feet seemed an intimate conversation with the divine, and the pure devotion shining in her eyes radiated a spirit that mirrored Devika's so completely, it ached within Abha.

When the ceremony concluded, Pakhi touched Abha's feet in a traditional gesture of respect.

"Thank you, Thakur Maa. This has been... this has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life."

"Will you come again?" Abha asked urgently, hands still clasping Pakhi's. "Please, Ma. Will you come back?"

Pakhi blinked, startled by the trembling urgency. "Of course, if you would like me to."

"I'd like that very much," Abha said, voice breaking. "There's so much I want to share. About the temple, its history."

As Pakhi and Aarav readied to leave, Abha's heart churned with a storm of feelings. She longed to cry out, to reveal that her daughter

Priya lived, that Pakhi was standing before her own grandmother. Her heart was a battlefield, torn between past and present. She envisioned breaking the long years of silence, offering Pakhi both truth and the warmth of unclaimed familial love.

Yet fear crept in, whispering of the potential chaos her words might unleash. How could she, after so much pain and loss, gamble with the fragile peace she had only just begun to rebuild?

But she couldn't. Not in front of the boy. Not without knowing what consequences her words might bring.

"Come back soon, dear," she called out as they reached the temple entrance. "The goddess... the goddess has been waiting for you."

After they departed, Abha collapsed onto the temple steps, breath quick and uneven, the weight of the moment pressing down on her. Raja approached, worry etched across his face.

"Thakur Maa, are you alright? You seem very affected by those visitors."

"Raja," Abha said, voice trembling with the weight of secrets, "sometimes the past comes back to us in ways we never expect. That girl... that girl carries more history in her blood than she knows."

She gazed up at the hornbill carved into the temple wall, a decoration Devika had added years before.

The same bird that once carried her daughter away had now guided her granddaughter home.

Yet how was she meant to hold such an impossible gift in her trembling hands?

Chapter 41

Between Mysteries and Love

As Pakhi and Aarav stepped away from the temple, a veil of mystery trailed behind her, whispering old questions she had carried since childhood. Her family's story was a tapestry of hidden threads and silent griefs, an ache that pressed against her hope like sunlight breaking through tangled branches. Yet with Aarav walking quietly at her side, his presence began to soothe the knots of confusion in her heart.

"You're quiet," Aarav observed, his hand finding hers as they reached his Land Rover. "That temple really affected you."

Pakhi nodded, wiping away the last traces of tears. "I don't understand it, Aarav. From childhood, I've always known my life wasn't woven like others. There are so many silent undertones in my family—things never spoken but always present."

He opened the car door for her, his eyes searching hers. "What kind of things?"

As she settled into the car, Pakhi stared out the window, her confusion softening into a gentle, aching sorrow. "My parents' love story always seemed like a riddle. Pa would whisper bits and pieces when Ma wasn't around—tales of mismatched hearts and love conquering everything. But I never guessed how many shadows lingered beneath, or how many secrets they quietly guarded."

"Dark?" Aarav started the engine but didn't drive, giving her his full attention.

"That's the thing—I don't really know." Her voice trembled with frustration. "I've spent years gathering fragments, trying to patch together a story from scattered pieces. I know Ma grew up in North Kolkata, but she never lets slip a single detail about her family or her childhood. It feels like her life began the day she met Pa."

Aarav reached over and squeezed her hand. "Is that why you wanted to come to Kolkata? To find answers?"

"Yes!" Pakhi's eyes lit up. "Anjali Mashi was my only hope. After so much coaxing, she finally gave me the address of their old neighbourhood. That's how I found the temple today. She admitted she was Ma's childhood friend and that Ma had arranged for me to stay with her. But after she married and left Kolkata, she lost touch and knew nothing more. Ma never spoke of it, never kept in contact. It was only when I decided to come to Kolkata to study that they reconnected after all these years."

"And meeting Thakur Maa felt significant?"

"It was the best thing that could happen. I don't know how I'll unveil the mystery, but at least I've made a beginning. She seemed to know something, Aarav. The way she looked at me, the questions she asked... There was recognition there."

"You really think she might have answers?"

"I have to believe she does. I promised I'd go back, and I will." Her voice grew gentle as she turned to him, uncertainty melting into a sudden glow. Her grey-blue eyes shimmered with something new. "But today, I want to give the rest of my day to you. To us."

His heart skipped. "To us?"

He lifted her hand to his lips, and her heart fluttered wildly, her breath catching as if the world itself were holding still. "Today, I want to let go of the past and simply be here, with you. Where should we go?"

"Anywhere you want." She leaned closer. "Show me your Kolkata. Show me the places that matter to you."

"Are you sure? We had planned—"

"That can wait," she interrupted softly. For a moment, the tension in her face eased, replaced by tenderness. "Right now, I want to focus on just being Pakhi and Aarav together." Not someone searching for family secrets. Just a girl who's fallen completely in love with a boy who makes her believe in magic."

Aarav's breath caught. "Pakhi..."

"What?" Mischief danced in her eyes.

"You can't just say things like that and expect me to stay calm." Pakhi's laughter bubbled through the car, light and musical. "Then don't drive the usual way. Take me somewhere it's just us, Aarav. Somewhere we can truly be ourselves, away from the pressures of the outside world. gaze."

The farmhouse appeared at the end of a winding, tree-lined lane. Pakhi drew in a breath, captivated by the sight of the traditional Bengali cottage—mud walls traced with delicate terracotta patterns, its thatched roof blending seamlessly into the lush green landscape.

"Aarav, this is magical," she breathed, stepping into air perfumed with a thousand flowers.

The garden burst with colour, roses and jasmine tumbling over trellises. Exotic blooms from faraway places perfumed the air, while the scent of wet clay pots anchored her in Bengal's earth. In the distance, a koel's song threaded through the tapestry of fragrance and color, adding a note of everyday magic to the scene.

"My father's passion project," Aarav said softly, his hand finding the small of her back. "He spent years bringing flowers from every country he visited. "

It felt like stepping into paradise. Joy was torn between vulnerability and desire as she felt every brush of his hand, the warmth of his touch sending shivers through the silk against her skin.

Inside, rustic charm blended with modern comfort, wrapping them in a cocoon of intimacy. Aarav's gentle, lingering touches made the air hum with quiet closeness.

"Are you hungry?" His voice was slightly husky.

"Starving," she replied, though she wasn't sure if she meant for food.

They cooked lunch together, side by side, stirring simple dal, rice, and fresh vegetables from the garden. Their playful banter filled the kitchen with warmth, the air alive with their growing connection. When it was time to eat, Pakhi found herself drawn to the inviting, cushioned floor seating.

"Come here," she said softly, patting her lap as she settled cross-legged on the silk cushions.

"Pakhi..." His voice held warning and promise.

"I want to feed you. Is that so wrong?"

He moved toward her as if drawn by a gentle spell, settling beside her and letting his head rest in her lap. The moment deepened—Pakhi's shyness melting into tenderness as her fingers traced through his hair, feeding him delicate bites. The way he closed his eyes and hummed with contentment made it feel more precious than anything they had shared before.

"You realize what you're doing to me," Aarav murmured against her hand.

"What am I doing?" Her pulse raced despite her innocent tone.

Instead of answering, he caught her wrist gently and pressed a kiss to her palm. "Making me forget everything except this moment."

The afternoon heat made them drowsy and content. When Aarav suggested they cool down, Pakhi hesitated, excitement and nerves

swirling inside her. Her heart pounded as he guided her to a bathroom with a grand marble tub.

"Together?" she whispered, cheeks flushing pink.

"Only if you want to." His voice was tender. We can avoid anything you're not ready for. I just... I want to be close to you."

They filled the tub with cool water, scattering flower petals until the surface shimmered with color. Pakhi wore a borrowed kurta and pajama from Aarav, which were there in the farmhouse cupboard, and Aarav wore his kurta and aligarhs, the wet fabric clinging to their skin as they sat facing each other in the fragrant water. Their voices dropped to a hush, sharing dreams, music, and the shifting patterns of light. In the gentle cradle of the floral bath, Pakhi's eyes caught the golden glow of sunset. "Aarav," she said softly, her words edged with vulnerability, "do you ever wonder where we truly belong? Or what the future might hold for us?" Her question lingered in the scented steam, hinting at a longing that reached beyond the moment. Aarav paused, meeting her gaze, as if weighing the promise of a future still unwritten.

"I've never felt so safe with anyone," Pakhi confessed, her hand finding his beneath the water.

"Neither have I." He brought her hand to his lips.

As the sun dipped beneath the horizon, they lay entwined on silk sheets, skin cool and damp from their bath, listening to the quiet music of each other's breath. The room felt airy and open, with white curtains fluttering softly in the evening breeze.

"Sing for me," Pakhi whispered, her head on his shoulder.

His voice filled the room with a Bengali love song, and tears of happiness slipped down her cheeks. In that moment, secrets, the past, and the world beyond their walls simply vanished.

They fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms, completely oblivious that from a respectful distance, Dukhiram, the elderly caretaker, had been discreetly noting their arrival. It was his job to inform LM about

any visitors to the property, though the young couple's innocent romance was hardly cause for concern.

As night deepened, the scent of jasmine drifted through the open windows, and two hearts beat in gentle harmony, lost in a love that felt as boundless as the stars.

Chapter 42

The Predator's Web

The old black landline sliced through the hush of the Mukherjee mansion's grand study. LM trusted these relics—landlines guarded secrets with a loyalty no modern device could match. In his labyrinth of schemes and shadows, privacy was his most prized possession.

"Hello," LM's gravelly voice answered on the third ring.

"Saheb, this is Dukhiram calling from the orchard."

A rare gentleness eased the lines of LM's weathered face. The LM Orchard and Vineyard was his sanctuary, a weekend escape where he shaped rows of grapes to his will.

"What is it, Dukhiram?"

"There were visitors today, Saheb. Young Master Aarav came with a girl."

LM's jaw tightened imperceptibly. "Tell me about this girl."

"She seemed to be from the hills, Saheb. Had strange-coloured eyes—grey-blue. They were very close. Shared lunch, stayed the whole afternoon."

The receiver groaned beneath LM's tightening grip. Those eyes haunted him—the same girl Aarav had paraded home weeks ago. That

woman from the borderlands. His hatred for hill people ran deep; to him, they were nothing but obstacles, complications, threats to everything he'd built.

"What else?"

"They bathed together, Saheb. Spent time in the bedroom. Very intimate."

"That tribal whore," LM spat, his face contorting with rage. "She's got her claws into my son."

"Keep watching them. I want to know every move that girl makes."

"Yes, Saheb. Should I—"

"Just watch. And keep your mouth shut about this conversation."

LM slammed the receiver down with violence that echoed through the study.

Unbeknownst to him, Su had been passing by when LM's harsh tone made her pause. She hesitated near the door, which was slightly ajar, letting his voice drift into the hallway. The name 'Dukhiram' and mentions of Aarav pricked her attention. Through the crack, she absorbed details that commanded her concern.

That evening, as shadows stretched across the room, LM settled into his study. The weight of his empire lay spread across the mahogany table like a general's map before battle. A single platinum record glimmered from a shelf, an emblem of long-fought fortunes. Between his fingers, a Cuban cigar smouldered, its smoke curling through the air in tandem with his tangled strategies.

He had always despised his birth name, Neelavo, a gift from his father that felt like a curse. LM, or simply "Lord," felt more fitting—a mask of power and control that buried the past. Now, this girl, this outsider with her cursed grey-blue eyes, had intruded upon his carefully constructed world, a fissure threatening to unravel everything he had built.

He surfaced from his brooding to find Su perched stiffly on the leather couch across from him, her posture rigid.

"What are you doing here?" His voice dripped with disapproval, eyes cold as winter stones.

Su straightened, fingers laced tight to still their trembling. After years spent shrinking into silence, she was finally ready to speak for her son.

"We need to talk, LM."

"We have nothing to discuss. If you want money for shopping or charity, talk to the accountant."

"This is about Aarav."

His head snapped up, eyes narrowing dangerously. "What about my son?"

Su drew a breath. "I heard you with Dukhiram. I know about the girl."

LM's face froze, the dangerous calm before an eruption. He set his coffee cup down with slow, deliberate care.

"You were eavesdropping."

"I was protecting my son. Something I should have done years ago."

"Your son?" LM barked out a bitter laugh. "Heir to everything I've built. That tribal girl will ruin us all."

"She's just a girl in love." Su's voice gained strength. "She's done nothing wrong."

"She exists," LM snarled, stepping forward. "That's crime enough."

Su shrank back as he approached, every muscle taut, old instincts urging her to flee. Yet the memory of Aarav's joyful face, the spark in his eyes when he spoke of the girl, anchored her determination. She lifted her chin, defying the urge to retreat, and stood her ground. "Aarav will never forgive you."

LM loomed closer. "He'll thank me once he sees her poison."

"Like you saved yourself?" Su's voice was barely audible but cutting deep. "By destroying everyone who stood in your way?"

For a moment, for a heartbeat, something flickered in LM's eyes—a fleeting shadow of the man he could have been before power devoured him. But it vanished almost instantly.

"And if you interfere with my plans again," he said quietly, his voice more dangerous than any shout, "you'll discover there are worse things than what you've already endured."

Su pushed herself up on unsteady legs, clutching the chair for balance. She knew she had lost, but also that she had finally fought back. At the door, she hesitated, then turned for one last look.

"She makes him happy. Isn't that enough?"

LM offered no reply. He had already turned away, mind sinking back into the cold calculations that had built his empire—and would now be wielded to shatter a young girl's future.

In the hush of his study, surrounded by trophies to his ambition, the Lord of Music plotted his next move in a game where love was always the first to fall.

Chapter 43

The Other Woman's Heart

Maya jolted awake to the shrill ring of the landline by her bed, dread crashing through her like cold water. The phone's piercing ring echoed off the metal window grille, vibrating a half-empty glass on her nightstand. That sound, sharp and relentless, always meant LM uncle. That call, cutting through the quiet of Monday morning, sent a chill racing down her spine.

Had Uncle discovered her frantic attempts to break the delicate, knotted tie that still linked her to Aarav—her childhood companion, her first love?

Maya pushed herself upright, her long dark hair spilling over her shoulders, eyes fixed on the clamouring phone. All her life, she had believed Aarav belonged to her. Yet now, with her pillow still damp from last night's tears, she faced a bitter realization: perhaps the love had always been hers alone.

"Hello, uncle," she said softly into the receiver, voice still thick with sleep and unshed tears.

"Maya, dear," LM's voice came through the line, unusually gentle. "How are you, my child?"

"I'm fine, uncle. Is everything alright? Papa isn't home—he's at the clinic."

"I called to speak with you, Shona Ma." That's what LM called her—beloved daughter-in-law. "I heard some news about Aarav."

Maya's grip tightened on the phone. "What kind of news, Uncle?"

There was a pause, a slight tremor in his breath betraying the mask of sternness he usually wore. "He's been seen with a girl. A tribal girl from the Northeast. They seem quite... close."

The phone line buzzed with silence.

Uncle's words hit Maya like stinging slaps. She had sensed it—noticed Aarav's faraway smiles, the shadows that crept across his face, the ache of his silence when he didn't call. But hearing her fears spoken aloud broke something inside her, scattering the fragile hope she had clung to.

"Maya? Are you there?"

"Yes, uncle," she whispered, fighting back tears. "I... I know it all."

"This is exactly what I was afraid of," LM's voice took on a paternal tone. "You know how much your father and I have hoped... how we have always believed that you and Aarav are meant to be together."

Maya closed her eyes, remembering all the times she had tried to bring up this very topic with Aarav. Both their fathers wished for them to be together. But Aarav had always deflected, saying they were too young, that they should focus on their studies.

Had he been avoiding the conversation because he knew? Because he had never seen her as anything more than a friend?

"Uncle," Maya said carefully, "maybe Aarav just needs time to realize—"

"No," LM interrupted, voice firm. "This girl has bewitched him. I've seen her type before—these Northeast girls with their exotic looks and

their manipulative ways. She's using her witch-like beauty to trap my son."

Maya flinched at his words, though a secret, trembling part of her echoed them. She had seen Pakhi—those stormy grey-blue eyes and ethereal beauty that seemed to belong to another world. Maya knew people admired her own olive skin and delicate features, but next to Pakhi's spellbinding presence, her beauty felt suddenly small and ordinary.

"What can I do, Uncle?" she asked, hating how small her voice sounded.

"Fight for what is already woven into our families," LM said intensely. "Come and see him. Remind him of who he really is, where he comes from. Make him remember the girl who's always been by his side."

"And if he's really in love with her?"

LM's laugh was cold and bitter. "Love? Shona Ma, what he thinks is love is just infatuation. She's probably using him for his money and status. These tribal girls are clever—they know how to trap wealthy boys from noble families."

Maya sat in silence, the heaviness in her chest making the air feel thick and difficult to breathe. The idea of Aarav slipping away from her was like a shadow that loomed over her thoughts.

"I'll think about it, uncle," she said quietly.

"Don't think too long, Ma. Every day you wait, she sinks her claws deeper into my son."

After LM ended the call, Maya remained frozen on her bed, eyes locked on the silent phone. Beyond her window, Kolkata stirred to life: the clink of teacups, vendors' shouts, the first growl of traffic. Yet inside her room, time seemed to stop.

Did beauty really decide everything? What about the years stitched together by memory—her, Aarav, and Shubho—bound by trust, laughter, and the quiet approval of their families? Wasn't love meant to bloom in the gentle spaces between shared jokes and old grief, not in the sudden spark of a stranger's face?

She thought of Shubho again, sweet Shubho who would never look at another girl the way he looked at her. Was that the same kind of look she had been giving Aarav all these years? Had he understood and chosen to ignore it, just as she had been unconsciously ignoring Shubho's devotion?

She had asked Su Auntie about his behaviour, Maya remembered, her dark eyes clouding with unknown fear. Su Auntie had always told her to be patient, that Aarav would come around, that their families' wishes would eventually align with their hearts.

Maya brushed away fresh tears. The choice before her was stark: battle for the boy she had always thought was her fate, or surrender and let this other girl claim what Maya had always believed was hers by right.

Each morning, she stationed herself across from their college, concealed behind the pillars of the neighbouring building. She watched Aarav arrive early, his face transformed by a joy she had never witnessed, open and unguarded. He lingered by the gate, checking his phone, nervously raking his fingers through his hair, waiting for Pakhi to appear.

And when Pakhi finally appeared, Maya's heart fractured a bit more with every encounter. Aarav seemed to ignite in her presence, reaching for Pakhi's hand instinctively, their eyes locked as if nothing else existed. They moved through the world oblivious to stares, whispers, and to Maya, hidden across the street, tears slipping silently down her cheeks.

She watched them, day after day, their bodies close, Aarav's hand gentle on Pakhi's back, private words making them laugh as if nobody else existed. Their happiness seemed to create an unbreakable bubble,

one she could only observe from outside, pressed against its invisible walls with a hollow ache in her chest.

You don't belong in this world, the thought whispered, relentless. *Never—not once—had she felt she was part of that world with Aarav.*

The sharpest pain was not in losing Aarav, but in seeing, at last, with blinding clarity, that she had never really possessed his heart at all.

As the realization washed over her, Maya reached instinctively for the carved wooden elephant on her nightstand, a keepsake Aarav had given her when they were children. It was small, the wood darkened by age and countless moments clutched in her palms during times of doubt. In that fragile moment, she knew this token was more than a memory—it was a choice.

Would she continue to hold onto a past that had never truly been hers?

After a long moment of contemplation, she gently placed the elephant back.

Maya resolved to confront the truths about her emotions and intentions. She needed to see Aarav face-to-face, not to reclaim an imagined love, but to free herself from the lingering hopes that had tethered her heart. She needed to look into his eyes and see if there was any trace of the boy who had once promised they would always be friends, always be there for each other.

Even if the truth shattered her heart into pieces, she needed to know.

Chapter 44

The Architecture of Ambition

October 2022

LM stood on his third-floor terrace, surveying his kingdom. The gardens spread in flawless geometry; South Kolkata's coveted lights shimmered beyond—a constellation he had claimed. This was his palace. His empire.

Inside, the mood lingered heavily from Maya's recent departure. Her eyes had shone with tears and hope. "Marriage will unite two families who have been together since childhood," she had whispered, voice betraying uncertainty.

LM nodded with a reassuring smile. "You're destined for greatness with us, Maya. Together, we'll reshape everything."

She is such a good girl, easily shaped. Soon, she would be his daughter-in-law. The merger with her father's company would secure his reign over the entertainment world for another generation.

It had all been so carefully planned. So meticulously orchestrated.

That sense of order was disrupted when a tribal girl appeared on his threshold. Her eyes were stormy gray, challenging everything LM believed in. Her presence was like a gale-force wind threatening to tear through the calm facade he had maintained.

LM's hands tightened on the railing until his knuckles blanched. Twenty years of construction, undone by a grey-eyed girl from the hills orbiting his son.

He forced his breath steady, determined to plot rather than lash out. *Emotion was a chink in the armor. Emotion had destroyed his father.*

His father: a drunk who dragged their family name through the gutters of North Kolkata. LM still recalled that house—the stench of stale alcohol, decay, and rotting dreams. The ancestral mansion's walls crumbled, rooms emptied, furniture sold off piece by piece to feed addiction.

"The Mukherjees were once great," his mother used to whisper, face hollow with shame. "Your grandfather was respected. Your great-grandfather had the ear of the British Raj."

But his father had squandered it all. Horses. Women. Drink. The sacred trio of upper-class ruin.

He would never be like his father. He would rebuild what had been lost. He would make the name Mukherjee mean something again.

But to do that, he had to become someone unrecognizable—even to himself.

A sudden memory arose unbidden—that morning in early 2001, when the final bankruptcy notice arrived. His father was too drunk to open the envelope. His mother was weeping silently in the kitchen. He was twenty-three years old, standing in the ruins of their drawing room, feeling the old life die inside him.

The banks would take the house. The creditors would take everything else. There was nothing left.

Except for opportunity.

He had been at the music college then, surrounded by dreamers and idealists convinced that talent sufficed. Fools, every one of them.

But he learned a priceless lesson: *people pay for dreams, and even more for the illusion that dreams can come true.*

The music college provided him with access to raw talent. Desperate artists would sign anything for a shot at fame. Most importantly, he discovered a rival whose talent couldn't be ignored.

That rival's music became the bedrock of everything that came next.

LM didn't let himself think of the name. Names had power. Names created connections. Better to think of it as "the acquisition." A business transaction. One person's loss, another's gain.

The stolen compositions were brilliant. When he released them as his own, the industry buzzed. Critics hailed a "new voice," "fresh yet timeless."

The money followed fast. Record deals. Production contracts. Artists clamoring to work with "the genius behind the sound."

He invested every rupee with precision. Not in pleasure, like his father, but in power: artists, equipment, producers, profitable ventures.

Within a year, he had a modest flat in South Kolkata. By the second, he founded the House of Lords. By the third, he was well on his way to becoming a mogul.

The old house in North Kolkata fell at the end of 2002. He watched from afar. As the wrecking ball shattered those walls, regret surged—then relief. *The past is finally dead.*

By then, he'd already secured land in the city's most prestigious enclave. He bought it with money he'd earned: stolen, manipulated, extorted, but claimed through his own cunning.

The palace took three years to build. Every brick was set with purpose. Every room radiated triumph.

His marriage was the only spontaneous decision in his life, compelled by the violent passion he felt toward Sanjana. Though they were already bankrupt, he married her in 2002. Su conceived immediately, and he sent her to her parents' house without revealing the truth, only telling her he would be leaving for the USA to pursue his master's degree. During those years, he resolved all necessary issues and brought Aarav and Su to his new house. LM Palace.

Su served her purpose: beautiful, suitable, musically accomplished, and simple to mould. She gave him a son and respectability. Her silence, enforced by fear, endured.

But now, that girl had arrived and stirred something dangerous in Su—an old hope he thought he had crushed long ago, a subtle shift he could sense but not quite foresee.

Maternal instinct. The urge to protect her child, even from his father.

LM's phone buzzed. A message from his private investigator following the tribal girl.

Subject returned to PG at 19:47. No unusual activity. Relationship with the target's son appears intact.

He deleted the message and stared out at his empire.

This palace was the monument to twenty years of calculated conquest. The farmhouse—where his son dared bring the tribal girl—marked his reach beyond Kolkata. The Mumbai apartment signaled his Bollywood ties. The Delhi properties, his political grasp.

Every brick, every deed, every asset was a testament to his refusal to end up like his father.

Maya's family company was next. The merger would double his market share. Aarav's marriage to Maya would bind everything together—family, business, legacy. Perfect symmetry.

Then that girl entered with her strange eyes, her mountain accent, her ignorance of the rules. Aarav—his careful, obedient son—looked

at her as if she were the answer to a question LM never knew he was asking.

It was unacceptable.

He replayed his earlier conversation with Maya. He saw her face light up when he called her "daughter-in-law," remembered the hunger in her eyes when he promised Aarav would be hers.

She believed him because she wanted to. Because she needed to. Because he'd given her exactly the right mixture of validation and manipulation to turn her into his weapon.

Just as he had done with so many before.

The artists who'd signed away their rights for pennies. The producers who thought they were partnering with him, only to find themselves subsumed. The politicians he'd bought with campaign contributions and blackmail material. The journalists who wrote what he wanted because refusing meant losing access.

His empire was never built on music. Music was only the vehicle.

His empire was built on understanding desires and using that power.

His father chased pleasure and fell. LM pursued power and built an empire.

The difference was discipline. Vision. The cold resolve to do whatever it took.

. First, he had to pry her from Aarav. He had to make his son see that some loves were impossible, that duty and family always outranked emotion.

Just as he had learned long ago, when he abandoned his old life and built this one from stolen songs and relentless ambition.

The night air cooled his face. Below, his driver washed the Mercedes. In the garden, the mali trimmed the roses. Inside, Su was likely in her prayer room, seeking comfort from a God who never shielded her from her husband's violence.

And somewhere in a modest PG in a less prestigious corner of the city, that tribal girl was likely holding his son's hand, making promises they both believed in.

Promises made for failure.

LM had never had that luxury. He'd felt only hunger. That hunger for success, for power, for revenge against his father's legacy—leaving no space for softer emotions to take root.

That hunger built this empire. And that same hunger would defend it from anyone who dared to take it away, even if it meant someone else's happiness.

Especially then.

Because LM learned long ago that happiness was a snare. Love softened you. Love exposed you. Only things that could be measured, controlled, possessed—power, wealth, respect—were worth having.

This palace. These properties. Each one a pillar of his empire.

These were real. These would endure.

Everything else was just emotion, and emotion was the undoing of weak men.

LM turned from the terrace and strode into his study. There was work waiting. Plans to sharpen. Pressure points to find.

He had built an empire once, out of nothing. The architecture of his ambition was too precise to be toppled by something as fleeting as love.

Or was it?

As shadows lengthened across the terrace, a nagging thought surfaced—*what if the heart, too, knew how to wield power in ways he could not foresee? Could he have overlooked a flaw in his plans, a single step that might fracture the foundation he believed unassailable?*

In that quiet moment, the hint of doubt lingered in the air.

Chapter 45

Secrets and Sisterhood

Billy's hand trembled slightly as she touched the doorknob, each heartbeat echoing the tender memory of Aarav's kisses. She floated home on a cloud of happiness after their day together. His kisses still danced on her lips, her skin humming with the warmth of his embrace. All she wanted was to collapse into bed and relive every sunlit second at the farmhouse.

Ana and Anjali Mashi's voices floated from the living room like a gentle current. The air brimmed with the aroma of tea, the delicate clink of cups threading through their words. Billy crept forward, every step a silent plea to stay unseen.

She had almost made it to the staircase when she heard her name.

"Billy? Is that you, dear?" Anjali Mashi's voice carried from the living room.

Billy forced a smile. "Yes, Mashi. I'm just going upstairs to freshen up."

"Come here first," Ana called, warm and friendly. "Tell us about your day."

Billy entered the living room, fingers combing through her wild hair in a futile attempt to tame it. She quickly wiped at her smudged lipstick.

"How was your temple visit?" Anjali Mashi asked, studying Billy's face with keen eyes.

"It was... meaningful," Billy said, settling into a chair. "Thakur Maa was very kind."

"Us?" Ana smiled knowingly. "Was it someone special?"

"Yes, with Aarav. He knows the temple well," Billy admitted.

Prii exploded onto the landing, bounding down the stairs with almond eyes sparkling and long, straight hair trailing behind her like a victory flag. She landed beside Billy, breathless and buzzing with excitement.

"Billy! Perfect timing! I have the most wonderful news!"

Billy sprang up, drawn by Prii's infectious energy. "Prii?"

But as Prii really looked at her friend, her own news slipped from her mind. Billy seemed to glow, her grey-blue eyes sparkling, cheeks flushed with happiness, her whole face lit up with secret joy.

"Oh my God," Prii breathed. "You look absolutely luminous."

"She does," Ana agreed. "That's the glow of love."

Billy's cheeks burned as she blushed furiously. "Don't be ridiculous—"

"Billy," Prii said softly, concern and wonder on her face. "Where were you today?"

The three friends exchanged a look, and Billy realized there was no use pretending. These girls saw through her better than anyone.

"We went to his family's farmhouse," Billy admitted quietly. "After the temple."

"And?" Ana prompted.

Billy's voice faded as a single vivid memory washed over her—the sound of Aarav singing as the sun dipped below the horizon. In that

moment, she finally understood what it meant when people talk about souls connecting.

Prii sank into a chair, her own news forgotten as she took in Billy's confession. The innocence she'd always seen in Billy had changed, replaced by something deeper and more complex.

"Billy," Prii said carefully, love and concern evident in her voice, "you know I love you like a sister. But are you sure about this? If your parents find out—"

"I know," Billy burst out, her voice ringing with new steadiness. "I know it's fast, and it sounds wild. But Prii, with him, everything just fits. All the family secrets, all the questions that haunt me—they melt away when I'm with him. For the first time, I feel truly understood. I finally feel... seen."

Ana and Prii exchanged a look. Both came from families deeply rooted in Naga traditions, which held strong opinions about suitable marriages and cultural preservation.

"Your parents," Ana said gently. "Have you thought about how they'll react?"

Prii finally remembered her news, but looking at her friend's determined expression, she wondered if this was still the right time to share it.

"Billy," she said slowly, "what if I told you that some of those family secrets might be more important than you realize?"

"What do you mean?" Billy asked, voice sharpening with interest.

Prii hesitated, then made a decision. "The news I wanted to share—I got a scholarship. A full scholarship to study journalism at Jadavpur University. And part of my acceptance letter mentioned investigating historical injustices in the Northeast. They specifically mentioned the Hornbill Hearth—a clandestine group believed to protect students during times of unrest."

Billy went very still. "The Hornbill Hearth?"

"You've heard of it?"

"I... no. I mean, maybe. The name sounds familiar, but I can't place it."

Ana leaned in. "It protected Northeast students from violence."

A chill slid down Billy's spine. Another piece of her family's puzzle had surfaced, another thread she couldn't yet unravel.

"Why mention it in your acceptance letter?" Billy asked.

"They want me to research it. Find what happened and where people are now." Prii looked at Billy. "And I think your family is connected."

A heavy silence filled the room as the weight of their unspoken truths pressed in. The implications of Prii's revelation were overwhelming, casting shadows over Billy's perfect day. Her newfound love, her dreams for the future—all seemed suddenly fragile.

If her family was indeed linked to the Hornbill Hearth, her story could be more dangerous and complicated than she had ever imagined.

As dusk settled around them, a shiver of unease swept over Billy. Her world felt suddenly breakable, as if hidden secrets might shatter everything she believed.

What would she be willing to sacrifice for love?

The question echoed in her mind, urging her to find answers amidst the uncertainty.

Chapter 46

A Daughter's Pilgrimage

November 2022

Billy awoke to gentle golden sunlight spilling through the PG's windows, her heart weighed down. She closed her eyes, nearly tasting the crisp mountain air and hearing the distant hornbill's call. She longed for the days she wandered Dan Uncle's palace in Naga dress, proudly guiding visitors through Kohima.

But now, Kolkata claimed her focus. The city held a mystery she was determined to unravel: the truth about her mother and her own heritage.

"I came here to find out the past," she whispered to the ceiling. "The past that was always hushed in our house."

Even Dan Uncle had guarded secrets. Only by pressing him again and again did she pry out a few bitter truths.

"Why won't anyone tell me about Ma's family?" she'd asked him one evening in his library, surrounded by political memoirs and historical texts.

"Billy my darling girl, some stories are better left buried." His voice had been heavy with old pain. "Your parents have their reasons."

"But I have a right to know. It's my heritage too."

Dan Uncle had looked at her with wise, tired eyes. "Rights and wisdom don't always align, child. Sometimes protecting someone means keeping them in the dark."

But Billy refused to give up. Bit by bit, Dan Uncle let slip fragments about her mother's old home, about the lanes of north Kolkata. Only after much coaxing did Anjali Mashi, her mother's friend and distant cousin, finally share the address.

Then came the day at the temple when she met her Dida, the revered Thakur Maa. The meeting left Billy in tears for two weeks, unable to explain the ache to Ana or Prii.

Something in the old woman's gaze—recognition, yearning, a love so fierce it unsettled her—made Billy feel an immediate bond, as if she had always been searching for this woman without realizing it.

"I will come back," she'd promised Thakur Maa, meaning it with every fiber of her being. "I promise."

And now, that day had finally arrived.

Billy sat up in bed, resolve hardening within her. She would go alone. As much as she cherished Aarav, this was a journey she needed to face alone.

This was her chance to understand herself, to unravel why her parents kept so many secrets.

She rose quietly, preparing for what felt less like a visit and more like a pilgrimage. She selected a simple yet graceful salwar kameez, honouring the temple while staying true to herself.

As she braided her hair, silent questions circled in her mind: *Why did Ma weep in the dark like gentle rain that wouldn't stop? Why had Pa's music faded, leaving only echoes? Why did Dan Uncle skirt certain memories, his eyes flickering away as though to hide from a past he didn't want her to see?*

"Today," she told her reflection, "I will begin to uncover the answers."

Later that morning, the temple pulsed with devotion. Devotees waited for Debi Darshan after the morning pooja, while the bhog kitchen buzzed with preparations. The scent of rice, dal, and vegetables mingled with incense and flowers.

Pakhi's grey-blue eyes scanned the courtyard, searching for Thakur Maa.

But as she moved deeper into the temple, unease crept into her chest. The simple white cotton asana stood vacant. The brass diya flickered in the corner, casting shadows on walls lined with faded photographs.

"Dida?" Pakhi's voice trembled. "Thakur Ma, are you here?"

Only silence answered.

"She's not here, Ma."

Pakhi turned to see Kamala, the elderly temple keeper, cradling a brass plate of wilting marigolds.

"She promised she would wait for me," Pakhi whispered, her voice cracking.

Kamala's clouded yet piercing eyes searched Pakhi's face. "Thakur Ma has been very ill, Ma. She has not come down in two weeks. The fever comes and goes."

"But she promised! She will tell me the unknown stories I should know." Pakhi's grey-blue eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

Kamala finished softly. "But Ma, she is upstairs in her room. Still very weak, but perhaps she will see you today. Wait here."

Kamala slipped away, and Pakhi caught the sound of muffled voices above. When Kamala returned, a tall man followed—the same gentleman Dida had introduced before.

"Raja Mama," Pakhi said softly, touching her forehead in respect.

Raja offered a gentle smile, his greying beard carefully trimmed, his white kurta immaculate. "Pakhi, Ma. Thakur Ma is asking for you. She says she has been waiting, even through her illness." Concern coloured his voice. "But you must understand, she is fragile. Do not tire her too much."

Pakhi's shoulders shook, hope and anxiety swirling within her. "Is she well enough to talk?"

Raja exchanged a glance with Kamala before nodding slowly. "She specifically asked me to bring you upstairs when you came. She said the time has come for you to know." He gestured toward the narrow staircase. "Come. But remember, speak softly. Her strength comes and goes like the tide."

Kamala reached out, gently brushing Pakhi's cheek. "Today, you may finally understand the storms."

Pakhi's breath hitched. With her heart pounding, she followed Raja up the narrow stairs, every step drawing her nearer to the truth she had chased her whole life. Her mind was a whirlwind—fear mixed with hope, apprehension tangled with desire.

A sudden creak beneath her foot jolted her senses. The sound, like a tender yet haunting note, echoed in her mind, reminiscent of her mother's lullaby—a gentle reminder of nights wrapped in whispered songs and unspoken secrets.

Behind her, temple bells rang out for the afternoon prayers, their echoes filling the chambers like a summons to something sacred and unavoidable.

Chapter 47

The Weight of Truth

November 2022

The corridor seemed to stretch endlessly, lined with wooden doors bearing brass nameplates tarnished with age. Some rooms stood empty, their doors ajar to reveal glimpses of covered furniture and dancing dust motes. Others were sealed shut, holding secrets that might never see daylight again.

"It takes fifteen minutes to walk from the main temple to here," Raja Mama murmured. "Fifteen minutes to travel from the present into the past. Thakur Ma says this journey prepares the soul for whatever truth awaits."

Finally, they stopped before a door that seemed no different from the others, yet Pakhi could sense something emanating from within—a presence both gentle and powerful.

Raja Mama turned to her, his expression serious. "Ma, before you knock, remember—Thakur Ma is very weak. But more than that, the truths you seek about your mother may not be the truths you expect. Some stories change us simply by being heard."

Pakhi nodded, her throat gone dry. "I understand. But I can't live with questions anymore. Whatever she tells me, I'm ready."

"Are you certain? Once you know, you cannot unknow. Once you hear, you cannot unhear."

"Yes," she whispered, then stronger, "Yes, I'm ready."

Raja Mama stepped back, giving her space to approach alone. She raised her hand and knocked gently.

Thak. Thak. Thak.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. Silence stretched for what felt like an eternity.

Then, from within the stillness, the gentle scrape of a wooden chair filled the air, and Pakhi caught a faint whiff of sandalwood.

"Come in, child. I have been waiting for you."

Abha had been resting when Raja's gentle voice called to her. "Thakur Maa, the young woman has returned. The one you've been waiting for."

Abha's weary eyes suddenly shone with happiness. "Help me, Raja Baba. Ask her to wait. I want to receive her properly."

Raja quickly arranged the pillows so she could sit upright with dignity. When Pakhi entered, her grey-blue eyes immediately filled with concern.

"Thakur Maa, are you unwell? I'm so sorry to disturb you."

"Sit, Ma, sit," Abha insisted, patting the space beside her. Raja poured fresh water into a silver glass, adding mishri and mouri. "Drink this, child. You have travelled far."

Pakhi accepted the glass gratefully and settled beside Abha.

"Thakur Maa," Pakhi whispered with reverence.

"No, Ma." Abha's weathered hand reached to cup Pakhi's cheek. "Call me Didun. I am your Didun."

Pakhi's eyes widened in shock. "My... my Didun? But how—do you know? I never told you anything."

"The day you entered our temple courtyard, I recognized you. You were Devika's daughter. I could see her in every gesture, every expression."

Pakhi's hand flew to her mouth. "Devika? My mother's name is Priya."

"Priya was her nickname, Pakhi. Her real birth name was Devika. Devika Mukhopadhyay." Abha's eyes filled with tears that had waited eighteen years to fall. "She was my daughter. That makes you my granddaughter."

The silver glass slipped from Pakhi's nerveless fingers. Raja caught it before it shattered. Pakhi fought to steady herself, overwhelmed by the room spinning with revelation.

"But... but Didun, how is this possible? Ma never told me..."

"Later, Anjali came to see me," Abha continued, her voice gaining strength. "She visited the week after you did and confirmed what my heart already knew. Anjali confided in me, though your Ma has never spoken about us. She probably doesn't know Anjali found me or that we've been in touch for years, watching over you from a distance."

"You really are my grandmother?"

"Yes, my golden bird. But you must understand, Ma. Much shame is associated with your parents' love story. So much pain and sacrifice. Are you prepared to hear it all?"

Pakhi took a shuddering breath, her hands trembling in her lap. "I have strength, Didun. I've been searching for this truth my whole life."

Raja returned with prasad and gholer shorbot, but Pakhi could barely touch the sacred offerings as Abha began to speak.

"Devika—your mother—was one of the most beautiful and talented girls in our family." Abha's eyes grew distant with memory. "A classical singer of the Rampurana gharana. An ethereal beauty who knew all the poojas and chanting her father taught her. He was so devoted to her that he even planned to perform the Janau ceremony for her—a ritual usually done for Brahmin boys. He believed she was part of Devi Parvati, born during Navratri after many years of our prayers."

Abha's voice cracked. "He had already arranged her marriage with a sacred Brahmin royal family in Orissa. Everything seemed perfect. But then your father came into her life and changed everything."

Pakhi's heart clenched, recognizing the same passion that had driven her own feelings for Aarav.

"Neev, her friend from college who visited regularly, warned us about this tribal boy. 'He's trouble, Thakur Moshai,' Neev would say. 'These outsiders don't understand our traditions.' But we trusted Devika."

Abha looked directly at Pakhi. "When your grandfather questioned her about these rumors, I defended her. I told him these were false stories, that maybe Neev had some ulterior motive."

The old woman's hands clenched into fists. "Then came that dreadful week. For ten days, she begged us for permission to visit Shantiniketan for a special music program. We said yes."

Abha's voice dropped to a whisper. "Later, we found out she had gone with Rick. She spent the night there and came back without letting us know anything about it."

Pakhi felt her world tilting. Her mother—her devoted, spiritual mother—had eloped with her father for a night?

"The next day, she came back sad and haunted. She wouldn't eat, wouldn't speak. We could see something terrible had happened."

Abha's tears fell freely now. "That night, your mother took the keys to the temple vault and stole all Goddess Kali's jewellery—every

precious ornament offered to the divine mother over generations. She ran away with your father."

The prasad slipped from Pakhi's nerveless fingers. "No. Ma would never—"

"The next day, newspapers were full of the scandal." Abha's voice was relentless. "Your father had stolen music from Neev and published them himself. He was caught taking not just the music but several other valuable objects from his studio. He was arrested."

Pakhi's breath came in short gasps. "That's not true. Pa isn't a thief—"

Abha's voice softened. "I don't know what the truth is, beta. I only know what the newspapers said and what the police told us. Your mother used the temple jewellery to bail him out. Then they disappeared together."

"Your grandfather," Abha's voice broke completely, "died three months later. The shame, the grief, the betrayal—it killed him. His heart simply stopped beating one night as he sat in the pooja room, surrounded by the empty places where the goddess's ornaments should have been."

Pakhi was sobbing now, great heaving sobs that shook her entire body. "Didun, please—"

"I tried to find her, your Ma. For years, I tried. I contacted her college friends, I prayed to Ma Kali every single day. But Devika had vanished as if she'd never existed."

Abha reached out with trembling hands and pulled Pakhi close. "And now, after twenty years, here you are. My granddaughter. My Devika's child. Looking at me with grey-blue eyes, carrying her same grace, bearing the consequences of a love that destroyed everything."

They held each other as twenty years of separation, shame, and sorrow poured out in tears that seemed to have no end.

"Does she know?" Pakhi finally whispered against her grandmother's shoulder. "Does Ma know you've been looking for her all these years?"

"No, Ma. She has never tried to contact me. Not once."

Pakhi pulled back, looking into her grandmother's aged face. "She wakes up crying sometimes, Didun. In the middle of the night. I can hear her through the walls. Pa holds her, but the crying doesn't stop."

"Then she remembers," Abha whispered. "Then she knows what she destroyed to save the man she loved."

They sat in silence as the afternoon light faded, two women connected by blood and separated by choices made long ago, finally bridging the gap that had kept them apart for nearly two decades.

The Shattered Girl

As Pakhi stepped away from the temple, memories from her childhood snapped together like shards of glass forming a picture. Her father would sidestep questions about his music. Her mother conjuring distractions whenever Pakhi's curiosity turned to her grandparents. Dan Uncle guiding conversations away from shadows with his gentle phrase: *'Some stories are better left alone.'*

Now Pakhi finally understood. He had been her silent guardian, keeping the darkness of her parents' past at bay, sheltering her from a truth sharp enough to shatter her world.

Tears spilled over and trailed down her cheeks as she wandered through Kolkata's vibrant chaos. When she said goodbye, Didun wept as well—her frail frame bowed beneath eighteen years of regret.

A wave of abhiman surged in Pakhi: hurt, disappointment, and a fierce, protective anger. Yet she could not bring herself to blame this sorrowful woman.

Didun had failed her mother. She should have tried to see the world through her daughter's eyes, to grasp the desperation that had driven Devika to the unthinkable.

"Maybe," Pakhi murmured, "if Didun had chosen faith over judgment, the story might have unfolded differently. Maybe Ma and Pa would have been spared years of suffering."

She was meant to meet Aarav for a concert that evening—a plan that once filled her with joy. Now, the idea of pretending nothing had changed felt unbearable.

She longed for solitude, to curl up on her narrow bed and replay the story piece by piece, hunting for the missing fragments her heart insisted were hidden.

Yet fear began to creep in, darker and more urgent than her need for answers. *What if Aarav refused to be associated with a criminal's daughter?*

She was the daughter of alleged thieves, accused of stealing sacred music and attacking law enforcement. What would Aarav think when he learned the truth? What would his family say?

An imagined line echoed with dread: *'We can't be associated with such scandal.'* Would Aarav's father urge his son to distance himself from disgrace?

She halted, rooted in the middle of a crowded sidewalk as people streamed past her like water around a stone. She felt utterly blank—numb, as if her old self had been washed away.

"Did I do the right thing by coming to Kolkata?" she asked herself. "Maybe Ma was right. Maybe I should never have delved into my parents' past."

Perhaps ignorance had been a gift. Maybe the safe, sheltered world her parents created for her in Kohima was kinder than this harsh awakening.

She remembered her mother's face when she announced her plans to study in Kolkata. Fear had flashed across Priya's features before she masked it with supportive smiles. *Had Ma known this day would come? Had she dreaded her daughter discovering the truth?*

Pakhi stood at a crossroads, both in the city and in her life. The street split into three paths, and she hesitated, uncertain which way to go.

Should she call Aarav and lay the truth bare? Keep digging for evidence that might clear her parents' names? Or simply pack her bags, return to Kohima, and pretend none of this had ever happened?

Or should she listen to her heart, trust in the love that drew her to this city, believe in her parents' devotion, and fight to uncover the truth buried beneath scandal and shame?

As the sun dipped over Kolkata, streaking the sky with gold and crimson, Pakhi made her decision. The air around her seemed to change, growing cooler as a gentle breeze swept through the streets. It was as if the world itself acknowledged her resolve: *she would not run*.

She would not let fear, scandal, or the opinions of others dictate her future.

She would chase the whole truth, whatever the cost. Only then could she claim her future—her life, her love, her legacy.

First, she needed to return home and mourn the innocence she had lost. For eighteen years, she had believed in her parents' goodness. That simple trust was gone, replaced by hard-won wisdom: *even good people can be driven to desperate acts when cornered by fate*.

The real question lingered: what had driven her parents to the edge? And who had set the stage for a choice between love and everything they once held sacred?

Pakhi picked a path and began walking home. Inside her, something new awakened—not just the urge to understand her parents, but a fierce determination to seek justice for what she now believed was a grave wrong done to them.

Chapter 48

The Price of Loyalty

Ana studied her reflection, unsettled by the image staring back. Among her friends, she was considered the unbreakable one, with her thoughts sharp, her movements quick, and her determination impossible to outlast. Yet the mirror showed a different truth. Her mind wandered, questioning, 'If they knew what I'd told Kyan, would anyone still see me this way?' The fear gripped her—losing Kyan's attention or her friends loomed heavily over her shoulders, threatening to unravel the image she had so carefully constructed of herself.

Yet time had quietly transformed her, reshaping the tomboy into a woman and awakening emotions she had never invited or imagined.

She loved Kyan.

She bore her love in silence, each day a quiet ache. With so many girls drawn to Kyan, she doubted she could ever matter. Ana clung to the scraps of his attention like lifelines.

Kyan, with the keen awareness that often comes with beauty, saw her devotion for what it was. He made her his confidante and informant, relying on her to track every detail of their Kolkata lives, especially Billy's secrets.

Ana became his silent observer, chronicling Billy and Aarav's every move, her heart twisting as she watched Kyan's attention drift to others.

Guilt sometimes gnawed at her—Prii and Billy trusted her with their secrets, and she repaid them by delivering every word to Kyan.

Yet if it meant Kyan might value her, even for a moment, the sting of betrayal faded into the background.

In the mirror, insecurity stared back. She had let her hair grow long, hoping the dark waves would soften her, make her seem more like the woman she wished she could be.

Her eyes and skin spoke of her tribal roots, a kinship with Billy, but without Billy's magnetic beauty. Next to her friend, Ana felt invisible.

She would never possess Prii's effortless grace or Billy's captivating charm. The truth of it stung with every glance.

She lingered over her makeup, but no amount of effort could transform her into someone unforgettable.

Sighing, Ana reached for her phone, dread curling in her stomach. She had news to deliver: Billy's tearful return from the temple, her self-imposed isolation, and Prii's new internship at Magnus Media House.

"Hello," she said, and then waited eagerly to hear Kyan's tough, husky voice traveling across the miles from Kohima.

Kyan's voice swept away her guilt, her doubts, even her sense of right and wrong.

"Ana," came Kyan's familiar tone, and despite everything, her heart fluttered. "I've been waiting for your call. Tell me everything."

Ana looked one last time at her plain reflection. "Billy went to the temple alone this morning. And when she came back, she was crying. She's been locked in her room ever since, won't talk to any of us."

"Interesting." Kyan's voice sharpened with interest. "What else?"

"Prii got that internship at Magnus Media House. Subho's father helped her—he's a manager in LM's company."

There was a pause on the other end. "LM's company? You're certain?"

"Yes. Subho told us yesterday. Why? Is that important?"

"Everything is important, Ana. Keep watching. Something is happening. Billy's behaviour suggests she's learning things she wasn't meant to know."

After the call, Ana glimpsed her reflection and saw a stranger—someone she wished she could escape.

A soft knock interrupted her brooding. "Ana? Are you okay?" Billy's voice, muffled through the door.

Ana's heart twisted. Billy, the very friend she had betrayed, was the one reaching out with kindness.

"I'm fine," Ana called back, trying to keep her voice steady. "Just tired."

"I made some tea. Would you like some? I thought we could talk."

The irony stung. Billy, after the irony burned. Billy, raw from her own pain, was now offering comfort, while Ana had spent the day feeding Billy's secrets to someone who wished her harm."

There was a pause. "Okay. But Ana? If you need anything, I'm here. We all are."

When Billy left, Ana sank onto her bed, suffocating beneath the weight of her divided loyalties. She pictured Prii's new beginning, Billy's heartbreak, and the tangled threads binding them all.

Her thoughts drifted to Kyan, far away in the hills, wielding her love like a blade against the only people who had ever truly welcomed her.

Meanwhile, Prii was rushing home after Subho had escorted her from Magnus Media House on her first day of internship. It was Subho's father who had helped her secure this opportunity—a

connection that would prove more significant than any of them realized.

Prii needed this job. Her mother, a teacher, had raised her single-handedly after her father's death in the army. Three generations shared a home, surviving on her mother's modest salary. Prii wasn't wealthy. They were not wealthy, but her mother's dreams soared. That hope had brought Prii to Kolkata, chasing a future brighter than the one she'd known.

Prii recognized the silent ache in Subho's eyes when he glanced at Maya—the same unspoken yearning that haunted so many of their friendships. Her own hardships had taught her patience, and she offered Subho true friendship, which he returned without complication.

When Prii returned to the PG, she found Ana perched on her bed, lost in a vacant stare.

"Ana? What's wrong?"

Ana glanced up, and for a fleeting second, Prii glimpsed something fractured in her friend's gaze. "Nothing. I'm just... thinking," Ana murmured.

"About what?"

"About choices," Ana whispered. "About what we're willing to give up for the things we want most."

Prii sat down beside her, taking her hand. "That sounds heavy. Want to talk about it?"

Ana hovered on the edge of confession—the calls to Kyan, the betrayals, the secrets she had spilled. But Prii's gentle, trusting face silenced her.

"It's nothing," she said finally. "Just one of those days."

"Well, I'm here if you need me," Prii said, squeezing her hand. "We all are. That's what friends do, right?"

Ana nodded, words caught in her throat. Prii's kindness echoed in her mind, sounding more like a rebuke than comfort.

However, today, Kyan had acted differently. His text buzzed urgently in her pocket: 'Ana, tomorrow is crucial. I need you to find out what Billy knows. This is your last chance.'

The ultimatum echoed in her thoughts, a countdown ticking ominously in her decision. Could she go through with it? Did she have a choice?

Chapter 49

The Call of Love

The third missed call ticked like a bomb in Aarav's palm. For three endless days, Pakhi had vanished from his world, leaving him stranded in a sea of questions. The silence gnawed at him, each minute dragging on like a lifetime.

He had tried everything—calling until his fingers ached, waiting outside the PG like a hopeless romantic, even sending messages through Ana and Prii. Nothing. Pakhi had slipped from his life so completely it was as if she had been a dream all along.

When he went to the PG yesterday, Anjali Mashi met him at the door with sympathetic eyes. "She's not well, son. She's been staying in her room, not coming down, barely eating. I think she needs some time."

But time for what? What had changed? Only days ago, they were weaving dreams at the farmhouse. Now, all that remained was this bewildering, suffocating silence.

Desperation pulled Aarav under, making music and studies impossible. Sleep eluded him. Even the food tasted hollow. Everywhere he turned, Pakhi lingered—her voice, her laughter, her presence an ache in every empty space.

He ached for those grey-blue eyes that had become his universe. For Pakhi, he would surrender everything—music, family, comfort. Without her, the world faded to insignificance.

Suddenly, his phone buzzed. Aarav's heart leaped as he saw Pakhi's name, and he answered before the first ring had finished.

"Pakhi! My Pakhi!" His voice broke with relief and joy. "I was going crazy without hearing from you. Are you okay? What happened? Why haven't you—"

"I'm ready to meet you now, Aarav." Her voice came through quiet yet determined, carrying a heaviness he had never heard before. "I... just needed some silence."

"Where can we meet?"

"Come to my house, Pakhi." He didn't care about propriety or conventions. He needed to see her, to hold her, to understand what had been tormenting her. "Please."

"Your house? Can I? What about your family?"

"Of course you can. Ma likes you, and in my life, she's the person whose feelings matter to me most—after you. She's been worried about you too."

There was a pause, and Aarav could almost hear Pakhi gathering her courage.

"Okay. I'll reach there within an hour."

"Pakhi, wait—"

But she had already ended the call, leaving him clutching his phone, torn between relief and dread. She was coming. After three days of torment, she was finally returning to him.

Yet something in her voice—a trembling weight, a quiet storm on the verge of breaking—gnawed at his hope.

Whatever haunted his Pakhi, whatever had built this wall of silence, he would find a way to break through. He would restore the light in her grey-blue eyes and the melody of her laughter.

Because some loves demand to be fought for, no matter the price.

"Ma! Pakhi is coming here to meet me," Aarav announced, finding Su in the living room.

Su looked up from her book, her face immediately showing concern. "But Aarav, your father has a lot of reservations about unknown people coming to the house without his permission. You know how he feels about—"

"But Ma! This is Pakhi! You know what she means to me."

Su's heart clenched as she saw the pain in her son's eyes. She understood his love for Pakhi and couldn't ignore the genuine connection they shared. Her fear of LM battled with her desire to support Aarav.

"I know, Jishu, but you know how your father can be about protocol, about proper introductions..."

"I haven't met her for three days, Ma." Aarav's voice broke slightly. "I felt like my world had ended. Today she finally called me, and I've invited her here. If Baba has any objection, I will deal with it."

His voice took on a steely resolve that made Su think, with a pang, of LM in his most unyielding moments.

"Whatever he has done with you all these years cannot continue. He cannot do the same with me. I won't let him control my life the way he's controlled yours."

Before Su could answer, the doorbell sliced through the tension. Her stomach knotted with dread. LM was upstairs in his third-floor retreat, but she knew he missed nothing that happened under his roof.

"I'll get it," she said quickly, wanting to be the buffer between Pakhi and any potential confrontation.

Su opened the door, and her heart ached for the young woman before her. Gone was the radiant, confident girl from weeks ago; in her place stood someone hollowed by deep pain.

"Come in, Pakhi dear," Su said gently, ushering her inside and leading her directly to Aarav's room. "I'll make some evening snacks for you both."

As Su rushed to the kitchen, worry churned in her mind. LM's footsteps echoed above, a reminder that it was only a matter of time before he demanded to know who had entered his domain.

In his room, Aarav gazed at Pakhi, feeling his world shift beneath him. What had become of his beautiful, vibrant Pakhi?

Her grey-blue eyes, once alive with mischief, were now dulled by exhaustion, ringed with shadows of sleepless nights. Her rosy glow had faded, leaving her fragile, almost ghostly. Her lips trembled, betraying her struggle to hold herself together.

"Pakhi," he whispered, her name a prayer on his lips.

Without hesitation, he wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly against his chest, as if his embrace could shield her from whatever demons had been tormenting her.

Tears flowed down her cheeks. Each sob shook her, a raw echo of the agony she had borne in silence.

"Pakhi, my Pakhi." His voice was thick with love and concern.

He began gently wiping her tears with his lips, kissing away each drop as if he could absorb her pain into himself.

She trembled in his embrace like a wounded bird, and with every shudder, Aarav felt his heart splintering.

"What happened, my love?" he whispered against her forehead. "What's hurt you so deeply? Please, tell me. Let me help you."

Pakhi drew back to meet his gaze, and what he saw stole his breath: grief, confusion, and a flicker of shame.

"Aarav," she began, voice barely above a whisper. "I went to the temple. I met my grandmother."

"Your grandmother?" Aarav's eyes widened. "But I thought—"

"I didn't know she existed until three days ago." Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "My mother never told me. My father never told me. Everything they've hidden makes me question who I really am."

"What did she tell you?" Aarav asked gently, though he had a terrible feeling the answer would change everything.

"The truth about my parents. About why we live in Kohima. About why Ma never speaks of her family." Pakhi's voice broke. "About what they did to be together."

Pakhi unravelled slowly, each sentence peeling back another layer of her parents' love story, every word heavy with shame and exile. Her voice trembled just above a whisper, while Aarav listened, his heart splintering with every truth she revealed.

"My mother... her real name was Devika Mukhopadhyay," Pakhi began, voice trembling. "She was the daughter of a temple priest, a classical singer, someone who was supposed to marry into another Brahmin family in Orissa."

Tears traced silent paths down her cheeks. Aarav's hands grew damp as he held her, grounding her through the tempest of confession.

"And then she met my father, Rick," Pakhi continued, voice breaking. "The whole debacle began when Rick was approached by Neev, a rising musician who felt threatened by my father's talent. Neev alleged that my father stole his music and claimed it as his own. When confronted, emotions ran high, and in a moment of heated exchange,

Neev was hospitalized. This incident turned into a scandal, painting my parents as the villains."

"Pakhi," Aarav whispered, his voice thick with emotion, but she continued as if she hadn't heard him, as if she needed to expel the poison of these accusations before they consumed her.

"And Ma... my mother stole all the sacred jewellery from the goddess Kali. The temple ornaments that had been offerings for generations. She took everything and ran away with Pa when she was pregnant with me. She used that stolen jewellery to bail him out of jail."

Aarav's world shifted, not from the accusations but from his own helplessness. He watched her shoulders quake with silent sobs, her hands turning cold in his.

"They became criminals," Pakhi sobbed, finally looking up at him with those grey-blue eyes swimming in tears. "My parents stole from temples and hurt others. My grandfather—my Dadu—died three months later, overwhelmed by shame."

Her voice broke entirely. "How can you love someone like me? My life is built on theft, violence, and shame."

The weight of her words hung in the air between them. But as Aarav gazed at Pakhi's tear-streaked face, feeling her tremble in his arms, a sudden clarity washed over him.

None of it mattered—the accusations, the scandal, or the world's merciless judgment.

"Pakhi," he said firmly, cupping her face in his hands and forcing her to look at him. His own eyes were wet now. "Listen to me carefully. Look at me. Look into my eyes and see if you find even a shadow of doubt there."

She stared at him through her tears, searching his face for any sign of hesitation.

"I don't care what they say your parents did," Aarav continued, voice gentle but unwavering. "I don't care what crimes they're accused of.

You are not your parents' past. You are Pakhi—my Pakhi—and that's all that matters to me."

"But Aarav, don't you understand? I'm the daughter of criminals. People who—"

"You're the daughter of two people who loved each other enough to risk everything for it," Aarav interrupted, voice gaining strength. "That doesn't define you as a criminal. It means you exist because of an extraordinary love story. I understand that love now, because that's exactly what I feel for you."

He drew her closer, wrapping his arms around her as if he could shield her from every harsh word, every judgment, every shadow of shame she bore.

"Do you think I could stop loving you because of something that happened eighteen years before I even met you?" he whispered against her hair. "Pakhi, you could tell me your parents were the biggest criminals in the world, and it wouldn't change how I feel about you."

Pakhi's sobs softened as his words sank in. With her face pressed to his chest, she listened to the steady, unwavering rhythm of his heartbeat.

"You really mean that?" she whispered.

"With every fibre of my being," Aarav replied, tilting her chin up so she had to meet his eyes. "Pakhi, I've spent my whole life in a house where love was conditional, where everything came with strings attached. I refuse to let our love be like that."

He brushed away her tears with infinite tenderness. "Our love is not conditional. It's based on two hearts that beat for each other, no matter what storms rage around us."

As Pakhi let his words settle, something remarkable stirred within her. Sharing her burden and being accepted had awakened a fierce determination she never knew she possessed.

"But I don't believe this," she said suddenly, her voice gaining power with each word. She pulled back slightly to look at him directly. "This is not the end of the story, Aarav. There's more—there has to be more. The parents I know couldn't have done these things without reason."

Aarav watched in awe as the fragile, trembling Pakhi transformed before him. She stood taller, her resolve hardening.

"I know my parents," she continued, wiping her own tears now with determined strokes. "They taught me about justice and protecting the innocent. Pa could barely kill a spider without guilt. Ma feeds every stray animal that comes to our door. People like that don't steal from temples and attack police unless something terrible drove them to it."

"What are you saying?" Aarav asked gently, already knowing the answer.

"I'm saying I want to find out what really happened," Pakhi declared, her grey-blue eyes now blazing with determination. "My Didun told me the story everyone believes—the one in the newspapers, the one society repeats. But there are always two sides, aren't there? I've only heard one."

She sprang to her feet and paced the room, energy surging through her. Despair had given way to fierce resolve.

"There are gaps in this story. Why would Ma steal from a temple she cherished? Why would Pa, the gentlest soul, attack the police? Who is Neev, the accuser? And why has no one searched for them in eighteen years?"

Pride and love surged in Aarav as he witnessed her transformation. He crossed to her, resting his hands on her shoulders.

"Then we will search for the truth together. Whatever happened that night, we will uncover it side by side."

"You'd do that?" Pakhi asked, voice softening. "You'd help me dig up a past that might be ugly, complicated, and painful?"

"Pakhi," Aarav said, pulling her close again, "I'd walk through fire for you. Helping you find the truth about your parents? That's nothing compared to how far I'd go to see you smile again."

He tilted her chin up and looked deep into her eyes. "Besides, I have a feeling about this. Your instincts are right—there's more to this story. Something doesn't add up."

Tears welled in Pakhi's eyes once more, but this time they brimmed with gratitude, relief, and a love so deep it left her breathless. "How did I ever get so lucky to find you?" she whispered.

"I think I'm the lucky one," Aarav replied, brushing his lips against her forehead. "I get to love the strongest, bravest, most beautiful woman in the world. A woman who doesn't just accept the stories she's told, who fights for the people she loves, who refuses to be broken by shame that isn't even hers to carry."

He kissed her forehead, then her closed eyelids, then her tear-stained cheeks. "And **I believe in you.** I believe in your parents, and I believe in the truth you're going to find."

"Even if it means standing against the whole world?" she asked.

"Especially then," Aarav replied without hesitation. "Because some loves are worth fighting the whole world for."

Pakhi rose onto her toes and kissed him, pouring gratitude, love, and hope into that single touch. Aarav answered with gentle devotion, wordlessly promising she would never be alone as long as he lived.

When they finally pulled apart, Pakhi rested her forehead against his, their breath mingling in the small space between them.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For not judging. For not running away. For being exactly who you are."

"Thank you for trusting me with this. For letting me be part of your journey."

They stood there for a long moment, wrapped in each other's arms, drawing strength from each other. Night crept in outside, but within

their embrace, true love was discovered—a love that depended not on flawless pasts but on belief in each other's strength.

"We should tell your mother I'm alright," Pakhi said finally, though she made no move to leave his embrace.

"In a minute," Aarav said, tightening his arms around her. "Just let me hold you a little longer."

Pakhi smiled against his chest—her first real smile in three days. "I'm not going anywhere. Not anymore. We're in this together now."

"Together," Aarav confirmed, pressing another kiss to the top of her head. "Whatever comes next—finding the truth, facing my father, dealing with your family's past—we face it together."

As dusk deepened, they held each other close, bracing against the storm ahead. Their love had survived its first true test, not because the past didn't matter, but because they had chosen to face the truth side by side, united against judgment and shame.

In the distance, the faint ringing of temple bells echoed through the evening air—a haunting reminder of the choices between faith and love, a question that still lingered between past and present.

Chapter 50

The Beast Unleashed

LM sensed Pakhi's arrival the instant she crossed his threshold. From above, he caught the gentle hum of conversation and the warmth in his wife's voice as she greeted the girl who, in his mind, was a storm poised to sweep away all he had created.

"Su!" he called out, his voice cutting through the evening air like a blade.

As she stepped into his study, the wild animal lurking beneath LM's polished surface stirred to life. He had overheard her using that same gentle, honeyed voice with the girl—the voice she once reserved for Aarav in his childhood.

That lingering kindness filled him with loathing. *What was it about this tribal girl that drew everyone in?* To him, she was living in danger, threatening everything he had built. She had snatched Aarav away, stealing his son's devotion as completely as if she had spirited him off in the night.

Gazing at Su standing before him, LM felt the old shadows of their twenty-year marriage coil around him. Even after all these years, after every cruelty, she still seemed untouched by the darkness. That purity both drew him in and filled him with disgust.

LM dabbed his damp face with a handkerchief as a familiar craving twisted inside him. *Tomorrow, he resolved, he would visit the farmhouse. He needed to sate his desires and find a new target for the fury swelling within him.*

Su sat wordless across from his desk, hands folded tightly in her lap, gaze fixed on the floor. She had mastered the art of silence, shrinking herself to near invisibility whenever his temper threatened to flare.

"I have called Maya," LM announced, his voice taking on an unexpected gentleness. "She'll be here within the hour."

A heavy ache settled in Su's chest, though her expression remained unreadable. She recognized the pattern—another ploy, another calculated move to shatter her son's happiness.

"You will throw that bitch out of the house," LM continued, his voice taking on the cold edge that meant absolute obedience. "I don't want to see her. I don't want to hear her. I want no trace of her presence in my home."

Su hesitated, the weight of Aarav's presence tugging at her resolve.

"I don't care what she's doing or where she is," LM cut her off sharply. "You will remove her. Now. Before Maya arrives."

Su's thoughts spun desperately. "What should I tell Aarav?"

"Tell him nothing. Let him draw his own conclusions when Pakhi disappears. And when Maya arrives, you will support whatever I decide for our son's future. You will smile and make it clear Maya is the daughter-in-law this family wants and deserves."

LM leaned in, his gaze pinning Su with cold focus.

"I will talk to Maya and Aarav together. You will just support my ideas. Whatever I say or propose, you will agree. Is that understood?"

Su nodded, each movement heavy with sorrow. Her heart splintered for her son, for Pakhi, and for the fragile love about to be crushed. *Defying LM meant risking severe consequences—another night of unspeakable cruelty, the prospect of losing her son forever, or perhaps even harsher reprisals she dared not imagine.*

"Good," LM said, settling back with satisfaction. "And Su? If you even think about warning them, about interfering with my plans in any way, you'll discover there's still a punishment I haven't used on you yet."

The threat lingered in the air, thick and toxic. Su pushed herself up on trembling legs, fully aware she was about to help destroy the last untainted thing in this house: her son's happiness.

As she walked toward the door, LM's voice stopped her one final time.

"Remember, my dear wife," he said softly but with unmistakable menace, "you have exactly ten minutes to get that girl out of my sight. After that, I'll handle the situation myself. And I think we both know how much messier that would be for everyone involved."

The Perfect Trap

Maya slipped into Aarav's room as naturally as breathing, her fingers curling around the doorknob with the confidence of someone who belonged. Since childhood, this space had been their haven.

But today, she froze, stunned by a sight that shattered her routine.

Her childhood sweetheart, her once-upon-a-time Prince Charming, now held that grey-blue-eyed enchantress close. Aarav's lips brushed Pakhi's blushing cheek with featherlight kisses, each one slicing into Maya's heart. Their closeness pressed in on her, suffocating, as Aarav cradled Pakhi like something rare and fragile.

For Maya, this wasn't just an affront; it was the unravelling of a future she had once believed was her destiny.

Hatred blazed through Maya, scorching every thought. She despised Pakhi, loathed them both, the bitterness gnawing at her insides like venom.

Then LM uncle's words echoed in her mind like a cold whisper: *"Never let your enemy see your true motives. Be their friend until you can strike."*

With practiced ease, Maya donned the cheerful mask she had worn so often these past weeks. She rapped on the doorframe, her voice sparkling with false warmth.

"Love birds, I'm here!" she sang out, flashing a grin so pointed it could cut glass.

Aarav looked up, startled, and quickly helped Pakhi straighten herself. "Maya? What are you doing here so late? You hardly come around these days."

His voice held surprise, but also a new wariness Maya had never heard before. *He's shielding her, Maya realized, a fresh wave of hatred crashing over her.*

"Oh, you know how it is," Maya replied lightly, stepping further in. "I was nearby and thought I'd drop in to see my oldest friend."

Pakhi offered a sad, timid smile, igniting another violent surge in Maya. *Why did Pakhi get to play the victim?*

"Hello, Maya," Pakhi said softly. "It's good to see you."

No, it's not, Maya seethed inwardly, but her smile stayed flawless. "Hello, Pakhi. You look... tired. Is everything alright?"

As Su entered, Maya sensed the electric tension in the room. *They've shared something important, Maya realized. Whatever it was, it had drawn them even tighter together, leaving her on the outside.*

Pakhi stood up gracefully, smoothing down her clothes with hands that still trembled slightly. "I should go. Anjali Mashii will be worried."

"Maya," Su said, her voice carefully controlled, "LM uncle has beckoned you."

"Has he? Wonderful. I've been waiting for our little talk."

Su watched, dread curling in her stomach. She had always cared for Maya, the spirited girl who felt like a member of the family. But soon, LM would twist Maya's loyalty, forging it into a blade aimed at Aarav's happiness.

"Maya, just wait here for a moment," Aarav said, moving toward the door. "I'll just walk Pakhi out and then come back."

"Of course," Maya replied sweetly. "Take your time. I'll wait right here."

Aarav moved to leave with Pakhi, but Su acted swiftly. She stepped forward, her hand finding Pakhi's with gentle urgency.

"Let me walk you out, Pakhi dear," Su said quietly. "Aarav can stay with Maya."

Aarav looked confused, but something in his mother's expression made him nod reluctantly. "Alright, Ma. But I'll see you tomorrow, Pakhi?"

Pakhi's gaze locked with his from across the room, and Maya seethed as she witnessed their silent exchange. "Yes," Pakhi whispered. "Tomorrow."

Su guided Pakhi away, then stopped in the hallway, out of Maya's earshot. She turned to the young woman who had captured Aarav's heart.

"Take care, dear," Su said, her voice thick with emotion. "My blessings are always with you. Remember, some of us see your goodness."

Pakhi looked confused by the intensity in Su's voice, but she nodded gratefully. "Thank you, Aunty. For everything."

"Just... be careful, dear," Su whispered, glancing back toward Aarav's room. "Not everyone here wishes you well."

Pakhi slipped away. Su lingered in the hallway, summoning her resolve. Upstairs, LM paced in his study, ready to transform Maya from wounded girl into adversary.

Back in Aarav's room, Maya sat alone, her bright mask sliding away to reveal eyes cold with calculation. *Soon, LM would give her the tools for vengeance.*

The Ultimatum

Aarav drifted back to his room, still wrapped in the warmth of his conversation with Pakhi. But as he pushed open the door, he froze. His father sat inside, a ghost from years past reclaiming forbidden ground.

Since Aarav had claimed his own suite, LM had rarely crossed this threshold. Until now.

Maya sat on the couch beside LM. Aarav's mother was across from them, her hands folded in her lap. He'd seen that exact posture countless times in childhood—the defensive stance she used when LM was on the hunt for a victim.

But what unsettled Aarav most was Maya, nestled close in LM's embrace. She alone could coax tenderness from his father's otherwise impenetrable heart.

"Aarav," LM began without preamble, his voice carrying absolute authority. "We are fixing your engagement with Maya."

The words hit Aarav like a physical blow. "What?"

"I called her here to take her consent, and she has readily accepted," LM continued smoothly, his arm tightening protectively around Maya. "Isn't that right, Maya?"

"Yes, Uncle," Maya replied, her voice soft and submissive, but Aarav caught something glittering in her eyes he had never seen before. "I would be honoured to marry Aarav."

Aarav stared at his childhood friend in disbelief. "Maya, you know that's not possible. I've always thought of you as a friend, nothing more."

"So what?" LM interjected before Maya could respond. "Many friendships have culminated in beautiful marriages. Both our families want this union. It makes perfect sense."

"But I don't want it," Aarav said firmly, his voice gaining strength. "I can't marry someone I don't love."

LM's expression darkened dangerously. "Love? Do you have someone else in mind? Some other girl you think you're in love with?"

The question lingered, a snare waiting to snap. Aarav's thoughts tumbled back to Pakhi—her grey-blue eyes brimming with trust and a love so fierce it ached inside him.

"I..." Aarav began, but the words stuck in his throat.

"Just forget whatever foolish notions you have," LM said coldly. "Our family men are famous for playing with girls, but they marry for family prestige and stability. I was the exception once, and you know the result."

He gestured dismissively toward Su, who flinched as if she had been struck.

"I don't want to discuss my past mistakes," LM continued. "But I won't allow you to repeat them."

Aarav's voice choked with emotion. "This isn't right, Baba. You can't force me to marry someone I don't love."

"Can't I?" LM asked with a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Watch me."

Aarav's words died in his throat. His father's authority weighed heavily on him, suffocating him. He searched his mother's face, pleading for support.

Su's eyes shimmered with tears she refused to let fall. Helplessness carved deep lines into her face. Aarav knew she longed to help, but years of suffering had taught her that standing up to LM only brought more misery.

"So I take your silence as acceptance," LM declared with satisfaction. "Excellent. You can enjoy this month as much as you want, with whoever you want. I heard from Maya that you're all planning to go to

the Hornbill Festival. Go, enjoy yourself. Consider it your bachelor party."

Aarav felt ice in his veins.

"Next week, both families will fix your engagement date," LM continued, standing up. "After that, you're free to go anywhere you like, do anything you want. But Maya is your destination, son. That's final."

"But what if I refuse?" Aarav asked desperately. "What if I simply say no?"

LM paused at the door, and when he turned back, his smile was positively predatory.

"Then you'll discover exactly how much power I have in this city, son. How easily I can make certain people disappear from your life permanently. How simple it would be to ensure that certain... tribal girls... find their lives in Kolkata becoming very, very difficult."

The threat was delivered so casually, so matter-of-factly, that it took Aarav a moment to process what his father had just said.

"You wouldn't," Aarav whispered.

"Try me," LM replied softly. "Just try me and see what happens to anyone who threatens my family's future."

With that, he strode out, Maya trailing after him like a silent shadow. At the threshold, she glanced back at Aarav, her eyes flickering with both triumph and pity.

"I'm sorry it has to be this way," she said quietly. "But some things are meant to be, Aarav. Maybe, one day, you'll understand why I agreed."

After they left, Aarav and Su sat engulfed in heavy silence. His sanctuary had been breached; his father's will stamped on every corner.

"Ma," Aarav said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "What am I going to do?"

Su gazed at her son, realizing he had just learned a bitter truth: love could be crushed by power, and happiness snatched away like a stolen heirloom.

"I don't know, Jishu," she admitted, tears finally spilling down her cheeks. "I don't know."

But as she spoke, Su's thoughts churned. The scars of twenty years as LM's victim were deep, but she would not let him ruin her son as well. *Somehow, she would summon the courage to resist, to save Aarav from a fate plagued by the same shadows. Even if it costs her everything.*

Chapter 51

The Velvet Trap

November 2022

The college gate pulsed with familiar chaos: students rushed to class, vendors hawked their snacks, and the air was alive with academic chatter. Today, a new current electrified the crowd—the upcoming inter-college music competition had everyone abuzz.

Maya caught sight of Aarav by the music department, laughter swirling around him like a memory. Her heart clenched at the sight; his smile was hollow, his eyes clouded. She worked to summon her perfect mask of friendship, but the strain showed in her white-knuckled grip on her notebook.

"Aarav," she called out, walking up to the group with practiced ease. "I need to talk to you about the music competition."

"What about it?" Aarav asked, voice tightly controlled.

"I've decided to withdraw my participation," Maya said, voice faltering for a brief moment before she steadied it. "Since I'm getting engaged, I need to give time to my family and all the arrangements."

Pakhi looked up with genuine concern. "Engaged? Maya, that's wonderful news! Who's the lucky guy?"

Maya's smile flowed like molten honey, but her eyes glinted with strategy. "Oh, it's... well, it's still being arranged. LM uncle told me not to announce it publicly yet. You know how these family matters are—very delicate until everything is finalized."

She studied Aarav, measuring every flicker of his reaction.

"But I feel so bad about leaving you without a partner for the competition."

"It's okay," Aarav said quietly. "I can perform solo."

"Nonsense!" Maya chirped, her cheer perfectly rehearsed. "Aarav, why not ask Pakhi to be your partner in the contest?"

The suggestion lingered in the air, a snare set with precision. Maya watched their faces, her satisfaction barely hidden beneath her encouraging tone.

"Me? But I... I mean, I'm not sure I'm good enough..." Pakhi stammered.

"Don't be silly," Maya insisted, voice dripping with sweet, artificial enthusiasm. "You have such a beautiful voice. And you play piano so well—I've heard you practice in the music room."

Aarav looked at Pakhi, at those grey-blue pools that held such trust, and felt tears stinging his eyes. *How could he tell her what had happened yesterday after she left? How could he explain that his father had trapped them both in a web they couldn't escape?*

Pakhi looked at him with such dependence now. After sharing her parents' devastating story, she needed him to be her anchor. How could he shatter her world again so soon?

"Aarav?" Pakhi asked softly, reaching for his hand. "Would you... would you like to perform with me?"

"Okay," he said, voice barely steady. "We will. We'll practice every day."

"Really?" Pakhi's face bloomed with joy, and Aarav felt another crack splinter through his heart.

For a heartbeat, Aarav glimpsed venomous glee flicker in Maya's eyes—a chill so sharp it raised goose bumps. Then it vanished, replaced by golden warmth.

How had he not seen this before? How long has she been planning this?

Shubho observed this exchange across the courtyard with increasing empathy and melancholy. He had known Aarav since they were children, and he could read the pain and helplessness in his friend's eyes like an open book.

"Aarav looks troubled," Prii observed quietly, moving closer to Shubho. "Is everything alright with him?"

"Family pressure," Shubho said simply. It was both the truth and completely inadequate to explain the complex web of manipulation tightening around his friend.

As the group drifted away, Maya lingered, a sly half-smile betraying her satisfaction. *Soon, very soon, this tribal girl would understand the cost of defying what belonged to established families.*

But as Aarav and Pakhi walked away, hands entwined and faces close in secret conversation, something inside Maya twisted—a sudden, piercing ache that stole her breath.

This is for the best, she reminded herself firmly. LM uncle knows what's right for everyone.

Festival of Dreams

Later that week, excitement crackled among the friends as they claimed their usual spot in the riverside café. The place was a living memory, where British colonial elegance met modern comfort. Ornate Victorian arches framed the Ganges, its sacred waters glinting in the afternoon sun.

Aarav, Shubho, and Maya leaned in, drawn by the spark in Pakhi's eyes as she spoke.

"Imagine," Pakhi said, her voice taking on the cadence of a storyteller. "Ten days when all of Nagaland transforms into a living, breathing celebration of our heritage. The Hornbill Festival isn't just an event—it's our soul made visible."

She paused for a sip of coffee, and Aarav was transfixed. Sunlight tangled in her hair, her hands danced with every word, and her grey-blue eyes shimmered with stormy passion.

"It happens every December in Kisama, just outside Kohima," Pakhi continued, voice warming with pride. "The government created it to preserve and promote our tribal cultures, but for us, it's become something magical—a time when all sixteen Naga tribes come together as one family."

"Sixteen tribes?" Shubho asked, genuinely curious. "That's incredible."

"That's the beautiful part—we don't all speak the same language," Pakhi said with a laugh. "We have different languages, different customs, different traditional dresses. My tribe, the Angami, has its own distinct identity from Ana's tribe. But during Hornbill, all those differences become threads in a larger tapestry."

"The festival gets its name from the hornbill bird," she explained, "which is sacred to us. We call it the 'King of the Jungle' because of its majesty, its wisdom, and the way it soars above the canopy like it owns the sky." She smiled at Aarav. "You know how I got my name? Pa used to say I reminded him of a yellow hornbill—always curious, always wanting to fly higher."

Aarav reached across the table and gently squeezed her hand. "Holud Pakhi. The golden bird."

Maya watched the closeness between them, her jaw tightening imperceptibly. LM Uncle's words echoed: 'Stay close. Never let them be alone. Soon, Aarav will be yours.'

She forced brightness into her voice. "It sounds absolutely fascinating, Pakhi. What kind of performances can we expect?"

Pakhi's face lit up even more. "The opening ceremony is breathtaking. Thousands of performers in traditional costumes, each tribe showcasing their unique dances and songs. The Angami with our warrior dances—" she paused, a shadow crossing her features briefly, "—folk tales sung in ancient melodies."

"Don't let her undersell the warrior dances," Prii added with obvious pride. "Pakhi's been learning them since she was five. You should see her with a dao—the traditional sword. She's mesmerizing."

"I'd love to see that," Aarav said softly, and the look he gave her made Maya's stomach clench with jealousy.

Ana, quieter than usual since her last conversation with Kyan, picked at her scone, her mind tangled in worry. "The crafts are amazing," she said, glancing up with a faint smile. "Hand-woven shawls, bamboo crafts, and pottery—every piece tells a story."

"Oh, absolutely," Pakhi said, excitement bubbling over. "Bands come from all over the Northeast for the rock contest. The traditional music competitions are even more intense—the elders judge you on authenticity and soul, not just skill. Pa used to compete, back when he was young and full of dreams."

As she spoke of him, a flicker of pain surfaced in her eyes. Aarav caught that moment and squeezed her hand again, a silent reminder that he was there.

"The fashion show is a world of its own," Pakhi went on, brushing aside her sadness. "Models wear traditional Naga attire—shawls that take months to weave, jewelry crafted from shells and beads, headgear crowned with hornbill feathers and wild boar tusks. Some pieces are so precious, they're treasured as family heirlooms."

"And the food!" Prii jumped in, eager to lighten the mood. "Smoked pork with bhut jolokia, the ghost pepper—bamboo shoot curry, rice

beer aged for months in village homes. And the momos? These are the real deal, nothing like the ones in Kolkata."

Shubho chuckled. "I don't know if my Bengali palate can handle ghost pepper."

"We'll build up your tolerance," Ana murmured. She glanced up, her eyes shadowed, and Prii instinctively reached out in concern.

"Are you okay, Ana?"

Ana replied too quickly, "Fine. Just thinking about home. It's been a while."

"Since 2000," Pakhi said when Shubho asked about the festival's history. "But it's built on traditions that are centuries old. My father always says it's like watching history come alive. Warriors who once fought rival tribes now dance together, sharing stories and laughter instead of spears and shields. It's proof that people can change, can choose unity over division."

She smiled around the table at each friend, cheeks flushing with nervousness and hope. "I've invited all of you. I want you to see where I come from, to understand my world, my family, my traditions."

"All of us?" Maya asked, trying to keep the surprise out of her voice.

"Of course," Pakhi said warmly. "You're all important to Aarav, which makes you important to me. Besides, the festival is about bringing people together, about building bridges between different worlds."

She turned to Aarav, and the love in her eyes was unmistakable. "I've even tried calling Dan Uncle—he's like family to us, practically raised me alongside his own children. But he hasn't picked up yet. I'll keep trying. I know he'd love to meet you."

Emotion tightened Aarav's throat. Pakhi wanted to weave him into her family's tapestry. Yet, in the shadows, his own father schemed to unravel everything.

"I'd be honoured," he said, voice thick with feeling. "To meet your family, to see your homeland, to understand where you come from."

Maya managed a smile, but unease rippled beneath it. This was proving harder than she'd imagined. It's only a matter of weeks. Stay close. Be a good friend.

But when Maya saw the way Aarav looked at Pakhi, as if she were the answer to a lifelong question, her confidence began to slip away.

Aarav saw through Maya's forced cheer, recognizing the hope and desperation beneath. Guilt gnawed at him—she had always been there. But he refused to let guilt shape his future. His love for Pakhi was unstoppable.

He resolved to talk to Maya privately before the festival. She deserved honesty, not his father's schemes.

Meanwhile, Ana wrestled with guilt of her own. Kyan's cryptic calls left her unsettled, yet her love for him was a force she could not escape. To keep him close, she confided details about Pakhi and Aarav to Kyan, unaware of the potential consequences.

Now they were all going to Nagaland, Kyan's territory, where he had resources and connections, and the kind of desperation that made people dangerous.

What have I done? Ana thought, staring into her coffee cup. What am I doing?

"The night performances are pure magic," Pakhi went on, unaware of the tension swirling around her. "Bonfires blaze across the festival grounds, their flames flickering, casting warm glows. Traditional songs echo through the hills as ancient drums reverberate through the air. When you hear your ancestors' voices on the mountain wind, it's as if they're calling out to soothe your soul."

She reached for Aarav's hand across the table, their fingers intertwining naturally. "I can't wait to show you the sunrise from my balcony. You can see the entire valley, layers of mountains fading into the mist. It's the most beautiful view in the world."

"I'm sure it is," Aarav said softly, but he was looking at her, not thinking about landscapes.

Shubho raised his coffee cup. "To the Hornbill Festival," he said. "And to friends brave enough to share their worlds with each other."

"To the Hornbill Festival," they echoed, glasses clinking.

As they raised their glasses, each friend harboured secret hopes and hidden fears. Pakhi longed to share her homeland with Aarav. Aarav dreamed of breaking free from his father's grip. Maya clung to promises, even as her future slipped away like mist. Shubho, steady as ever, sensed change beneath the surface. Prii watched Ana, worry growing. Ana, torn by love, faced the weight of a betrayal whose consequences she could not yet fathom.

The festival of celebration and unity was approaching. Yet beneath the excitement lay tensions that could either bind hearts together forever or tear them apart with the force of ancient rivalries.

Chapter 52

The Predator's Game

The moment Prii stepped into his office, LM's predatory instincts stirred. Like a tiger scenting fresh prey, he fixated on the young woman with Megha Dutta, already imagining her as his next conquest.

On most weekends, his farmhouse bedroom became a private stage, crowded with women from every corner of India, each chasing musical stardom. They arrived brimming with hope, only to leave with their dreams and dignity in ruins. He was especially drawn to girls from the Northeast—their distance from home and hunger for support made them irresistible prey.

Now, his focus shifted: two women were unearthing secrets he'd buried, and his son was recklessly involved with a tribal girl.

Will these Northeast people never leave me and my family alone? he thought with barely contained fury.

"Welcome, ladies," LM said smoothly as Megha and Prii arrived at the farmhouse, his voice carrying practiced charm that had fooled countless victims.

A striking young woman, introducing herself as the housekeeper's wife, served gondhoraj lebur ghol—lemon drinks from his prized

garden. The refreshments were so delicious that both women were genuinely delighted.

Yet in the server's eyes, beauty was shadowed by secrets, as if a constant fear held her captive. A fleeting tremor, a cautious restraint, hinted at darker truths hidden beneath the serene facade.

Megha wasted no time on small talk. "Mr. Mukherjee, we have a question about an incident from your past linked to Bhavna Studio—a controversy involving a young boy from the Northeast, allegedly accused of stealing songs from the owner's son, Neev. We're investigating accusations against Northeast students in the music industry."

LM studied them with flat, unreadable eyes. The charm remained, but something cold flickered beneath.

"Yes, I studied at that college," he said in a measured tone. "Science stream, of course. And yes, I knew about Bhavna Studio, though I never knew Neev personally."

He leaned back, posture relaxed but eyes alert. "You must understand, my background **was very** different. My father was a cassette hawker on the Gariahat footpath. We were poor, just struggling to survive."

LM's voice took on false humility. "Back then, I was too humble and aware of my place. I never mixed with Neev's rich friends—I was just a poor boy."

As he spoke, his gaze slid over Prii with a predator's interest, but only Megha noticed.

He's lying, Megha thought, spotting the ease of his sob story—and his interest in Prii as prey.

"That's interesting," Megha said, making notes. "Our research shows you were far more involved than you say."

LM's smile didn't falter, but something dangerous flickered beneath his eyes. "Your research is mistaken, Ms. Dutta. I merely worked hard

to build something from nothing. If people got hurt... that's an unfortunate, inevitable part of progress. Business is business."

The mask was beginning to slip, and Megha felt her pulse quicken. She was finally getting close to the truth—and understanding just how dangerous this man really was.

The Hunt

"Enough with the interview," LM said, rising smoothly. "Let's tour the farm. My Land Rover's outside."

As they prepared to leave, LM pointed at Prii, who was absorbed in her laptop.

"You there?" he called.

Megha caught a flicker of something predatory in LM's gaze. Her red skirt was vivid against the dull room as she typed, her tidy ponytail and quiet grace giving her an air of delicate vulnerability.

"You know," LM said, assuming a paternal tone, "you have just the perspective our **company needs**. **Why** not join us?" He turned to Megha with a forced smile. "Sorry, Ms. Dutta, I'm offering your employee a role."

Beneath his polished exterior, LM schemed to push Megha aside. Prii fascinated him to an unsettling degree.

"Thank you, sir, but I'm happy working with Megha ma'am," Prii said, looking up. "I learn a lot from her."

LM's jaw clenched, his smile never faltering as he quietly calculated how to separate Prii from the group.

"Well then," LM said, steadying himself. "Let's see the farm."

They climbed into the Land Rover, careful not to betray their unease. Megha shot Prii a look that spoke volumes—*be careful*.

"For the best tour, Prii should sit up front," LM said. "She can capture all the best shots."

"Actually," Megha began, "perhaps I should sit in front to—"

"No, Ms. Dutta," LM interrupted smoothly. "You'll see best from the back. Prii's camera work will shine up front. Trust me."

As the Land Rover rolled out, Megha's protective instincts surged. She had faced threats before, but LM's fixation on Prii unsettled her deeply.

"First stop," LM announced, pulling away, "the most secluded part. That's where I do my most... private work."

A cold dread seized Megha, but she masked it with practiced calm.

Paradise with a Serpent

The Land Rover slipped along winding tracks through LM's estate, acres of manicured landscape artfully masquerading as a wild paradise.

"Look there," LM said, gesturing toward the sprawling mango orchard. "Those are Alphonso trees, over fifteen years old. In season, their fruit is so sweet, you'd swear you were tasting honey."

The mango trees stood in flawless formation. Below, grass and wildflowers splashed the ground with bursts of colour.

"And over here," LM said, slowing the vehicle, "is my pride and joy—the vineyard. These are Italian varieties, forced to grow in Bengal by years of my effort."

"Prii," LM said, his tone low and insistent, "capture this angle. The light on the grapes—it's unmissable. Closer to the window."

As Prii shifted for the perfect shot, LM's hand "accidentally" grazed her shoulder, lingering as he directed her.

"Is this good?" Prii asked innocently, focusing on framing the shot.

"Perfect," LM murmured, his eyes on her profile rather than the vineyard. "You have such an artistic eye."

They passed organic gardens, then rounded a bend where a pristine lake unfurled before them, its glassy surface mirroring sky and trees.

"The lake is spring-fed," LM pronounced, stopping the Land Rover. "Water's crystal clear. Prii, get some shots from the water—now. The perspective's unmatched."

"We'll take the boat," LM said, already climbing out. "Ms. Dutta, stay here. Prii and I have work to finish on the water."

Megha's instincts screamed in warning. She had seen too many red flags: LM's lingering touch, his predatory tone, and now his push to separate Prii. Anxiety surged at the thought of her intern alone with him, out of reach on the water.

"Actually, I'd love to join you on the boat," she said, hiding her worry behind a practiced smile.

"Oh, it's only for two," LM cut in, feigning disappointment. "As you mentioned, you're not comfortable on water, correct? No point risking it."

Megha caught how LM placed himself to help Prii into the boat, his hands lingering at her waist just a moment too long.

"The lake gets deep at the centre," LM intoned as he rowed. "Private. Isolated. I come here alone when I need to think—no interruptions."

As the boat drifted beyond Megha's vigilant gaze, LM's demeanour shifted. His smile grew sharper, his gestures more calculated.

"You know, Prii," LM's voice dropped, colder now. "A girl like you could have anything. The right mentor, the right introductions—doors would open everywhere."

"That's very kind, sir," Prii replied, still focused on her camera work.

"I could show you things," LM muttered, letting the boat drift to the lake's farthest shade, "that would redefine what's possible for someone with your talents."

From the shore, Megha's panic mounted as the boat slipped farther away, her young intern drifting into isolation with a man she deeply distrusted.

But then, unexpectedly, LM paused. As he rowed toward the lake's most hidden corner, a whirlwind of thoughts churned within him. Fear prickled at **the edges of his ambition; the scrutiny of Megha's** vigilant figure on the shore made his every move feel burdensome. Her phone was a sentinel, ready to record any transgression.

For the first time in decades, LM found himself able to control his predatory impulses rather than giving in to them.

"Actually," LM said abruptly, voice snapping brisk, "we're done here. The light's changing—let's get the gardens before it fades."

"Let's rejoin Ms. Dutta," LM said, already turning the boat. "She might think I've absconded with her star assistant."

As the boat neared the dock, relief crashed over Megha so intensely she nearly slumped against a tree.

"Thank you so much for your time," Megha said, gathering their equipment with perhaps more haste than was entirely polite. "This has been... very illuminating."

As they made their way back to the farmhouse, Megha kept Prii close, unwilling to trust that LM's sudden restraint would hold for long.

Whatever had stopped LM today, Megha was grateful. Yet she knew this was only a pause in his behavior, and somewhere in Kolkata, other young women might not be so lucky.

The Beast's Return

The drive back to the mansion simmered with unspoken tension, LM's knuckles whitening on the wheel. The mask he'd worn all day had drained him, and the effort of suppressing his cravings gnawed at his self-control.

As the Land Rover rolled into the farmhouse compound, LM's predatory instincts surged. Denied his chosen prey, he wasted no time in seeking another **outlet for his hunger**.

LM found Dukhiram's wife alone in the servants' quarters. Isolated and bound by her dependence, she had already been shattered by his past violence. She offered no excitement, but she would suffice for now.

His cruelty burst forth, unleashed by hours of forced restraint. The woman bore it in silence, aware that any protest would only deepen her pain and threaten her family's fragile security.

When LM was done, a measure of his fury ebbed, but the bitter aftertaste of unfinished conquest still scorched his throat.

The return to the main mansion seethed with brooding thoughts. As the Land Rover pulled up to the portico, music floated from the house, Aarav's voice blending with others in a gentle rehearsal.

That holy bitch is here, he thought with renewed fury. Maya had already informed him of Pakhi's presence, of the music practice sessions that were bringing her deeper into his domain with each passing day.

Just a few more days, he reminded himself, *and all will be solved with no trace of the crime, just like many times before*.

As he entered the lobby, LM could see into the music room where Su was serving the group. She had prepared refreshments that the young people were enjoying between practice sessions.

He seethed as he watched the scene of domestic joy. Shubho played the keyboard, Aarav strummed his guitar, and the college friends laughed, basking in Su's warm, attentive care.

And there, in the center of it all, was Pakhi—the source of his current frustration, the girl who had unknowingly escaped his trap.

His fury flared hotter as he saw Su's delight in their company. She moved with a grace he barely remembered, her face alight with real happiness as she fussed over the group and listened to their music.

Sometimes I envy her, he admitted to himself with bitter resentment. Aarav loves her, and nothing I do *will ever change that*.

The boy had always been closer to his mother, seeking her comfort and approval rather than his father's. Even now, Aarav's eyes followed Su with affection and gratitude.

That love should be mine, LM thought. *I built this empire, provided this life, made it all possible. Yet he gives his heart to her.*

Unable to endure the sight of their happiness, LM retreated to the internal elevator, desperate to escape to his private floor.

Soon, he promised himself as the elevator doors closed behind him. *Very soon, all of this will be over, and I'll have what I want.*

The elevator rose, lifting him from the warmth below that would never welcome him, carrying him into the cold solitude where he could plot his final, **lethal moves**.

In the music room below, the rehearsal continued, the young musicians blissfully unaware that a predator was circling ever closer, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Chapter 53

The Voice from the Void

Present - November 2022

Anjali's hands trembled as she held out her mobile phone to Abha. "She's waiting, Mashima. She's ready to talk."

Abha's weathered fingers shook as she took the phone, her heart hammering so hard she thought it might burst. Twenty years. Twenty years of silence, of wondering, of grieving for a daughter who was alive but lost to her.

"Devika?" she whispered into the phone.

"Ma."

That single word sliced through the phone, cold and unyielding. *Was this really Devi? Her Priya? Was this icy, distant voice the one she had yearned for all these years?*

"Why did you tell Pakhi? Wasn't it enough you cast me out? Now you've poisoned her with your beliefs—that I'm a criminal?"

Every word landed with the sharpness of a scalpel, each one meant to cut deep. Abha felt her chest tighten, as if her daughter's fury was a boulder pressing the air from her lungs.

"Yes, I stole from the temple. Did you ever ask why, Ma? Did you ever wonder how your daughter could do it?"

Abha's mouth opened and closed soundlessly, tears streaming down her weathered cheeks.

"No. You never tried. You're just like him—my father. You never understood family or love."

The accusation struck Abha with the force of a fist.

"That's not true," Abha whispered desperately. "I'm not like him. I loved you. I always loved you."

"Love? You believed every story about me without question. You call it love to accept I was a criminal without asking why?"

"I wanted to understand," Abha protested. "But you were gone—"

"You had no way because you chose not to," Priya cut in. "You let everyone turn you against me."

Anjali reached out, her hand steadying Abha as tremors wracked the older woman's body.

"That's not true," Abha protested weakly. "I loved you. I always loved you."

"Love?" Priya's laugh was bitter and hollow. "You call it love to believe the worst about someone you claim to care about? To cut someone out of your life without even trying to hear their side? To spend twenty years mourning me as if I were dead instead of finding the truth?"

A heavy silence pressed in, so thick Abha could hear her own heartbeat, Anjali's ragged breaths, and the far-off hum of temple life carrying on as her own world unraveled.

"Do you know what love is, Ma? It's faith. It's believing in someone and fighting for them—even when it's hard."

"Devi, please," Abha sobbed. "Please tell me what happened. Help me understand. I want to know the truth."

"The truth? I needed you, and you weren't there. I made hard choices, and you joined my accusers."

"I can support you now," Abha pleaded. "Tell me what happened, and I'll believe you. I'll help you. I'll do whatever it takes to make things right."

The pause stretched on, endless and suffocating.

"Pakhi doesn't believe it," Abha said suddenly. "She trusts you, Devi. She has the faith I lacked."

For the first time since the conversation began, Priya's voice wavered slightly. "What did you say?"

"She defended you. Even after I told her everything, she said she didn't believe it. She wants the truth."

The silence between them brimmed with twenty years of pain and the faintest glimmer of redemption.

The Revelation

When Priya ended the call, a crushing silence settled over the temple courtyard. Anjali watched, powerless, as Mashimoni collapsed on the stone steps, her body wracked by silent sobs.

"Mashimoni," Anjali whispered, kneeling beside her. "Please, don't torture yourself like this."

Abha's words tumbled out in jagged pieces. "My intention was never to hurt Priya or Pakhi. I just... I just wanted to share my sorrow with her. When I saw Pakhi that day, when I realized she was my granddaughter, I thought maybe... maybe if she knew the truth as I understood it, she could help bridge the gap between us."

"I love them, Anjali," Abha continued, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I love them both so much. Yes, maybe I couldn't stand by her the way I should have. Maybe I believed what was told to me instead of fighting for her. But I never stopped loving her, not for a single day."

"I waited for her every single day," Abha whispered. "Each morning I woke, each evening I lit the pooja lamp, I pictured her stepping through the temple gate. I would dream of her children—how they might look, how their laughter might sound, if they would inherit her singing voice."

"It's true, I couldn't fight the world," Abha confessed, voice thick with regret. "I was weak, afraid, worn down by years under his rule. But my love for her never faded, Anjali. My hope never died."

She paused, then spoke with sudden fierce intensity. "I am not like Krishna Chandra, who didn't want to see her even on his deathbed, who forbade anyone from even mentioning her name. My husband... he was as cold and as vicious as a king cobra—and no one except we few family members knew about his real self."

Anjali shuddered, remembering the fear that Krishna Chandra had inspired.

"He ruled over everything," Abha went on, voice gaining strength as she finally let the truth spill out. "He dictated every breath, every word, every thought. When Devika left, he didn't just cast her out—he made sure anyone who spoke her name would suffer his anger."

"What did he do to you?" Anjali asked softly, though she dreaded the answer.

Abha's gaze drifted far away, haunted by memories that still made her shudder. "He punished me for loving her. He said I was too soft, too forgiving, that my weakness had ruined our daughter."

She paused, breathing becoming laboured as the memories flooded back.

"He forced me to take cold baths in the dead of winter," she whispered, voice thin as a thread. "After those nights that were never about love, only duty, only about bringing forth a lineage. He would pull me from bed, still bleeding, still aching, and shove me into the courtyard."

Anjali gasped, covering her mouth in horror.

"There's more, Anju. Things I've never told anyone." Abha took a shaking breath. "After Devika left, after the scandal broke... your mesheo changed. Or perhaps the monster that had always lived inside him finally broke free. He claimed I needed purification."

Her voice cracked. "He said my mother's heart had tainted me, that I had spoiled a daughter destined to betray all that was sacred."

"He would drag me to the temple courtyard at dawn, when no one was watching. Pour buckets of freezing water over me while reciting purification mantras. He said it would cleanse me of weakness, drown out the corrupting love I had shown our daughter."

She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was hollow. "But that wasn't the worst of it. He wanted me to conceive again. At my age, in that trauma, after everything. He said we needed a newborn to replace the one we'd lost, a pure one who wouldn't shame the family name."

Anjali's hand flew to her mouth.

"Night after night," Abha continued, each word costing her something precious, "he would come to my room. Not as a husband, but as a man punishing me for sins I hadn't committed. Claiming my body not for love, not even for desire, but for lineage. For redemption. For his wounded pride."

The tears flowed freely now, twenty years of suppressed agony finally finding voice.

"I prayed to Ma Kali every day to save me. To end it somehow. And then..." Abha's voice took on an almost guilty tone, "two months after Devika left, after one of those tortuous nights, Krishna Chandra collapsed. A massive cerebral stroke."

She looked at Anjali with eyes that carried both relief and shame. "I watched him fall. Watched his face contort. Part of me wanted to call for help immediately. But another part—a part I'm ashamed to admit existed—hesitated. Just for a moment. Just long enough to think: *Is this my answer? Is this Ma Kali's mercy?*"

"Mashimoni," Anjali whispered, but Abha shook her head.

"By the time the doctors came, he was half-paralyzed. He lay in that bed for a month, unable to speak, unable to move, unable to hurt me anymore. I cared for him because it was my duty. And every day, I saw the rage in his one good eye—rage that he could no longer control me, could no longer punish me."

Abha's voice grew stronger, harder. "And then he died. Three months after Devika left. Three months after the scandal. And I..." She looked directly at Anjali. "I felt **relief**, Anju. Standing at his funeral, knowing I would never have to endure another night of his purification rituals, another dawn of freezing water, another moment of being claimed like property—I felt relief."

She clenched her hands tight, feeling the coarse fabric of her sari anchor her. "But I survived it all," Abha said, voice suddenly strong. "Every punishment, every humiliation, every act of cruelty—I bore them because I believed that if I just kept going, maybe one day my daughter would return. Maybe I could tell her that her mother's faith in her love never wavered, even when I could not understand her choices."

Anjali sank beside her, brushing away her own tears.

"She doesn't know," Anjali said quietly. "Priya doesn't know what you suffered because of her. She doesn't know that you paid a price for loving her, even when you couldn't defend her."

"Maybe if she knew—"

"Maybe," Abha agreed softly. "Maybe if she understood that her mother was also a victim, and that her mother's silence stemmed from terror rather than judgment, she could find it in her heart to forgive an old woman who loved her imperfectly but completely."

The temple bells tolled for the evening pooja, their echoes weaving through the ancient walls and mingling with the soft sobs of two women burdened by years of secrets and sorrow.

"What do we do now?" Anjali asked. "How do we heal wounds that have festered for twenty years?"

Chapter 54

In the Mountains

November 2022 - Kohima

Priya huddled in the alcove of their old colonial house, her hands shaking as she gripped the phone. Sunlight slipped through the wooden shutters, painting shifting mosaics across the floor, but the rays felt distant and cold.

She had finally gathered the courage to call Dan.

When Dan learned Kyan had joined the Hornbill Hearth behind his back, the foundation of their friendship crumbled. Dan's sense of betrayal ran deep; his closest friends had pulled his son into a world of vigilante justice, exposing him to the very violence Dan had always fought against. Kyan's rebellion came next: he broke away to form the Wild Bisons, taking half the Hearth's members with him.

The silence between their families grew heavier with each passing day. But now, with Pakhi alone in Kolkata and danger closing in, and after a rare call with her own mother, Priya felt an urgent need to break through the misunderstandings that had poisoned their friendship.

The phone rang twice before Dan's voice came through, edged with a coldness she had never heard before.

"Hello."

"Dan," Priya whispered. "It's me."

A heavy silence followed. Priya could almost hear Dan wrestling with himself, caught between the fading warmth of their old bond and the anger that now haunted every word between them.

"What do you want, Priya?" His voice was tired, aged by pain.

"I want to explain. I want you to know why we kept Kyan's joining us a secret."

"A brother? Brothers don't lie for years. Brothers don't recruit each other's children without permission."

"We tried to protect you," Priya said. "You'd retired from politics, you were finally at peace after Lyna. We didn't want to drag you back."

"That wasn't your choice," Dan replied. "Kyan is my son. What happened should've been faced together."

"You're right," Priya said, her voice breaking. "We were wrong. In trying to spare you, we caused pain instead."

She drew in a shaky breath. "We never wanted this life for Kyan. The Hornbill Hearth was meant to protect, to stand for justice. What changed us all was Lyna's story—it was her vibrant spirit that united us, and the violation she suffered served as a rallying cry."

"It came from watching his sister suffer," Dan said. "All our talk of justice meant nothing to a girl who never recovered from what they did."

"I know," Priya whispered. "We failed Lyna. And, in trying to fix it, Kyan too."

Silence stretched between them, thick with the burden of shared guilt.

"Why are you calling me now, Priya?" Dan asked finally. "After all these months of silence, why today?"

"Pakhi's in danger," Priya said urgently.

Priya heard Dan shift on the other end, his anger giving way to the old protective instinct she remembered so well.

"What do you need from me?" he asked quietly.

"I need my friend back," Priya said. "Help me save my daughter before our mistakes destroy her future."

Rick hovered in the doorway outside the alcove, worry etched deep into his face as he listened to his wife try to rebuild the bridge they had set ablaze.

The Weight of Time

Priya heard the creak of the gate and felt a chill in the evening air as she gazed from the alcove window. Dan's familiar figure emerged, and sorrow gripped her heart, fierce and unrelenting. The man approaching was only a faded echo of the vibrant leader she once knew.

The golden evening light could not disguise the salt and pepper now threading through his hair. Just months ago, those locks were jet black. Now, the early silver glinted in the fading sun, a silent testament to sleepless nights and relentless worry.

Dan's shoulders slumped beneath an invisible burden, each step heavy with defeat. Deep creases fanned out from his eyes, lines etched by pain and sleepless nights.

After her conversation with Ma, Priya's emotions felt raw and exposed. Old wounds, never truly healed, throbbed anew.

She greeted Dan at the door with a brittle smile that refused to reach her eyes.

"Come, Dan," she said, voice carefully controlled. "The evening snacks are ready as usual. I have made some crispy samosas for you."

"Thanks, Priya," Dan murmured, sinking into his usual spot on the couch. The room looked unchanged, but the air between them was thick with everything that had happened.

"Dan," she began, settling into the chair across from him, "Pakhi met my mother. She knows about our past now. Not the whole truth, but enough to be devastated by it."

Dan's expression grew even more pained. "How is she handling **it**?"

"After learning what she thought was the truth, she stopped speaking to us completely. I don't know what was going on in her mind during those silent days."

"And your mother?"

"I scolded Ma during our phone call, but I feel she was helpless with age. She was so happy and emotional when she met Pakhi that she could not control herself."

Priya took a deep breath. "But after a long, terrible silence, Pakhi spoke to me today. She said that she and her friends are coming here for the Hornbill Festival."

Despite the heaviness, a faint smile touched Priya's lips. "She spoke of her friends, but when she said Aarav's name, her voice rang with a warmth I recognized instantly. As a mother, I heard the tenderness, the subtle joy that coloured her words."

"You didn't press her about it?"

"I did not force her to say something she did not want to share," Priya replied. "She just said he was the boy who saved her on the first day of college from ragging. But Dan, there was love in her voice when she spoke of him. Real love."

Priya's voice trembled as she went on. "Today, I wonder if I was wrong. Back then, running away with Rick felt like my only choice. But maybe I should have stayed and fought, even if it meant facing a courtroom instead of hiding."

She paused, dabbing at her eyes. "But I was so afraid, Dan. Afraid of losing Rick, afraid for the baby I carried."

"But now, I wish I had gone back and faced them," she whispered, voice cracking. "Yet I knew I would lose. They had all the power, Dan. They would have destroyed us without mercy."

Suddenly, sobs wracked Priya's body, years of suppressed emotion erupting at last. Old wounds she thought had faded now burned like wildfire inside her. Guilt, shame, humiliation, scandal—all surged up, threatening to pull her under.

Rick stood frozen in the doorway, powerless to intervene. He understood that nothing could stem Priya's outpouring now.

After long, wrenching sobs, Priya's breathing finally slowed. She wiped her face, trying to gather herself.

"Dan," she said, voice hoarse from crying, "I started the Hornbill Hearth to protect our community. So when Kyan wanted to join us, I was happy. I know I should have informed you, but I don't know what stopped me."

Dan's expression stayed guarded, but pain flickered unmistakably in his eyes.

"As a college leader, he was an asset to us," Priya continued. "He was determined to punish Lyna's rapists and recruited many young people for our cause."

She drew a shaky breath. "But after Pakhi left for Kolkata, something in him changed. We sent him there on an assignment, but in those months, he became someone else. That's why we called him back right away."

"You know the rest," she said quietly. "The rebellion, the **split, the Wild Bison group.**"

Priya met Dan's gaze, tears brimming anew. "This will hurt you, Dan, but you need to know. He's become involved in narcotics. Worse, he's selling drugs to other young people in our community."

Dan sat frozen, shock draining the color from his face. The words struck him like a series of blows. He began to tremble, unable to process the enormity of it all. His breath came in ragged, desperate gasps.

Rick saw what was happening and rushed to Dan's side, his own face shadowed with worry and guilt.

Priya, stunned by Dan's collapse, let out a sharp cry and hurried to him. Dan looked blankly ahead, his eyes unfocused. Tears flowed in a free, endless stream down his weathered cheeks.

"Why did God punish him like this?" he asked the room, voice breaking completely. "I was a true Christian. I never missed my Sunday church services. I tried to live righteously, to serve my community, to raise my children with good values."

His voice rose with desperate confusion. "Why is it that I am being punished? First, my daughter Lyna, who is still paralyzed in her bed, her mind shattered by the molestation of unknown hooligans from the plains."

He buried his face in his hands. "And now Kyan... my son... has become everything I fought against. A criminal. A destroyer of young lives."

Dan looked up suddenly, his eyes wild with a new kind of fear. "I have to save Natasha," he said urgently. "My youngest daughter... I have to protect her before this poison reaches her, too."

His breathing was still laboured, but his voice grew more determined. "I will take her back to London with me. Away from all of this. Away from the Hornbill Hearth, away from the Wild Bison, away from everything that has destroyed my family."

Rick knelt beside his old friend, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Dan, breathe. Just breathe. We'll figure this out together."

But Dan shook his head violently. "No more together, Rick. Look what 'together' has cost us. Look what your Hornbill Hearth has done to my son. I trusted you with him, and you turned him into a killer and a drug dealer."

His voice cracked with the weight of betrayal. "You've shattered that trust, Rick, and with it, you've not only destroyed my family but also the very fabric of our heritage."

Priya's heart splintered at his words. *Good intentions could not erase the truth: they had failed Kyan, and in that failure, shattered Dan's faith in friendship, justice, and love's power to protect.*

Chapter 55

The Beast in Exile

Kyan hunched in the weed-choked courtyard of a crumbling cottage, tucked away at the forest's ragged edge, worlds apart from civilization. Once, he was a prince among his people, a legend whose name made hearts flutter in Nagaland. Now, the acrid stench of stale rice-beer clung to him like a stubborn shadow, marking him as an exile.

His love for Billy had twisted from devotion into a shadowy hunger, an obsession that devoured the man he once was. The face once celebrated across the hills now wore jagged scars of rage and heartbreak. The sun had baked his skin into harsh, leathery bronze.

His hair, once sleek and shining in college hallways, now hung in wild, greasy tangles. A filthy beard spilled down his chin, stained and snarled, hiding the jawline that once made hearts race.

His clothes stank of sweat, smoke, and something even fouler. Ana's voice still echoed in his ears, leaving his face tense for a moment. Then, the tension melted into a slow, predatory smile that revealed teeth yellowed by neglect.

"Finally," he muttered to himself, voice hoarse and rough. "Finally, they're coming home."

Fifteen Minutes Earlier

The phone had rung just as the sun was beginning its descent behind the hills. Kyan had grabbed it with trembling hands, desperate for any connection to the world where Billy existed.

"Ana," he'd answered, not bothering with pleasantries. "Tell me you have something."

There had been a pause on the other end, and when Ana spoke, her voice carried a hesitation that hadn't been there before. "Kyan, I... I need to talk to you about something."

"What? What is it?" His heart began to race. "Is it Billy? Has something happened to her?"

"No, nothing like that. She's fine. But Kyan, I've been thinking—"

"Don't think, Ana," Kyan interrupted sharply. "Just tell me what's happening. That's all I need from you."

Another pause, longer this time. "They're coming to Nagaland. For the Hornbill Festival. All of them—Pakhi, Prii, and..." she took a breath, "Aarav too."

Kyan felt his entire body go rigid, every muscle tensing like a coiled spring. "Aarav? That Bengali bastard is coming here?"

"Yes. Pakhi invited him. They want to experience the festival together."

"That pretty boy thinks he can just waltz into our territory, parade around with Billy on his arm like she's some trophy he's won?" The words tumbled out, sharp and barbed. "What does he know of us? Of her?"

"Kyan, please listen to me," Ana said, voice growing more urgent. "I'm not sure about this anymore. Pakhi is my friend. When I see her with Aarav, she's... she's happy, Kyan. Really happy. Maybe we should just—"

Kyan laughed, the sound like gravel scraping against stone. "She thinks she's happy because she doesn't know any better. That boy has filled her head with lies about love and acceptance, made her believe she can belong in his world. But you and I both know the truth, Ana. People like us, people from the hills, we never truly belong in the plains."

"But Aarav isn't like that. I've seen them together. He really cares about her."

"He cares about the exotic novelty of her!" Kyan snapped, voice rising. "Those grey-blue eyes, that tribal mystique—that's all he sees. He doesn't see Billy for who she really is. He doesn't know how she belongs to these hills in her bones and blood."

"Kyan—"

"I'm the one who taught her to read the forest, Ana. I'm the one who was there when she scraped her knee falling from that mango tree. I'm the one who held her when she cried about her mother's secrets. Me. Not some privileged Bengali boy who plays at love like it's one of his musical compositions."

Ana was quiet for a long moment before speaking again, voice small. "What are you planning to do?"

"What I should have done months ago," Kyan replied, voice taking on a cold, calculated edge. "I'm going to save her from making the biggest mistake of her life. I'm going to bring her home where she belongs."

"How? Kyan, you can't just—"

"Can't what? Can't fight for the woman I love? Can't protect her from throwing her life away on someone who will never truly understand her?" He paused, then softened his tone slightly. "Ana, you of all people should understand. You've seen how they treat us in Kolkata. **The stares, the comments. Do you really** want Billy to live that life forever?"

"I..." Ana hesitated, and Kyan knew he had her.

"When they arrive, I want to know their every move, their every plan," he continued. "Where they're staying, which festival events they're attending, and when they'll be separated from the group. Everything."

"But Kyan, I don't want Pakhi to get hurt. Or anyone else."

"Hurt?" Kyan forced a laugh, though it came out strained. "I'm going to save her, Ana. Save her from that Bengali pretty boy who's filling her head with fantasies. She belongs here, with her own people, with someone who understands her true nature. With me."

"And if she doesn't want to be saved?" Ana asked quietly.

The question hung in the air like a cloud of smoke. When Kyan finally answered, his voice was barely above a whisper, but it carried a weight that made Ana shiver.

"Then I'll make her understand. One way or another, she'll see that we're meant to be together. That we've always been meant to be together."

After a long silence, Ana whispered, "I'll send you the information," before hanging up abruptly.

Now, alone in the courtyard as dusk bled into the hills, Kyan replayed every word of the call. His hands trembled—not from fear, but from a jagged anticipation, shot through with something darker that coiled and grew inside him.

He stood up abruptly and paced the small courtyard like a caged animal. The cottage belonged to one of his Wild Bison followers, a man named Imti who had lost his sister to an assault by plainsmen.

"She's coming home," Kyan said aloud to the empty air. "My Billy is finally coming home."

He pulled out a battered notebook and dropped to the ground, scribbling in the dying light. Names, places, times, backup plans. His

handwriting, once elegant, now slashed across the pages in wild, angry lines.

Day 1: Festival opening ceremony - crowds, chaos, multiple venues

Day 2: Traditional dance performances - Billy will want to perform

Day 3: Rock contest and music events - the Bengali boy will perform with Billy

Day 4: Night Festival

Day 5: Next Day Morning...

Whatever he had to do had to be within these ten days.

He paused, his pen hovering over the page. *What exactly was he planning to do? Take her by force? Convince her somehow that she belonged with him? Make the Bengali boy disappear?*

"No," he said firmly, shaking his head. "No violence. Not against her. Never against her."

Yet even as he spoke, doubt flickered at the edges of his mind. The rage that had simmered for months surged forward, hungry to drown out his fragile resolve.

He thought of Lyna, his sister, lying in that bed year after year, her mind broken by what those boys had done to her. He thought of his mother, dying from grief. He thought of his father, once the most powerful politician in Nagaland, reduced to a broken man.

"The world took everything from us," Kyan whispered to the gathering darkness. "Everything. But they won't take Billy. She's the last good thing, the last pure thing, and she's mine. She's always been mine."

A voice in the back of his mind—the part of him that still remembered who he used to be—whispered that this was wrong, that love didn't mean possession, that Billy had the right to choose her own path.

But he buried it. Determination hardened inside him, crushing the fragile, naïve part from before.

As the sky surrendered its last light, Kyan kept writing, his plans growing sharper, more elaborate, more desperate with every line. The Hornbill Festival would flood Nagaland with strangers, creating a perfect storm of chaos where someone could vanish without a trace.

This time, he vowed, staring into the black glass of the window, barely recognizing the stranger who stared back, I won't fail. Billy will finally see who she is, where she belongs, and who loves her enough to fight for her.

And if that Bengali boy tried to meddle, the hills would deal with him. Accidents happened in the forest. People vanished. The wild did not forgive outsiders.

As the moon climbed above the trees, spilling silver over the courtyard, Kyan smiled for the first time in months. It was not the easy grin that once won hearts and trust. It was the smile of a man who had stepped beyond the point of return.

When she finally looks at me, will she recognize what I've become? he thought, the question hanging in the chilled night air.

Soon, very soon, his Billy would be home at last—his, and his alone, forever.

Chapters 56

The Den of Secrets

The intercom buzzed through the Mukherjee mansion. "Su, upstairs. I need to discuss a few things."

Su's hands trembled as she set down her tea. She hated LM's upstairs den—that cold, sterile room where he plotted with chess-master precision.

Ascending the marble stairs, she glimpsed Maya slipping into LM's private elevator. Maya had never used that route before. Su's maternal instincts prickled.

Minutes earlier, Aarav had returned glowing with happiness. "Ma, we had a wonderful time at Burlington's café. We're planning the Nagaland trip—Pakhi can't wait for the Hornbill Festival." He'd described their intensive practice for the upcoming competition, his voice bright with hope.

Now Maya was sneaking in through the back way.

Su knocked softly on the den's heavy door.

"Enter."

The room's icy chill struck her. LM sat behind his mahogany desk, face carved in irritation. Maya sat across from him, spine rigid, hands folded with model-student poise.

"You called for me?"

LM's scowl deepened. "I did. But I didn't expect you to barge in during a private conversation."

"I saw Maya arrive," Su said carefully. "It was unusual—"

"Maya," LM interrupted sharply, "we'll continue this later. You know what needs to be done."

Maya stood with practiced grace. Su studied the girl she'd once called daughter. There was new steel in Maya's eyes, a calculating edge that hadn't been there before.

"Maya, why did you use the private elevator today? In all these years, you've always stopped to see me first."

Maya hesitated at the door, fingers brushing the ornate handle. For a heartbeat, her mask slipped—Su glimpsed the vulnerable girl beneath, longing to confess, aching for comfort.

But the moment vanished. "I didn't want to disturb Aarav and his team," Maya said, voice steady but cold. Her smile never reached her eyes. "They seemed so focused. I thought it better to see Uncle directly."

LM leaned back. "Su, do you have anything specific to discuss, or may Maya and I finish in private? She'll meet with you before leaving."

"Of course." Su backed toward the door. "I'll be downstairs if you need anything, Maya."

Su slumped against the corridor wall, chest constricted with anguish. Voices murmured behind the door, their meaning lost to her.

Descending the stairs, helplessness draped over her like a leaden shawl. In the living room, Aarav strummed his guitar, voice bright with

joy. Her beautiful boy had no idea his father was spinning a web meant to ensnare him.

Su collapsed into her chair, eyes squeezed shut. How could she shield him from a father who used power as a weapon?

That evening, Su pressed herself against the cold balcony doors, heart drumming so loud it seemed to echo in the silent night. Below, through the gap in the windows, she watched LM and Maya, heads bent together in secretive huddle.

"Excellent work, Maya," LM's voice drifted up as he patted her shoulder. "You've exceeded my expectations. You've become exactly the strategic thinker this family needs."

Maya's laughter rang out—not innocent, but calculated and sharp. "Thank you, Uncle. It wasn't easy at first, learning to think like you, but I understand now. Sometimes you have to manipulate the board to get the outcome you want."

"Precisely. You're going to make the perfect daughter-in-law, Maya. Unlike *that Naga girl*, you understand how power works, how families like ours maintain their position."

Su's breath snagged. LM's dismissal of Pakhi landed like a stinging blow. Her fist clenched around the curtain fabric, knuckles whitening.

"So everything is set for the Hornbill Festival?" Maya asked.

"Everything. If Aarav insists on going to this tribal celebration with his precious Pakhi and his band, then you're going too."

Su watched Maya's shoulders stiffen, doubt flashing before slipping away.

"Uncle, you know Aarav doesn't want me there."

"What Aarav wants is irrelevant. He's twenty years old and still thinks like a romantic child. He doesn't understand business alliances, social connections, the future of this empire."

"But what if he refuses to let me join?"

"He won't have a choice. I'm funding this entire expedition—travel, accommodation, equipment. Aarav needs to understand that the comforts he enjoys can be taken away."

Maya shifted uncomfortably. "And you're certain the plan will work?"

Su leaned closer, straining to hear.

"Maya, listen carefully. I've arranged for you to travel separately. You'll arrive a day after them, giving Aarav just enough time to realize how different their worlds really are."

"I don't understand—"

"Think, child. Aarav will be surrounded by tribals, eating their food, sleeping in primitive accommodations, pretending he belongs in their backward culture. By the time you arrive—familiar, representing everything comfortable and civilized—he'll be ready to come home."

"And if he's not ready?"

LM's laughter was devoid of warmth. "Then we implement phase two. You know what needs to be done."

Su caught Maya's slow nod, resignation carved into her jaw.

"I'm still nervous, Uncle. What if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing will go wrong as long as you remember everything I've taught you. You're no longer the naïve girl who followed Aarav around like a lost puppy. You're a woman who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to take it."

"You're right." Maya's voice grew stronger. "I've loved Aarav since childhood. I've waited through his rebellious phase, his artistic phase, his infatuation with that tribal girl. But no more waiting. After the festival, with only three days left before the final concert, he'll be mine."

"That's my girl. Remember, Maya—in chess, sometimes you sacrifice pawns to capture the king. Are you prepared to make those sacrifices?"

Maya stood, silhouette visible through the windows. "I'm prepared, Uncle. Pakhi has no idea what's coming. By the time we're finished, she'll be begging to return to her mountains."

"Excellent. Not a word of this to anyone. Especially not Su. She's too soft-hearted for strategic thinking."

Maya moved toward the door, then paused. "What about Aarav? Won't he hate me if he discovers what we've done?"

"Hate is just another form of passion, Maya. Passion can be redirected. Once Aarav realizes his tribal fantasy was a childish dream, he'll appreciate having a woman who understands his real world."

Maya turned back one final time. "I won't disappoint you, Uncle. This time next month, I'll be your daughter-in-law in every way that matters."

Su watched in horror as Maya slipped toward the private elevator. For the first time since childhood, Maya did not seek Su Aunt's blessing. She vanished without a backward glance, the elevator swallowing her whole.

Cold clarity crashed over Su: this was more than a plot against her son's happiness. She was watching the child she'd cherished transform into something unrecognizable, a fierce pawn shaped by LM's relentless control.

Yet as darkness edged closer, something shifted within Su. She resisted the pull to retreat into silent despair. Instead, she walked toward Aarav's door, steps slow but resolute. Pressing her palm flat against the polished wood, she whispered a silent vow.

No longer would she witness her family's unravelling without action.

She knocked softly, knowing this small gesture marked her first step away from passivity.

Chapters 57

The Predator's Web

The evening sun slanted through Megha's office windows as she spread the documents across her desk. Photographs, financial ledgers, testimony transcripts—each one a brushstroke in a decades-long mural of devastation.

"My God," Megha whispered. "Prii, look at this. The pattern is clear."

Prii leaned in, pulse quickening. Nothing had prepared her for unmasking her friend's boyfriend's father as a monster.

Megha's finger traced a timeline on the wall. "2001—a folk singer from Assam dies in a suspicious accident after refusing LM's exploitative contract. 2002—twin sisters from Manipur, classical dancers who accused him of harassment, found dead in their apartment."

"They seem connected," Prii said.

"It's impossible not to see the pattern. Seventeen male musicians systematically had their careers destroyed after refusing his terms. Twenty-three female artists have vanished, died inexplicably, or fled out of fear. Each case has chilling similarities."

Prii's eyes scanned the wall. "It's like he's weaving a web."

Megha pulled out a thick folder marked 'CONFIDENTIAL.' "But here's what makes my blood run cold—there are no solid grounds to prove him guilty. Every death has an alternate explanation. Every career destruction has a plausible business reason. Every disappearance has a convenient personal motive."

Prii dropped into the chair, pale. "He's that calculating?"

"He plans every move three steps ahead. Even when people suspect him, they can never prove anything." Megha opened another file. "But the most disturbing part is his background. LM's ID records are a masterpiece of fabrication."

"What do you mean?"

"According to official documents, he was born into a humble family. Father supposedly a street vendor selling cassettes in North Kolkata. Perfect rags-to-riches story." Megha's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Except the address doesn't exist. The father died when he was twelve—no death certificate, no family members who remember him. It's like LM materialized out of thin air at age eighteen with a perfect sob story and unlimited ambition."

She pulled out a photograph. "This was taken six months ago at one of his private parties. Notice the young people in the background?"

Prii gasped. "They look terrified. Like they're trapped."

"Three of those musicians have since had their careers destroyed. Two others left Kolkata suddenly, abandoning contracts and refusing to explain why."

Heavy silence filled the office.

"Prii, you can't share this with Pakhi. Not just because it's confidential, but because—"

"It would shatter her," Prii finished. "Learning that her future father-in-law might be a killer who destroys artists."

"And we don't have enough legal proof to bring him down. All we have are patterns, suspicions, circumstantial evidence that his lawyers would tear apart in court."

Prii looked up, alarmed. "Megha, the day at his farmhouse—"

"I know. The way he looked at us, the questions that had nothing to do with the article, the way he insisted we stay for dinner..."

"We were being evaluated," Prii whispered. "Like potential victims."

"Thank God we left when we did."

A visible shudder ran through both women.

Megha checked her watch and sighed. "Speaking of which, we have one final meeting with him scheduled. He agreed, but only after office hours. He prefers to discuss 'sensitive business matters' when there are fewer people around."

"Do we have to go?"

"We don't have a choice. This might be our only chance to get him to reveal something incriminating on record. But I've taken precautions—left copies of all our research with my editor, arranged for colleagues to check on us every hour, established a code word to signal if we need to leave immediately."

"What's our strategy?"

"We ask our prepared questions, try to get him talking about his 'business philosophy' with young artists. If we're lucky, his ego will make him reveal more than he intends."

"And if we're not lucky?"

Megha's smile was grim. "Then we make sure we're never alone with him, keep our phones recording, and pray his need to maintain his public image keeps us safe."

By 8 PM, LM's corporate office building had emptied. Megha and Prii's footsteps echoed through marble corridors as security escorted them to the penthouse suite.

"Ms. Dutta, such a pleasure." LM rose from behind his imposing desk, smile perfectly calibrated to suggest warmth while his eyes remained cold. "And young Prii, welcome back to my sanctuary of business."

The word 'sanctuary' sent a chill across Prii's skin.

"Thank you for making time, Mr. LM," Megha said, immediately noting how he positioned himself between them and the door.

"You're proud of your Assamese heritage, aren't you, my dear?" LM's tone was husky.

Prii gave a terse nod, instantly aware that his knowledge went far deeper than any routine interview could justify.

"Assam is beautiful. The women there have a rare, natural refinement."

Megha cleared her throat. "We were hoping to discuss your mentorship programs for young artists."

"Indeed. I believe in taking a very personal interest in promising talent. Very... hands-on guidance, you might say." His fingers tapped a restless rhythm on the desk.

"Could you elaborate on your selection process?"

LM's laugh was soft but menacing. "Oh, that's quite intuitive. I can usually tell within moments whether someone has the... qualities I'm looking for. Vulnerability mixed with talent, hunger for success, willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve their dreams."

His gaze fixed on Prii. "Some individuals have such natural appeal they practically call out for guidance. They need an experienced hand to show them how the industry works, the sacrifices required, the boundaries that need exploring."

Nausea swept through Prii. Her eyes flicked to the door, measuring her escape.

"Do you maintain long-term relationships with your mentees?" Megha asked.

"Oh yes. Once I invest in someone's potential, I never truly let them go. They become part of my... collection. Even if circumstances require patience, I always eventually claim what I've identified as mine."

He drifted closer to Prii, pouring water from a crystal pitcher. "You know, your documentary shows real promise. Raw talent like yours needs the right guidance. I could open doors most journalists spend decades trying to access."

His hand reached out to give her the glass, but his fingers deliberately brushed against hers, lingering too long. Prii jerked back, water sloshing dangerously.

Megha's professional mask cracked. "I think we have everything we need." She stood abruptly, gathering equipment with trembling hands. "Thank you for your time."

"Leaving so soon?" LM's smile turned predatory. He made no move to step away from blocking the door. "We've barely scratched the surface. Perhaps over dinner? Something more intimate than this sterile office."

"That won't be necessary." Megha grabbed Prii's arm and steered her toward the door, forcing LM to step aside.

"Think about my offer, young Prii," LM called after them. "The industry can be very rewarding for those who understand how to... cooperate. And very difficult for those who don't."

They ran through the marble corridors, footsteps echoing like gunshots. They burst through the building's entrance into the humid evening air.

"Oh God," Prii choked out, bending over and gulping air. "Did that really just happen?"

Megha's face was ashen, hands shaking. "That predatory bastard. He wasn't even trying to hide it. He practically announced his whole MO, knowing we couldn't prove a damn thing."

"The recording—"

Megha shook her head bitterly. "Nothing concrete. Nothing actionable. Everything he said could be interpreted as innocent business speak. Any lawyer would tear it apart, claiming we were reading sinister intent into normal mentorship language."

Tears of frustration streamed down Prii's face. "But we both know what he meant. The way he looked at me, touched my hand—"

"I know." Megha pulled her into a fierce hug. "But knowing and proving are two different things. Men like LM built empires on that exact difference. They operate in spaces where intent can't be documented, where threats sound like offers, where assault is packaged as opportunity."

"We can't use any of this, can we?" Prii's voice was small, defeated.

Megha's jaw tightened. "Not nothing. We know now, with absolute certainty, what kind of monster we're dealing with. We know how he operates, how he selects victims, how he uses power to trap talented young women. This was reconnaissance. We couldn't get evidence today, but we will. Men like him always make mistakes eventually."

"And how many more women does he hurt in the meantime?"

Megha had no answer. They stood in the gathering darkness, carrying knowledge they couldn't weaponize, disgust they couldn't wash away, **fear for all the other young women who would walk into LM's office seeking opportunity and find only exploitation.**

"Come on. Let's get you back to the PG. But Prii—" she paused, making sure the younger woman was listening, "—you are never, ever going anywhere near that man again. Promise me."

"I promise," Prii said, though she wondered about Pakhi, about Aarav, about all the people already trapped in LM's web.

As they disappeared into the Kolkata night, neither noticed the security camera that captured their hasty exit or the text message soon reaching LM's phone: *Subjects appeared distressed upon departure. Recommend continued monitoring.*

In his penthouse office, LM read the message and smiled. Fear was just another form of control, and he'd been cultivating it for over twenty years. Two more frightened women added to his collection of those who knew but couldn't prove it, who suspected but couldn't act.

It was, he reflected, almost too easy.

Chapters 58

Homecoming

The plane dipped through mist, and Pakhi pressed her forehead to the glass, heart pounding. Below, Nagaland's rolling hills unfurled like emerald tapestry.

"There it is!" Her voice rang with pure joy. "My homeland!"

The moment the wheels touched down, the cabin erupted—Pakhi, Prii, Aarav, Subho, and the Lord of Music Junior band shouting in unison: "HORNBILL!"

Megha caught their exuberance on film, grinning. "Your excitement is contagious."

"Just wait until you see Kisama Heritage Village!" Pakhi bubbled as they collected bags. "The festival grounds become a living museum—every tribe, every tradition, every story springs to life." She added softly in her mother tongue, "*Etiya te napuriba, nomokowa ki hangat ase.*" Nothing like home to find peace.

Aarav watched her animated face with pure adoration. "I've never seen you this happy."

"That's because I'm finally home. And I get to share it with you." She squeezed his hand.

The crisp, pine-laced air welcomed them. Pakhi stretched her arms wide, breathing deep. "Welcome to my world."

Subho gazed at the rolling hills in awe. "The air is so clean."

"Mountain air," Prii laughed. "No pollution, no chaos—just nature."

A line of sturdy jeeps waited, courtesy of LM's organization.

"At least the old man knows how to arrange transportation," muttered Ravi, their lead guitarist.

"Don't get comfortable," Aarav cautioned. "Maya arrives tomorrow."

Pakhi's excitement dimmed. "You didn't mention that."

"I didn't know. My father decided at the last minute." Aarav's jaw tightened. "Along with several other decisions I apparently have no say in."

Subho tried to lighten the mood. "The more the merrier, right?"

"That's not what bothers me," Aarav said quietly, eyes meeting Pakhi's with unspoken understanding.

Pakhi's phone rang. Her face brightened instantly.

"Ma! Are you and Pa already at the festival grounds?"

Priya's voice came through clearly. "Yes, Holud. We're at the heritage village, setting up the community pavilion."

"Perfect! I can't wait for you to meet everyone. Especially Aarav."

"And I'm eager to meet this young man who has captured my daughter's heart." There was an undercurrent Pakhi couldn't quite identify. "When will you reach Kisama?"

"By evening. The whole Kolkata group is here—my friends, Aarav's band, even a journalist covering the festival."

"Wonderful. We'll be waiting."

Pakhi spun to the group, energy renewed. "My parents are already there! Ma can't wait to meet everyone."

"What about return plans?" Megha asked, ever practical.

"The boys head back after the festival ends. But Prii, Ana, and I are staying a week longer. I have some... family matters." Her face shadowed with seriousness, her grandmother's secrets heavy on her heart.

Aarav noticed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She forced brightness. "Right now, I just want to show you the most beautiful festival in the world. Everything else can wait."

As they piled into the jeeps and set off toward Kohima, Pakhi's heart churned. Joy at returning home, excitement to share her world with Aarav, anticipation for the festival—all tangled with quiet anxiety about the talks awaiting her.

"Look!" She pointed out the window. "Traditional Naga houses built into the hillside. And those terraced fields—my ancestors cultivated them for generations."

The group pressed to the windows. Rolling hills blanketed in vibrant green stretched endlessly, brilliant wildflowers adding splashes of red, yellow, purple. The crisp air carried the rustle of leaves and melodic bird calls—stark contrast to Kolkata's constant noise.

"It's beautiful," Aarav whispered, though his eyes were on Pakhi rather than the scenery. Seeing her in her element, he fell in love all over again.

As the convoy snaked through the mountains, they remained blissfully unaware of shadows gathering in Kolkata. Maya packed bags with things meant for more than a festival, while LM set plans in motion that would turn celebration into peril.

A hornbill called from ancient trees along the roadside, its haunting cry echoing through misty hills—both welcome and warning.

Kisama Heritage Village unfurled before them, a vibrant tapestry alive with tradition. As their convoy topped the last hill, Pakhi gasped, palms pressed to the glass.

"Oh, Aarav! Look!"

The sprawling venue pulsed with energy. Traditional morungs crafted from bamboo and timber stood likewise guardians, their hornbill-crested roofs catching golden sunlight. Prayer flags danced in mountain wind, weaving rainbow canopy over a sea of visitors from every corner of the globe.

"It's a living museum," Aarav said, captivated. "Every structure tells a story."

The air vibrated with deep pulse of log drums. A solitary bamboo flute called out, haunting melody weaving through the crowd, while tribal performers chanted hypnotic refrains. Smoke curled from cooking fires, bearing rich aroma of smoked pork. The subtle tang of aged rice beer lingered—invitation to share warm hospitality.

"See those performers?" Pakhi pointed toward dancers in elaborate costumes. "That's the Ao tribe performing their harvest dance. And over there—Sumi warriors demonstrating traditional combat."

Pakhi nearly danced through the entrance, eyes alight with pride and joy of coming home.

"Accommodations are this way," she said, guiding them past vendors. "LM arranged luxury camps, but—"

"But we're not staying there," Aarav said, dialling his father.

LM answered. "Aarav, at the festival grounds?"

"Yes. It's incredible. We need to change accommodation plans."

Pause. "What kind of change?"

"Pakhi, Prii, and Ana want to stay in community tents with their parents. Subho and I will join."

Profound silence. LM's voice turned sharp. "Unacceptable. I arranged luxury accommodations. You will not stay in tribal tents—it would embarrass the company."

"With respect, they're not primitive. They're authentic experiences Pakhi's family offered."

"Don't lecture me! You're there for company and family. Stay in luxury camps. Final."

Aarav took a deep breath. "No, Father. I'm deciding where I stay. Subho and I are in the tents. Megha and the band can use camps when Maya arrives."

"Maya arrives tomorrow, and I'll supervise the band performance. Remember your responsibilities when I arrive. This tribal infatuation ends now. Act like my heir."

"My feelings for Pakhi are love, not infatuation. Nothing will change that."

"We'll see." LM ended the call.

Aarav looked up to find Pakhi watching with concern.

"Okay?" she asked softly.

"Perfect." He took her hand. "Lead the way. I want the real festival experience."

The community tent area felt like hidden world unveiled. Traditional shelters made from bamboo frames and handwoven cloth gave the grounds the semblance of living village. Pakhi's heart swelled as she spotted her parents near beautifully decorated tents.

Priya looked up from arranging sleeping mats, and her face transformed. "My Pakhi! You're finally here!"

The reunion overflowed: tears, laughter, hugs that melted away months of distance. Rick stepped out, his gentle face glowing with pride.

"Prii, Ana, my dear girls!" Priya embraced them like daughters. "How wonderful to have all three of you home together!"

"We missed you so much, Aunty," Prii said, voice thick with emotion.

"And this must be Aarav." Priya studied the young man who had captured her daughter's heart. Despite fears and reservations, she couldn't help but be impressed by his respectful manner.

"Namaste, Aunty." Aarav pressed his palms together. "Thank you for welcoming me into your home and festival."

"Namaste, son," Rick replied warmly, immediately charmed. "Any friend of our Pakhi's is family to us."

"Ma, Pa, I want you to meet Aarav properly." Pakhi's voice bubbled with happiness. "And Subho, Aarav's best friend, and Megha, the journalist covering our festival."

"We're honored to be here," Subho added sincerely. "This is unlike anything we've ever experienced."

Priya's smile radiated warmth as she greeted each guest, but her gaze lingered on Aarav, thoughtful and searching. She saw quiet gentleness, an artist's sensitivity in how he took in every detail with respectful wonder. Yet beneath welcoming demeanour, mother's instincts worried—could he truly understand their traditions? Would Pakhi find happiness in a world so different from his?

"Come, all of you," Rick said, gesturing toward the tents. "We've prepared traditional accommodations. Much better than those commercial camps."

As they settled in—Pakhi and the girls in one tent, Aarav and Subho in another—evening came alive with festival preparations. Children darted between shelters, laughter trailing behind. Elders spun stories by fires. The whole camp buzzed with anticipation.

"This is perfect," Aarav whispered to Pakhi as they sat outside their tents, watching the community come alive. "I can see why you love this place."

"I'm so happy you're here to share it with me." Her hand found his in gathering dusk. "Tomorrow you'll see the opening ceremonies—thousands of performers, traditional competitions, craft demonstrations. It's going to be magical."

Yet as night fell, a lone figure lingered in shadows at the edge of tent village. Kyan stood outside his tent, face unreadable, eyes fixed on the joyful reunion he could not join.

"She's here," he whispered, voice carrying dangerous mixture of longing and determination. "My little Billy is finally here. And after a day or two, everything changes."

Inside his tent, blades glimmered in moonlight—silent proof that Kyan's idea of protection had twisted into something far darker. A memory flickered: Pakhi as a child, reaching out with tiny hands. How far he'd come since those days, his longing for her safety morphed into obsession.

This time, he would take control.

Chapter 59

Love's Dark Descent

Ana slipped away from warmth and laughter, heart pounding as she headed toward the darker end of the tents, where shadows gathered like secrets.

The familiar figure outside the last tent made her breath catch. Even in moonlight, those haunting eyes were unmistakable.

"Kyan."

Without warning, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her inside. His lips crashed against hers with desperate intensity—months of isolation, addiction, and consuming obsession poured into one kiss.

Ana's world tilted. She had dreamed of this moment, fantasizing that Kyan would finally see her as more than information source. As shock faded, tears began streaming.

"Kyan, I... I don't understand." She pulled back to look at him properly. "You never... I was never your choice. Why now?"

"Ana." His voice was hoarse, damaged. "You've been the only one. The only one who stayed loyal, who helped me when everyone else turned their backs."

As her eyes adjusted, joy turned to horror. This wasn't the Kyan she remembered—not the handsome, athletic heartthrob with confident charm.

Now a skeleton in loose clothing, withered frame showing sharp angles and hollowness. Hands trembled, knees barely held him. The piercing eyes she loved were sunken, bloodshot, circled with darkness from sleepless nights and dependency.

"Oh, Kyan." Fresh tears flowed freely. "What have you done to yourself?"

"I've become what I needed to become. To protect what I care about, I must break rules. Destroy what's beautiful to rebuild on my terms."

Ana's heart shattered. "Dan Uncle... he must be devastated. And Lyna and little Natasha—"

His expression hardened. "Don't mention my family. They chose their path when they decided I was a monster. Now they're in London, trying to forget I existed."

"Because they love you! Because seeing you destroy yourself was killing them!"

"Is that what you think I'm doing? Destroying myself?" Bitter laughter. "No. I'm rebuilding into something that can eliminate threats before they hurt innocent people."

A chill ran down Ana's spine. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about." He approached with predatory intensity. "You've fed me information about Pakhi—her movements, relationships, plans. You helped me track her because you know she needs protection."

The tent felt suffocating. "Kyan, what did you do in Kolkata? What really happened to those three boys?"

His eyes glinted with pride. "I did what needed doing. Those animals planned to assault Billy. They stalked her, made crude remarks about a 'tribal girl' who dared belong in their city."

"So, you killed them."

"I would have if the commune hadn't stopped me. And I'd do it without hesitation. Just like I'll eliminate any other threat that tries to harm what's mine."

Ana's tears came from a deeper place now—profound recognition of how love could twist everything. "And now? What about Aarav? Have I been helping you hurt him too?"

"Aarav is a complication. Billy thinks she loves him, but she can't see the danger he poses. His father is a predator who destroys young artists and now targets our community, our festival, our people."

"So we destroy Aarav to save Pakhi?"

"We do whatever is necessary. You love me, don't you, Ana? You've loved me since college, even when I was too blind to see it?"

"Yes." She hated herself for the admission.

"Then trust me. Everything I do is to protect those we care about—Billy, our community, even you." He cupped her face with trembling hands. "Stay strong. Keep helping me."

Ana closed her eyes, feeling the last pieces of her moral compass shatter. "What do you need me to do?"

"Tomorrow, when the festival begins, LM and Maya arrive. They have plans that will hurt Pakhi and destroy Aarav's spirit. We're going to make sure those plans backfire spectacularly."

"How?"

Kyan's smile was sharp, dangerous. "We will provide them with what they desire, but not in the manner they anticipate." Maya thinks she can separate Billy from Aarav. LM wants to humiliate us and

damage his son's reputation. They have no idea they're walking into a trap."

Ana looked at him—this hollow shell of the boy she'd loved, this dangerous stranger who wore Kyan's face but spoke with the voice of someone who'd crossed lines that could never be uncrossed.

"And if innocent people get hurt in the process?"

"The only innocent people here are Billy and our community. Everyone else is either a threat to be eliminated or a tool to be used." His eyes bore into hers. "Which are you, Ana?"

In the dim tent, surrounded by tools of violence, Ana realized that love had destroyed her judgment, her morality, her ability to see who Kyan had become. Memories of college days—shared laughter in sunlit courtyards, his easy smile—clashed violently with present reality.

But it was too late to turn back. Too late to confess to Pakhi, too late to warn Aarav, too late to save anyone—including herself.

"I'm whatever you need me to be," she whispered, sealing her fate with words that tasted like ashes.

Outside, festival preparations continued, unaware that in the darkness at the community's edge, love had become a weapon aimed at their celebration of culture and unity.

Chapter 60

Beneath Starlit Skies

The scent of roasting corn mingled with night-blooming jasmine as music and firelight pulsed through the festival night. Pakhi scanned the crowd, unexpected emptiness sweeping over her.

"Ma! Where is Dan Uncle? My precious buddy! I haven't seen him, or Lyna, or little Natasha for months. I was so caught up in college. Only now do I realize how long it's been."

Pakhi's words lingered like smoke from the fires. Priya seemed to shrink, shoulders folding as if bracing for familiar pain. Across the flames, her eyes met Rick's—silent exchange heavy with years and unspoken regrets.

Rick's voice was barely above a whisper. "Dan has left for London, Holud. He took Lyna and Natasha. Their house stands empty now."

"London? But why? Dan Uncle loves Kohima more than anyone. He always said these hills were in his blood."

Rick hesitated, something heavy in his gaze. "And Kyan..." The name stuck in his throat like broken glass. "Long before Dan left, there were signs. Subtle but there." His voice turned somber. "Come, dear one. I'll share everything over dinner. Some truths are better shared under open skies."

The barbecue area transformed into cozy amphitheatre, alive with friendship and song. Band boys from Lord of Music Junior joined local musicians, guitars weaving with traditional instruments—melodies of love gained and lost floating like silk on the breeze.

Ana listened from afar, catching every note, every laugh. Yet she no longer belonged to that world of innocence and easy friendship. She had stepped into Kyan's universe, where shadows spoke louder than sunlight and love tasted of danger.

Inside the tent earlier, Kyan's touch had been desperate, almost feral, as if he could pour his entire wounded soul into Ana. Their lovemaking was wild and consuming. In those stolen moments, Ana felt whole at last.

"You are mine now," he'd whispered against her neck. "Say it, Ana."

"I'm yours," she'd gasped, meaning it with every fibre. "I've always been yours, Kyan."

"After I remove Aarav from the picture," he'd promised, lips tracing patterns that felt like brands of ownership, "after Billy realizes her fantasy with that city boy is just illusion, I'll make you my wife. We'll start fresh."

Ana had clung to his promises. The alternative was too painful: admitting she'd given up her soul for nothing.

Now, sitting apart, Ana watched Pakhi's world begin to unravel. Tangled satisfaction and sorrow churned inside her. Soon, Pakhi would learn that love was no fairy tale.

Pakhi pressed close to her father, tears streaking her cheeks as Rick quietly revealed Kyan's spiral into violence and madness. As he spoke of Dan's heartbreak and the painful choice to take his daughters far from a son who'd become unrecognizable, his hand trembled in the firelight.

"He was like my big brother," Pakhi whispered, voice broken. "Kyan taught me to ride a bicycle, helped with homework, scared away boys

who teased me. How could he become someone who thinks of... of murder?"

"Sometimes, Holud," Rick said, voice heavy with hard-earned wisdom, "love can turn into poison rather than medicine. When we love someone so much we're willing to hurt others for them, that's when love stops being love and becomes something dangerous."

Across the fire, Aarav absorbed the unfolding tragedy. His heart ached for Pakhi, but another feeling rose within him. Beneath starry sky and ancient Kohima hills, he watched the girl he loved pour her heart into her broken community. The depth of her love left him breathless.

"She's incredible," he murmured to Subho, voice filled with awe. "Look at how she cares, how deeply she feels everything. I've never known anyone with such capacity for love."

Subho smiled sadly. "Just make sure you're worthy of that love, Aarav. Someone who loves that deeply can also be hurt that deeply."

Priya watched her daughter's pain, familiar ache blooming in her chest. Tonight, under the protective dome of stars that had watched over these hills for millennia, she allowed herself to simply be a mother comforting her child, a woman grateful for the love that surrounded their small circle.

The music continued weaving through the evening air, carrying hopes and fears of young hearts learning that love was both the most beautiful and most dangerous force in the universe.

Tomorrow's dawn would bring choices that could shape destinies, revealing the true nature of hearts held captive by both love and vengeance.

Chapter 61

Predators Arrive

The plane jolted on landing, and Maya's fists locked in her lap. LM moved through life with effortless command, wielding power with ease. Maya wasn't sure if she even wanted these sharp-edged skills of manipulation, even for Aarav's sake. The thought of losing herself in this ruthless game stabbed at her heart.

The Naga welcome songs, rhythmic and powerful, mirrored the tumult in her heart. The pine-laced air clawed at her senses. She felt like an intruder in a land woven with stories she could never claim. The riot of colour whispered: *You do not belong.*

A gleaming BMW idled outside the terminal, mirror-bright finish jarring against wild, rugged mountains.

"Mr. LM, Sir! Welcome to Nagaland. I am John, your driver."

"Excellent." LM settled into plush leather with satisfaction. "Take us directly to the luxury camp. And driver—maintain discretion. I'll make my entrance my way."

The BMW snaked along mountain roads, but Maya barely registered the breathtaking scenery. Anxiety dulled everything—terraced fields, fortress villages, endless green. She wondered if fear had stolen wonder from her forever.

"Are you listening?" LM snapped.

Maya started. "Sorry, Uncle. I was just—"

"Focus. What happens when we get to the community area?"

Maya recited the plan with mechanical precision, though her stomach churned. "I express surprise and delight at finding Aarav staying in 'primitive' accommodations. I make subtle remarks about how uncomfortable and unhygienic the conditions are compared to what he's used to."

"Good. And then?"

"I suggest he'd prefer the luxury camps with us—that his band needs proper rest before their performance. I make it seem like I'm concerned for his comfort and professional needs."

"Exactly. Remind him of home, of memories. Make him feel guilty for choosing them over the people who've always loved him."

As she said it aloud, Maya wondered if she believed her own lines or was only rehearsing heartbreak for both of them.

LM nodded with approval. "And the masterstroke?"

"I mention you've been considering a recording contract for Lord of Music Junior, but you need to see them performing in appropriate, professional conditions. That staying in tribal tents reflects poorly on the band's image and might jeopardize their future opportunities."

"Perfect. Every pressure point covered—business, emotion, embarrassment. Aarav will be begging to leave."

The BMW crested a hill, revealing the sprawling festival grounds below. Even from a distance, the sight was breathtaking—thousands of colourful tents spread like living mosaic, smoke from cooking fires creating a dreamlike haze.

"My God," Maya whispered despite herself. "It's actually beautiful."

"Beautiful?" LM scoffed. "It's pageantry hiding poverty. Don't be fooled, Maya. This is a tourist trap."

Maya said nothing, but his words unsettled her. She longed to join the families by their fires, to taste simple happiness instead of this gnawing dread. Even as she clung to her mission, the glow of shared laughter and ancient songs began to erode her resolve.

The luxury camp contrasted sharply: climate-controlled tents, full bathrooms, leather chairs, mahogany tables.

"Now this is proper," LM declared.

Maya's tent adjoined LM's, linked by a lavish sitting room with stocked bar and entertainment system. The opulence felt jarring, almost indecent, set against the honest revelry outside. She felt like a spectator behind glass—safe, yet utterly isolated.

"Rest for an hour," LM said, pouring a drink. "I'll call Aarav to escort us. We appear gracious and interested in his adventure."

Maya retreated to her tent, luxury mocking her. Through the canvas walls, festival drums grew louder—a steady pulse echoing the countdown to impending betrayal. Firelight that once seemed warm now flickered ominously, casting shadows that loomed larger.

For the first time, Maya confronted the raw truth: this was not strategy but betrayal. As doubt crashed over her, she wondered if she could really go through with it. Part of her longed to find a way out, to resist the path laid before her. Another part feared the consequences of defiance.

The tension of her choices tightened around her heart—a silent plea for clarity amid the chaos.

Chapter 62

The Caged Bird's Realization

Aarav trudged toward the luxury camp, every step feeling like a retreat from the raw truth he'd tasted the night before. Born into privilege, he'd spent an evening with Pakhi's family that cracked open his heart to what family truly meant—something richer than wealth or status could ever offer.

The community tents pulsed with the heartbeat of clan culture. People gathered out of love and shared roots, not necessity. Here was warmth money could never purchase, belonging that luxury had always failed to deliver.

Sitting in the plush room, Aarav's thoughts drifted to his mother. She deserved to breathe this mountain air, to witness the meaning of family. But as always, LM had left her behind, an afterthought.

"She should be here," Aarav muttered. "One day, I'll bring Ma here. She deserves to see this."

The contrast cut deep: yesterday's discovery of genuine happiness swallowed by today's oppressive return to his father's constructed universe.

"Aarav! You look... rustic. This mountain air must agree with you," Maya called, tone overly bright.

She bounced into the sitting room, designer clothes and flawless hair jarring against the vibrant festival outside. Her smile stretched so tight it looked painful.

"Hello, Maya." Aarav's voice was flat. "Settled right into the luxury, I see."

"Uncle looked into each detail—"

"No amount of luxury can replace real human connection."

Maya laughed, brittle. "Philosophical as ever! But shouldn't the band rest? Lord of Music Junior's reputation... Uncle said—"

"Where's my father?" Aarav interrupted, voice edged. "Didn't he want to oversee this cultural experience himself?"

LM emerged from his tent, impeccably dressed, carrying himself with casual arrogance. "Aarav, my boy! Good to see you. Maya was just expressing concern about your accommodation choices."

"Surprised you're not experiencing the festival yourself, Father. Isn't this a business opportunity?"

LM's smile was calculating. "Actually, I've decided to modify our plans. Maya will accompany you to the community area for dinner tonight. I think it's important for her to see firsthand the... cultural immersion you've chosen. She can report back on the environment and your interactions. Business sometimes requires more nuanced insight."

Maya's head snapped toward LM, carefully composed expression cracking. Her eyes widened with confusion and panic.

"Uncle? I thought we were all going together. We never discussed this."

LM's smile never wavered, but there was steel beneath it. "Sometimes the most effective strategies require adaptation. You're perfectly capable of handling an evening among... these people. The information you bring back will be valuable. Consider it a test of your commitment."

Watching them, Aarav felt suspicion and anger coil inside him. Maya's anxious glance said it all—this was no friendly visit, just another of LM's calculated moves.

"What plan? What are you two plotting?" Aarav's voice was like a blade.

"Plotting? My boy, you're so suspicious." LM's tone was smooth. "Maya just wanted the festival experience with her old friend. No plot—just family support."

Maya stayed silent, eyes flicking between Aarav and LM like a cornered animal. The bold confidence she wore in Kolkata had vanished, replaced by raw fear.

"Prepare yourself, Maya." Aarav's voice was clipped. "We'll dine in the community area, then I'll bring you back. The authentic tribal experience should be... educational."

"But Aarav—" Maya's voice was small.

"One evening, Maya. Then you can go back and tell my father how primitive it is. Isn't that what you expect?"

LM watched, satisfied. "Excellent. Maya, remain open-minded. Valuable lessons come from unexpected places."

Maya vanished into her tent, movements sharp with barely hidden panic. Aarav leveled his father with a glare that could have melted steel.

"Whatever you're scheming, Father, it will fail. I finally see you for who you are, and I know the life I want. It's nothing like this." He swept his hand around the lavish room, disgust unmistakable.

"We'll see about that, son," LM replied quietly, voice carrying the promise of battles yet to come.

As Aarav left the luxury camp, the weight of his father's manipulation pressed down. But this time, fierce determination burned where resignation once lived. He would shield his happiness and Pakhi's world from LM, no matter the cost.

Chapter 63

"The Mask Cracks"

Maya's designer heels wobbled as she crossed into the community tents. Each step sent up dust that clung stubbornly to her shoes. Laughter, music, and firelight tangled in the air, battering against her composure. Smoke threaded through her perfume, making the distance between her world and this one painfully clear.

"Maya!" Pakhi beamed. "You're really here! Wonderful!"

Pakhi's presence knocked the air from Maya's lungs. In a simple white silk dress, hair loose and eyes shining with unguarded joy, Pakhi glowed with an innocence so genuine it left Maya unsteady.

Was this truly her rival? This girl who gazed at the world with the unguarded trust of the Kobima hills themselves?

"Pakhi, you look... so natural," Maya forced cheer into her words.

Aarav appeared, and as his eyes found Pakhi, Maya's confidence wavered. He looked at her as if every vision of beauty he'd ever imagined had come to life.

Maya watched love unfurl across Aarav's face. The truth hit her: there had never been a competition. She could never be the dream Aarav saw in Pakhi. She hadn't lost; she'd never even been a contender. Every plan she'd made now felt hollow.

Pakhi took her arm warmly. "Ma, Pa, this is Maya—Aarav's friend from Kolkata."

Priya approached, eyes wary. "Welcome, dear. Aarav's friends are welcome."

"Thank you, Aunty." Maya's voice was hollow. "I'm surprised Aarav didn't use the accommodations his father arranged."

The words slipped out—first venom-tipped dart from LM's arsenal.

Rick smiled gently. "You can't get the heart of our culture in hotels or camps."

Maya let out a brittle laugh. "I'm just worried Aarav isn't used to this." Her gaze flicked over the thin bedding, betraying discomfort.

Subho looked up. "We're sleeping better here. Authentic community beats luxury."

"Oh, absolutely!" Maya's smile tightened. "Just different from what Aarav is used to. His mother would worry if she saw this."

"Ma would love it," Aarav said, warning clear.

Ravi, Sameer, and Arjun exchanged wary looks. They'd known Maya since childhood and could feel the sting behind her words. This was not the friend who once played cricket in LM's garden. Maya was no longer just a friend; she was a force with an agenda.

"Let's eat early, Priya Aunty," Ravi said, guitar in hand. "We have practice tomorrow."

"But it's early—" Maya tried.

"No, Ravi's right," Sameer said. "We should eat and rest."

While Maya struggled to find her footing, a darker current stirred at the festival's edge. Away from the glow of tents, Kyan hunched in shadows, bloodshot eyes glued to his phone as Ana's secret videos played again and again. On the screen, Pakhi laughed with her friends, face bright with excitement about the upcoming performance.

His trembling fingers hovered over her image. All his talk of hatred and corruption was a mask for something rawer: a possessive, aching need to control Billy, to matter, to be seen. He ached to reach through the screen, to make her understand she belonged to him.

"I love her," he laughed, the sound sharp and bitter, already reaching for the things that dulled his pain. "She's just a tool. Billy is the prize. She always was."

Back at dinner, the festival's glow receded from Maya as the community drew closer around each other. Even Rick and Pakhi, always welcoming, grew cautious, sensing the unease threaded through Maya's words.

"Maya," Pakhi said, gently wary. "Is something wrong? You seem... different."

For a moment, Maya's mask cracked. She saw Pakhi—kind, beloved, untouched by spite. Her hand hovered, longing to reach out, but instead curled into a fist. Did she truly want to shatter something so unspoiled? The weight of her own motives pressed in. Was she really willing to ruin this just to claim victory?

"I'm fine," she whispered, eyes tearing up. "Everything's fine."

As the night deepened, Maya watched Aarav and Pakhi together, radiant as they plotted their performance. Her determination dissolved. Here, she was the only one who could unravel things.

Was she truly daring enough to act, or just a coward clinging to old hurts?

Chapter 64

Night of Revelations

The BMW purred to a stop outside the opulent camp. Aarav refused to cross deeper into his father's territory. Beside him, Maya sat shrouded in silence, her earlier confidence evaporated.

As he shifted into park, Maya's hand darted out, clutching his wrist with fierce desperation.

"Aarav, wait. Please."

He glanced at her trembling fingers, then lifted his gaze. Tears carved silent paths down her cheeks.

"Maya, what—"

"Do you remember when we were eight and I fell from your mango tree? You carried me home even though I was heavier than you."

Aarav's expression softened. "Maya—"

"And when we were twelve, during that storm, you let me sleep in your room and told me stories until the rain stopped."

"That was a long time ago." He tried to extract his hand.

"You always said I was your best friend. You promised we'd care for each other. Don't those years mean anything?"

Aarav studied her face, truly seeing her for the first time in months. The dashboard light highlighted tears like fragmented glass. He recognized the girl who'd been his partner in scraped knees and birthday cakes. Yet now, he glimpsed something darker, warped by desperation.

"Those memories matter, Maya. But they don't change how I feel now or what I want for my future."

"With her? That tribal girl will never fit into your world," Maya spat, bitterness sharpening every word.

"Don't." Aarav's voice was sharp. "Don't talk about Pakhi like that."

Maya released his hand as if burned. "Fine. If that's your choice." She stepped out, then turned back, expression icy. "If I can't have you, neither will she. I won't let her claim what I never could."

The car door slammed shut. Aarav watched her retreat, dread tightening in his chest.

Back at the community tents, Pakhi waited outside, wrapped in a traditional shawl against the mountain chill. Seeing her there—so open, so trusting—filled him with fierce, protective love.

"How did it go?" she asked softly, settling beside him on a log bench facing the star-scattered valley.

"She's not the girl I grew up with anymore. Something's changed her, made her... desperate."

They sat in peaceful silence, watching festival lights flicker like fallen stars. The night air carried distant drums and rustling tents.

"Pakhi," he said suddenly, turning to face her completely. "Regardless of what happens tomorrow, no matter who tries to tear us apart, promise me you'll hold on to this moment. Promise you'll remember how deeply I love you."

"Aarav, you're scaring me. What do you think is going to happen?"

"I don't know. But I can sense it coming, like a storm swelling just out of sight. My father, Maya—so many forces want to tear us apart."

Distant thunder rolled across the valley. A sudden gust rustled the tents.

Pakhi reached up and touched his cheek, feeling the dampness of tears he hadn't realized he was shedding. She leaned in and kissed him, pouring all her love into that touch. The kiss brimmed with promises and resolve.

"Whatever comes," she whispered against his lips, "we face it together. I'm not going anywhere, Aarav. Not without you."

In her tent, Ana watched through the zoom lens of her phone, hands shaking as she recorded their private moment. Every frame felt like fresh betrayal, but Kyan's hold on her—his threats and leverage—kept her trapped in shadows.

She sent the video to Kyan: "They're planning something for tomorrow's performance. More in love than ever."

Later that night, Aarav held Pakhi close as darkness thickened and festival laughter dwindled. When she finally slipped away to her tent, he lingered outside, pulling out his phone for the call he'd been avoiding.

"Aarav?" Su's voice was warm with surprise. "Jishu, it's so late. Is everything alright?"

"Ma, I just needed to hear your voice. How are you? How are you really?"

"I'm fine, Jishu. But you sound troubled. What's wrong?"

Aarav gazed up at the star-strewn sky. "Ma, have you ever felt trapped, like everyone else was deciding your life for you?"

Su's silence spoke volumes. When she finally answered, her voice was barely a whisper. "Every day, my son. Every single day."

"I'm going to change that, Ma. I don't know how yet, but I promise I'll find a way for us both to be free. This place, these people—they've shown me what true family is. What real love feels like."

"Just be careful, Aarav. Your father... he doesn't like to lose. And he especially doesn't like to be defied."

"I know, Ma. But some things are worth the risk. Some loves are worth fighting for."

After the call ended, Aarav lingered beneath the endless **canopy of stars, the weight of looming battles** pressing heavily on his shoulders. Tomorrow promised triumph on stage, but also dark machinations.

A cool wind swept over the camp, carrying the scent of impending rain. The earth itself held its breath, waiting for the inevitable storm.

He hoped that when it finally broke, the love he and Pakhi had forged would be resilient enough to survive.

Chapter 65

The Performance

Morning air crackled with electric anticipation. Breakfast was hurried, lunch became quick bites between sound checks, every spare moment consumed by frantic practice.

By late afternoon, word had spread: LM of Lord of Music Company had arrived to sponsor the best-performing band—a prize that could launch careers and change destinies.

Megha and Prii positioned themselves with cameras, ready to document the evening. But Ana sat apart, her usual chatter replaced by silence that radiated from fresh bruises hidden beneath carefully chosen clothing. The physical marks of Kyan's "love" had faded to yellow and purple, but the damage to her soul ran deeper.

"Ana, you've barely said a word all day," Prii observed with concern.

Ana's hollow laugh didn't reach her eyes. "Just tired. Big day for everyone."

Pakhi and Prii exchanged worried glances, sensing something fundamentally wrong.

As evening approached, Lord of Music Junior took the stage in LM's signature navy and red. But all eyes fixed on Pakhi, who had chosen to honour her heritage in spectacular fashion.

Her outfit was a masterpiece of traditional craftsmanship—golden yellow, capturing every nuance of the hornbill's majestic plumage. Flowing fabric shimmered with each movement, intricate beadwork tracing ancient stories. She had become the living embodiment of Holud Pakhi—the yellow bird.

"My God," Rick whispered to Priya. "She looks like a goddess descended from the hills."

Priya nodded, eyes filling with tears. "She's magnificent. But I feel... something terrible is about to happen."

The performance began with traditional Naga rhythms, Pakhi's voice soaring like a bird finding its element. Gradually, the music evolved—Rick's Bengali heritage, Aarav's contemporary stylings, and all three cultures merging into something breathtakingly beautiful.

Aarav's guitar complemented Pakhi's vocals with intimacy that spoke of deep connection. When they harmonized, two souls sang with one voice, creating melodies that bypassed ears and spoke directly to the heart.

The crowd was mesmerized. Even competing bands stopped to watch this fusion of tradition and innovation, ancient wisdom and youthful passion.

And then LM made his entrance.

He arrived with calculated timing—expensive coat, bald head gleaming under stage lights, gold chains catching illumination like warnings of wealth and power.

The moment Priya's eyes fell on him, something shifted deep in her memory. She knew that face—not as it was now, aged and hardened, but as it had been twenty years ago. Younger, charming, with full head of hair and a smile that had fooled an entire college.

"Rick," she whispered urgently, gripping his arm. "That man... I know him."

"Priya, that's impossible. That's LM, one of the most powerful music moguls in India—"

"I don't know how, but I do. There's something about his face, his voice... Rick, I've seen him before."

"You're imagining things, love. The excitement—"

"I'm not imagining anything!" Priya's voice carried desperation that made Rick study her face.

On stage, the performance reached its crescendo. Pakhi and Aarav moved with perfect synchronicity, voices and instruments creating something that transcended entertainment and approached spiritual experience. When the final note faded, silence stretched before erupting into thunderous applause.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer boomed, "we have our winner—Lord of Music Junior, featuring the extraordinary Holud Pakhi!"

The crowd's cheers were deafening. Pakhi's face radiated pure joy as she gestured for her parents to join them, wanting to share this triumph.

But as Rick and Priya climbed onto the platform, LM visibly recoiled. For a split second, his composed mask slipped, revealing something that looked almost like fear. He took an involuntary step backward, calculating eyes fixed on Priya's approaching figure.

Priya tried desperately to place the memory, to connect this powerful stranger with someone from her past. But the pieces wouldn't quite align, like a puzzle with crucial fragments missing.

The celebration continued—handshakes, congratulations, photographs—but underneath the surface joy, currents of recognition and dread were beginning to flow.

That night, long after the festival had settled into slumber, Priya lay awake staring at the tent ceiling. The unease had intensified,

transforming into bone-deep certainty that danger was circling her daughter like a predator selecting its moment to strike.

At two in the morning, unable to bear the weight alone, she slipped out and called Megha.

"Priya Aunty?" Megha's voice was alert despite the late hour. "Is everything alright?"

"Megha, I need to talk. Can you meet me by the main stage? It's about Pakhi... about that man LM. I think I know who he is."

"I'll be right there."

Under the star-scattered sky, Priya's words tumbled out in desperate rush. "Twenty years ago, in Kolkata, there was a student named Neev. He destroyed Rick's music career, humiliated us both, and drove us from the city in shame and fear."

Megha's blood ran cold. "Aunt, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that LM—this powerful music mogul who just sponsored my daughter's performance—I think he's the same person who once tried to destroy our lives. And now he's here, with access to Pakhi, with power to hurt her in ways I can't imagine."

"Are you certain?"

"Not completely. But my heart knows. My instincts know. And I think he recognized us too. Did you see how he stepped back when I came on stage?"

Megha's mind raced, connecting Priya's revelation with her investigation into LM's predatory history. "Aunt, if what you're saying is true, then Pakhi is in more danger than we realized. This isn't just about business or competitions. This is about revenge."

As they stood in shadow of the stage where triumph had turned to terror, they understood that the real battle was just beginning.

LM hadn't come to sponsor young talent—he had come to settle old scores and claim new victims.

And tomorrow would bring whatever dark plans he'd been constructing since the moment he realized that his old enemies had placed their most precious treasure directly within his reach.

Chapter 66

Darkness Unleashed

LM prowled the luxury camp's sitting room, each step a drumbeat of unravelling control. Gold chains flashed like warning signals, fury simmering beneath the surface. The master strategist had vanished, replaced by a man wrestling with ruins of his ambitions.

"Twenty years. Twenty years building this empire, and they think they can threaten it all?"

He'd recognized Rick and Priya in a heartbeat: the mountain boy fuelled by dreams and the Brahmin girl fierce in love. Their defeat in Kolkata had once crowned him in victory. Now their daughter—a prodigy—threatened all he held dear. The past refused to stay buried.

His phone buzzed. Maya's name. He snatched it up, rage barely leashed.

"Uncle? Did you want to change our plans?"

"No more manipulation. Tomorrow morning, we end this."

"What do you mean?"

LM's voice was calm, deceptively so. "The Rick Angami family... they're no longer an obstacle. Time to end this."

"But Uncle, I thought we were just trying to separate Aarav from—"

"Tomorrow at breakfast, their story ends in tragedy."

Maya inhaled sharply. "Uncle, what exactly are you planning?"

"Decide, Maya. Are you the woman who claims what she wants, or do you surrender? If Aarav isn't yours, he belongs to no one."

Silence stretched—a quiet battle of wills. Maya's mind whirled with doubt, heart torn between loyalty and morality. Aarav's honest smile clashed with her uncle's ruthless eyes. But the moment passed.

"What do you need me to do?"

"Be ready at dawn. Ensure Aarav and his friends are precisely where I need them. After tomorrow, they'll never trouble us again."

Maya shivered. She wanted to talk to Su Aunty, to Aarav. But it was too late. She was in it now. And she was ready to do anything to get Aarav back.

As the call ended, LM dialled another number, reaching forces far darker than any he'd orchestrated.

"This is LM. Tonight, you have work. The path behind my accommodation—strew it with broken glass and sharp pebbles. Make it look natural. Complete before sunrise."

Ana lay shattered on the floor of Kyan's tent, spirit dulled by his violent possessiveness. Under his obsession, her sense of self had faded, leaving her bruised in body and soul.

"You're mine now," Kyan whispered against her ear. "Completely and forever mine."

Every illusion had crumbled: to Kyan, she was only a bridge to Pakhi, never a true partner. Her betrayal had made her nothing but a pawn.

Kyan's phone buzzed. His bloodshot eyes widened as he read Billy's group message about breakfast invitation from LM.

"Perfect. Absolutely perfect."

He rose, deaf to Ana's whimpers, and crossed to a locked box in the corner. Hands shaking—withdrawal or anticipation, he couldn't tell—he grabbed his stash and used, letting numbness flood his veins.

Next, he unearthed another box, buried and sealed with heavy locks. Inside, weapons gleamed—objects that belonged to violence, not celebration. Promising murder instead of safety.

His fingers curled around the cold steel of a pistol.

"Tomorrow," he said to Ana, "everything changes. After LM's plan, Pakhi will see who really loves her."

He pulled out his phone, messaging his loyal followers—young men who'd marched with him into darkness, convinced by his warped vision of defending their community.

At dawn, we move. Pakhi needs saving from the Plainsmen's corruption. Before LM succeeds, we bring Billy back where she belongs. Use any force necessary.

Ana watched Kyan's preparations, horror rising with every moment. The truth crashed down: her choices had set this violence in motion. Faces of friends she once cherished flickered in her mind, each now at risk because of her.

"Kyan," she pleaded, "please don't. They're innocent. Just young and in love."

Kyan met her gaze, eyes cold. "Love? What do you know about love? You're just a tool for information. Tomorrow, Billy will know real protection only comes from me."

Ana's voice broke. "And what am I, Kyan? What was I to you?"

"A convenience." He turned away, checking his weapons. "Nothing more."

The words hit like physical blows. Ana curled into herself, finally understanding the depth of her betrayal—not just of her friends, but of herself.

As dawn crept closer, LM and Kyan pressed forward with separate but deadly schemes, each fuelled by obsession. At the heart of it all lay Pakhi, sleeping peacefully, oblivious to the storm gathering around her.

Outside, a lone torch flickered in the wind, casting unsteady shadows. The very air held its breath.

Tomorrow would reveal who would suffer the consequences.

Tomorrow, everything would burn.

Chapter 67

Peak of Glory

Joy burst forth like fireworks as dreams soared into reality. The Lord of Music Junior team circled the roaring bonfire, faces alight with victory. Laughter sparkled with disbelief as they savoured triumph's sweetness.

"Can you believe it?" Ravi yelled, hoisting his bottle high. "We actually won!"

"We didn't just win," Sameer said, voice filled with emotion. "When we played that final chord, it echoed off the mountains, lifting our spirits to the stars. That moment is what people will talk about forever."

Neighbours poured in with fragrant delicacies and homemade rice wine. Pakhi glided through the crowd like a golden spirit, hornbill costume mirroring the dance of flames.

"Darling, you made us all so proud," a village elder told her, weathered hands clasping hers. "Your voice carried the soul of our people to the world."

"Videos are blowing up," Prii said, waving her phone. "People everywhere are saying they've never heard anything like this."

Subho grinned. "With Lord of Music's support, we're set for life."

Beyond the laughter, Ana slipped away unnoticed, shadows clinging to her steps. Each bruise beneath her clothes throbbed, but the ache in her heart was sharper. She'd watched her friends revel, haunted by knowledge that she'd betrayed them for a man who saw her as nothing more than a pawn.

Back at the bonfire, Aarav caught Pakhi's hand. "Come on," he whispered, eyes sparkling with love and mischief. "Let's get some time alone."

Pakhi grinned. "Just for a moment. No one will notice."

Hand in hand, they slipped away, wandering until a quiet meadow welcomed them. Winter cornflowers shimmered silver beneath the full moon. Music and laughter floated on cool mountain breeze. Here, beneath endless stars, they were utterly alone.

"I can't believe this is real," Pakhi whispered as Aarav pulled her into his arms. "Everything feels like a dream."

"If it's a dream, I never want to wake up." His lips found hers in a kiss that tasted of triumph and infinite possibility.

Bathed in moonlight, they clung to each other as passion blossomed. Surrounded by ancient hills and the blessing of stars, certainty filled their hearts.

Nothing could tear them apart.

"I love you, Holud Pakhi," Aarav whispered against her hair. "My yellow bird. You've given me everything I never knew I needed."

"And I love you, my mountain king. You've shown me that love can be both wild and gentle, powerful and tender."

After a while, Aarav reluctantly pulled out his phone. "I need to call Ma. She should hear the good news from me."

Su's voice was warm with motherly pride. "Jishu, my son, how did the performance go?"

"Ma, we did it! We won! Lord of Music Company is sponsoring us."

"Oh, my darling boy!" Su's joy was unmistakable, though something in her tone made Aarav pause. "I'm—I am incredibly proud of you. "Ma, you don't sound completely happy. What's wrong?"

Silence stretched before Su spoke again. "I am happy, Jishu. Truly. But... be careful. Your father... I don't trust his sudden interest in supporting your music. Just promise me you'll be cautious."

Aarav laughed. "Ma, for once, I think he's changing. Maybe he finally gets what I can do."

"I hope you're right, Jishu. I truly do. But just... watch yourself. And watch the people you care about."

After the call, Aarav drew Pakhi close, breathing in the wildflower scent of her hair. The night brimmed with promise, neither suspecting that this perfect happiness would soon become only a memory.

As they stood together, the gentle hum of festivities started to fade, replaced by a distant, almost imperceptible drumbeat. It came from the darkness beyond the meadow—steady and sombre, echoing the uncertainty lying ahead.

The embers of their bonfire flickered softly, occasionally dimming, as if mirroring the faint yet persistent chill threading through the night's warmth.

Chapter 68

The Breakfast Trap

Sunlight spilled gold across the festival grounds as Aarav's team prepared for their momentous breakfast. The luxury camp gleamed ahead, a world apart from the community tents behind them. Yet even in this golden morning, a sharp metallic tang hung in the air—discordant, unsettling.

"I can't believe we're actually having breakfast with Lord of Music himself," Ravi whispered, straightening his shirt for the tenth time.

"If we make the right impression, everything changes," Sameer said, voice taut.

Subho lagged behind, weight pressing on his shoulders. Unlike his friends, he'd grown up around "Lord Uncle," catching glimpses of the shrewd mind behind the polished mask. Su Aunty always welcomed him like family, but LM held him at arm's length—never an equal, always Aarav's friend and beneficiary.

"Subho, you're quiet," Aarav observed, falling into step. "Everything alright?"

"Just thinking. Your father... he's not usually this generous with his attention. It makes me wonder what's changed."

Aarav's face lit up with genuine happiness. "Maybe he's finally realized I'm capable of succeeding on my terms. Maybe seeing me win showed him that my music has real value."

Subho longed to share his doubts, to warn Aarav about the patterns he'd seen in LM over the years. But witnessing his friend's rare, unguarded hope, he couldn't bear to snuff out that fragile light.

"I hope you're right," he said quietly.

Pakhi emerged, radiant in red and white Naga dress. Her dimpled smile sent Aarav's heart into a flutter.

"My little red riding hood," Aarav whispered, voice full of tender adoration.

"Do I look alright?" Pakhi asked nervously. "I want to make a good impression on your father."

"You look perfect. You're like all the beauty of this place come to life."

The breakfast spread dazzled—every dish meticulously arranged to showcase luxury. LM had crafted an atmosphere of celebration, yet beneath it all, a strange chill clung. His smile stopped short of his eyes.

"Come, welcome!" LM called out with polished warmth. But Subho caught the way his gaze lingered on Pakhi—an intensity that made his skin crawl. "Please, sit. Today is for young talent and bright futures."

They discussed music, future plans, the prior night's performance. Subho noticed LM's probing questions about Pakhi. Maya's agitation as she checked her phone, the tent entrance.

After the meal, LM leaned back with apparent satisfaction. "Well, this has been delightful. I'm so pleased to finally meet the young woman who has captured my son's heart."

"Thank you, Uncle," Pakhi replied graciously. "I'm honoured to meet Aarav's father. He speaks of you with such respect."

"Does he?" LM's smile turned slightly predatory. "How... touching."

Maya spoke up, enthusiasm oddly brittle. "There's a beautiful lake just behind the camp. Why don't we all walk there? The morning light is perfect for photos." She shot a quick look at LM.

"Sounds wonderful!" Pakhi agreed, her trusting nature missing any hint of danger.

"An excellent idea," LM concurred. "Fresh mountain air—what could be more perfect?"

As the group moved toward the door, LM checked his watch. "You know what, I'll stay behind and make some business calls. This old man needs his rest."

A silent glance flashed between LM and Maya—too quick for most to notice. But Subho caught it. Realization hit him like a wave. This was no casual suggestion. This was a calculated move to draw them away from safety.

"Aarav," Subho said urgently, "maybe we should stay near the festival grounds—"

"Nonsense!" Maya interrupted, voice sharp with desperation. "It's just a quick walk. What could possibly go wrong?"

Subho's throat tightened. Clammy sweat broke across his forehead. He'd seen these setups before in LM's business world: isolate, corner, strike. His heart pounded. This was a trap, and they were being drawn into it.

As they headed for the door, Subho made a silent vow. Whatever waited at that lake, whatever snare had been set, he would not let his friends stumble into it unaware.

"Aarav," he said quietly, catching his friend's arm at the entrance. "Can I talk to you? Privately?"

"Sure, but make it quick. I don't want to keep everyone waiting."

Subho pulled him aside, voice urgent and low. "Something's off, yaar. Your father's sudden generosity, Maya insisting on this lake trip, the way they keep exchanging looks—it doesn't add up."

"Subho, you're being paranoid—"

"Am I? Think about it. When has your father ever invited your friends for breakfast? When has he ever shown interest in your girlfriend? This isn't like him."

Aarav's smile faltered. "Maybe he's changing. Maybe last night showed him—"

"People like your father don't change—they just shift their tactics." Desperation crept into Subho's voice. "I've watched him my whole life. I know how he moves when he wants something or feels threatened."

"Threatened by what?"

"By you succeeding without him. By happiness he can't control." Subho's grip tightened. "Please, trust my instincts. Something about today is off."

Aarav looked back toward the group, where Pakhi chatted animatedly, face radiant with innocent joy. Then at his best friend's genuinely worried expression.

"What are you suggesting?"

"Stay near the community area. Make up an excuse—say you need to check equipment, anything. Just don't let them pull us away from people who care about us."

Aarav hesitated. Subho's words hit a nerve, stirring a flicker of unease.

But Maya's call shattered the moment.

"Aarav, Subho! Are you coming? The morning light won't last forever!"

"We're coming!" Aarav called back, then turned to Subho with a reassuring smile. "Look, I appreciate your concern, but sometimes

people do change. Maybe my father is finally ready to accept that I've grown up."

Desperation gnawed at Subho. His warning had landed nowhere.

"Just promise me you'll watch Maya. She's changed, Aarav. Please."

"I'll be careful," Aarav promised, though his tone suggested he was humouring his friend more than heeding his advice.

As they rejoined the group, Subho couldn't shake the feeling that had taken root in his chest—a cold, certain knowledge that they were walking directly into shadow.

Pakhi slipped her hand into Aarav's, eyes bright with trust and love.

And together, they stepped toward the lake.

Chapter 69

When the World Stopped

Inside the police station, Priya faced the duty officer, hands shaking as she gathered jagged memories buried for two decades.

"This sounds impossible," she said, voice trembling. "But LM is the same man who ruined us in Kolkata—he was Neev then."

Choking on tears of shame and guilt, she unlocked the story: how Rick's music career was dismantled piece by piece, how public humiliation followed, how the charming college student they trusted became a nightmare who shattered dreams.

Megha listened with growing horror, connecting dots. "Ma'am, this corroborates my evidence about LM's predatory behaviour. He has a documented history of targeting vulnerable artists."

The police officer looked sceptical. "Do you have concrete evidence linking this LM to your college incident?"

"Not yet, but we need time to—"

"We can't wait!" Priya shot to her feet. "My daughter is with him right now. Take me to LM's place. Now."

"You named her Holud Pakhi after Rick's band, 'The Yellow Hornbill,' right?" Megha said softly.

"Yes," Priya whispered. "She was our hope reborn. And now she's in the hands of the man who tried to destroy that hope."

They raced from the station. As the road climbed toward the luxury camp, cold certainty gripped Priya's heart—a terrible fear that they might already be too late.

The group wound down the winding path, golden morning light playing tricks on their eyes. Laughter floated in the air, masking the foreboding silence of the forest.

"The view will be spectacular," Maya said, voice artificially bright. "Perfect for photographs."

Aarav strolled hand in hand with Pakhi, pointing out wildflowers and ancient stone walls. Only Subho's gaze darted warily, unease growing with every step.

"Wait," Aarav said suddenly, stopping. "The path ahead—it's all covered with broken glass."

Before he could shout a warning, Maya lashed out, kicking Pakhi's foot and sending her tumbling headlong onto the glittering shards.

"PAKHI!" Aarav screamed as she fell, traditional dress catching on jagged glass as she rolled down the steep incline.

The sounds were nightmarish: fabric ripping, glass splintering, and then the dreadful crack as Pakhi's head collided with a boulder. She went limp, blood seeping from her wounds, mingling with dirt and glass. Her golden dress turned her into a shattered bird, feathers streaked with red.

"Maya, why did you do that?" Subho shouted, voice raw with horror.

"Me! You are mistaken! Why me?!" Maya dusted herself off, eyes icy. "It happened so fast."

But no one was looking at her anymore. They were too busy with Pakhi—checking injuries, surrounding her with protective concern that Maya had spent years craving for herself.

A wave of nausea rolled through her. Not from fear of being caught, but from horrifying realization. *What have I become?*

"Maya?" Prii's concerned voice broke through her thoughts. "Are you okay? You look pale."

Maya looked up, tears filling her eyes. "I just... I can't believe that happened. Poor Pakhi..."

Prii hugged her, and Maya allowed herself to be comforted. But watching Aarav cradle Pakhi with such desperate tenderness, something cracked inside her—a hairline fracture in the armor she'd been building since LM first whispered poison into her willing ears.

Nobody suspected her involvement.

And that, Maya realized with a chill, might be the most damning thing of all.

At that exact moment, Priya's voice pierced the morning air from somewhere above them. "PAKHI!"

The sound shattered the morning calm, unleashing chaos from every direction.

Gunfire exploded from the jungle—a bullet slicing through air straight for Aarav's chest.

Ana darted out from the undergrowth. She positioned herself between Aarav and the oncoming bullet, absorbing the impact. The force threw her backward as blood blossomed across her shirt.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, fading. "I never meant harm. But loving Kyan destroyed your love story, Pakhi. I'm sorry!"

From the jungle, wild commotion erupted. The ground trembled as stampeding wild bison, panicked by gunfire, thundered closer, shaking the earth beneath them.

Priya burst onto the scene, instantly spotting Ana slumped and bleeding. Her frantic gaze swept the chaos until she found Pakhi's motionless body among the glass and rocks, golden dress stained with blood.

Priya dropped to her knees, searching for a pulse and finding it—faint, but there.

"She's alive," Priya whispered through tears. "Rick! Help me!"

She cradled Pakhi gently, and for a heartbeat, the world paused. Festival music faded, mountain birds hushed, even the distant thunder of bison felt far away and dreamlike.

Rick appeared beside her, gentle face transformed by fear. Aarav knelt beside them, hands shaking as he helped support Pakhi's head.

Pakhi's red dress, once a symbol of joy and pride, now lay torn and bloodied. The fabric, though damaged, held intricate patterns of resilience—hinting at the possibility of mending, just like the girl herself.

Her voice, which had soared so freely hours ago, now lay silent.

But hope whispered that it would rise again.

From the jungle, Kyan's anguished roar tangled with war cries of his followers, echoing off the mountains as if the land itself bore witness to the collision of love and hate—and the reckoning that must follow.

Chapter 70

The Aftermath

Sirens tore through the mountain air. Above the chaos, one sound cut through everything—Priya's voice, raw and primal, the anguished cry of a mother facing her deepest nightmare.

"My daughter! My Pakhi!"

She ran toward where Aarav knelt beside Pakhi's still form, shoving through the crowd with desperate strength. When she saw her daughter's pale face, blood seeping through makeshift bandages, something inside her shattered—eighteen years of carefully constructed peace exploding into rage and grief.

"Get away from her!" Priya's hands pulled at Aarav's shoulders. "Get away from my child!"

"Aunty, please—" Aarav's face was streaked with tears, hands still gently holding Pakhi's. "The ambulance is coming. She's going to be okay."

"Okay?" Priya's laugh was cold, bitter. "How can anything be okay? We ran from your family twenty years ago, and still you found us. Still you brought destruction to our door."

Rick arrived, breathless, and immediately knelt to check Pakhi's pulse. His hands were steady, but his eyes held ancient pain. "Priya, not now. She needs—"

"She needs to be away from them!" Priya turned on Aarav with fury born from years of suppressed trauma. "We have had enough of your family. Please, beta. I'm begging you. Leave my daughter alone."

"I love her, Auntie. I would never—"

"Love?" The word was acid on Priya's tongue. "Your father loved too. Loved power more than people. Loved control more than mercy. His love ruined us not once, but twice. I abandoned everything—my family, my name, my home. Rick silenced his music. We gave up our entire world to keep our daughter safe." Her voice broke. "And still, your father found a way to hurt us."

Aarav looked at Rick desperately. "Uncle, please. You know I'm not my father."

Rick's eyes were impossibly sad as paramedics lifted Pakhi onto the stretcher. "I know, beta. But Priya is right. Some gaps are just too wide."

"This can't be how it ends—"

"It has to be." Priya gripped Aarav's arm, forcing him to meet her eyes. "Please forgive us, but you must go. Every time we trust the plains, we bleed for it. My daughter has bled enough."

Nearby, Prii and Megha reached Ana, slumped against a tree clutching her wounded shoulder. Blood seeped between her fingers.

"Ana!" Prii pressed cloth against the wound. "Stay with me!"

"I'm sorry," Ana whispered, face ashen. "I'm so sorry. This is **my fault—**"

"Save your strength," Megha commanded, though her hands trembled. "You can explain later."

At the luxury camp, LM's arrest unfolded with insulting ease. He smoothed his expensive coat, adjusted his cufflink and summoned his driver with casual entitlement.

"Contact Ghosh and Associates immediately. Inform them that their harassment is based solely on suspicion. This is persecution of a legitimate businessman."

Before the police van doors closed, his lawyer's number was already ringing.

Maya watched from her tent entrance, her carefully maintained composure finally cracking. She retreated inside and sank onto her bed, nauseated by her actions yet unable to suppress a twisted flicker of satisfaction—Pakhi no longer stood between her and Aarav.

A shadow fell across her doorway.

"Maya." Subho's voice was soft but firm. "I saw what you did."

Her head snapped up, tears vanishing instantly, replaced by something cold and calculating. "Be very careful what you're accusing me of, Subho."

"I'm not accusing. I'm stating a fact. You tripped Pakhi deliberately. You almost killed her."

For one moment, genuine fear flickered across Maya's face. Then her phone was out, a quick call was made.

"Uncle? Yes, it's me. Someone is threatening to spread lies... Yes, Subho... Thank you, Uncle."

She smiled, and it was the smile of someone holding all the cards. "You have a choice. Walk away and forget what you think you saw, or explain to your father why he's suddenly unemployed. That accounting irregularity investigation could go either way..."

Blood drained from Subho's face. His father's livelihood, threatened in a single phone call.

"That's what I thought." Maya's voice was sickly sweet. "Uncle always says the best way to ensure silence is to make speaking more expensive than someone can afford. Your father can't afford it. Can he?"

She brushed past him out of the tent, leaving Subho alone with truth burning in his throat like swallowed poison.

By evening, LM's lawyers had arrived. He was released with respectful apologies.

That was the power of wealth and connections.

As ambulances carried Pakhi and Ana down the mountain, a procession of anxious loved ones followed.

In the back of one ambulance, Pakhi stirred briefly, grey-blue eyes fluttering open.

"Aarav?" she whispered.

Priya gripped her hand. "Shh, baby. Don't speak. Just rest."

"Where... where is he?"

"He's gone, Pakhi. He had to go."

A single tear traced down Pakhi's pale cheek before her eyes closed again.

Behind them on the mountain, Aarav stood alone, watching the ambulance lights disappear into the darkening valley. Subho approached quietly, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"They won't keep you apart forever," Subho said, though he wasn't sure he believed it.

Aarav said nothing. He simply stood there as night fell over the hills, festival lights twinkling in the distance like stars that had fallen to earth—beautiful, unreachable, impossibly far away.

In the jungle, Kyan and his Wild Bison group melted into shadows, leaving behind only gunshot echoes and the memory of love twisted beyond recognition.

The saga born from a mother's fierce protection had reached its breaking point. Trust lay shattered, hearts splintered like broken glass along the mountain path.

As twilight deepened, one question haunted two generations:

Could love ever bridge the chasm between worlds destined to remain apart?

Chapter 71

The Mother's Confession

The ambulance rocked along serpentine mountain roads, siren wailing into the dusk. Inside, Priya cradled Pakhi's battered body, voice sinking to a haunted whisper. After two decades, secrets long entombed clawed into the open.

"My little birdie," she murmured above the medical equipment's beeping. "You always wanted to know about your Ma and Pa's story. I'm sorry, Billy. I'm so terribly sorry. I never told you."

Pakhi's face was a portrait of agony, tiny glass shards glinting in her cheeks. Blood welled from the edges of her grey-blue eyes, mingling with silent tears. The bandage on her head had surrendered, crimson soaking through. Her limbs sprawled at impossible angles, body as delicate as a bird with splintered wings. Only the erratic flutter of her heartbeat on the monitor betrayed the fragile spark of life within.

"The curse of Kalima," Priya whispered, voice thick with guilt that had festered for decades. "I stole from her temple—jewellery and cash—to save your father. Perhaps she never forgave me."

Megha, notebook in hand, rode in the ambulance to chronicle every detail. Yet witnessing Priya and Pakhi's raw confession, she found herself caught between professional distance and aching empathy.

"Your father wasn't just a singer, Pakhi. He was a lyricist, composer, magician of sound—he conjured whole worlds from music. That's why Neev wanted to ruin him. Not just envy, but hunger to steal true brilliance." Priya's words tumbled out like a river breaking free. "Neev's father owned Bhavna Studio. They were recording demos for Mega Productions. I stopped Rick so many times from trusting that boy. I could see the calculation in Neev's eyes, the way he studied your father like a predator. But Rick's heart was too pure to recognize evil wearing a friendly face."

A sudden jolt rattled the ambulance. Pakhi's body shifted, a faint moan slipping from her lips. Priya's arms tightened, fierce and protective.

"Rick shared his composing diary with Neev—pages and pages of songs from his soul, from our love, from his dreams of the mountains. Neev promised to show them to his father. He said it would help Rick get a recording contract."

Priya's laugh was sharp and cold as mountain wind. "From that moment, our lives unravelled. Neev stole those songs and claimed them as his own."

"How did you find out?" Megha asked gently, journalist instincts compelling her to gather the full truth.

"We were in the college canteen when I heard Rick's songs playing on MTV. His melodies, his words, his very soul—but with Neev's name credited as composer and lyricist." Priya's voice cracked with remembered anguish. "Rick went completely white. Then he rushed out without a word. I followed, terrified."

She shut her eyes, the memory searing. "When we arrived at Neev's house, that monster was revelling with his newest conquest. Rick stormed past the guard. He nearly strangled Neev with his own hands."

"But Rick was arrested instead," Megha guessed, understanding the cruel irony.

"Neev's father had already filed complaints about stolen copyrights and violence. They painted Rick as a primitive tribal who tried to steal civilized music. Claimed he attacked an innocent student when caught." Priya's voice shook with rage that had never dissipated. "Rick was to be sentenced the next day."

"So you took action," Megha said softly.

Priya nodded, tears carving silent rivers down her cheeks. "I ran through the city like a ghost. Somehow, I found someone willing to take a bribe, someone who could free Rick that night. I had nothing—no money, no help, no family left to ask."

"You were carrying Pakhi then," Megha realized.

"Yes. With our little bird, but we never knew then. I loved Rick more than life itself. I couldn't let him waste away in prison for defending his stolen dreams. So I..." Priya's voice shrank to a whisper, heavy with shame. "I broke into Kalima's temple and stole her jewellery along with the donation box. Sacred things meant to shield the faithful. I defied them to save the man I loved."

The ambulance grew quiet except for medical equipment and Pakhi's laboured breathing.

"The next day, everything was in the newspapers. 'Tribal Student Attacks Promising Young Composer.' 'Theft and Violence in Elite College.' We could never return to Kolkata. We could never face that world again."

Priya gazed at her daughter's battered face with boundless tenderness. "This is why I never wanted you to go to Kolkata. I knew that world would try to break you, just as it broke us."

Her voice echoed with emptiness. "See? Once more, we have lost it all. Trusting the plains has stolen everything we hold dear."

Megha reached out and gently touched Priya's shoulder. "Aunty, I promise you—you will win back everything. The truth will come out this time. I'll make sure of it."

But Priya's gaze turned vacant, fixed on a world far beyond the ambulance walls. The burden of confession and her daughter's suffering had shattered her grip on reality. Old wounds surged back, raw and relentless.

She looked at Megha without recognition, voice eerily calm. "Have you seen my little yellow bird? She was supposed to sing at the festival today. I can't find her anywhere."

As the ambulance sped toward the hospital, it bore a mother adrift in protective delusion and a daughter clinging to life. The true magnitude revealed itself: not merely young love lost, but a legacy of pain where one act of malice rippled through generations, tainting every hope for joy and trust.

The Hornbill's song had fallen silent, its fate now inscribed only in the stars watching over the ancient hills, waiting to see if its voice would ever return.

Chapter 72

The Long Vigil

Aarav and Su's phone call stretched into the small hours, darkness casting an intimate cloak over their conversation.

"Ma! Priya Auntie asked me to go away, but I can't abandon Pakhi when she's fighting for her life. I won't be able to live with myself."

Su's voice carried across the miles with a mother's understanding. "Then you won't have to, Jishu. I'm coming to Kohima. You shouldn't face this alone."

"But Ma, what about—"

"Your father is in police custody, Aarav. For the first time in twenty years, I'm free to make my own decisions. And my decision is to be with my son when he needs me most."

Three days later, Su stepped off the bus in Kohima, two suitcases in hand and new resolve in her eyes. She found Aarav outside the hospital, steadfast as a pilgrim, living on tea and the quiet generosity of local vendors who had come to know the sorrowful young man.

"Jishu," Su said quietly, settling beside him on the bench. "I'm here."

Subho, who'd been taking turns during the vigil, looked at his friend's mother with new respect. "Su Aunty, you came all this way..."

"A mother goes where her child needs her." Su looked at the hospital's imposing entrance. "How long since there's been any news?"

"Seventeen days," Aarav whispered, voice frayed by waiting. "They won't let me in. No one tells me anything. To them, I'm just the boy whose father tried to ruin her."

Each day, Aarav would approach the hospital reception with desperate hope. "Please, any news about Pakhi? Holud Pakhi Angami?"

The answer was always the same. "Sorry, Sir. The family has requested complete privacy. No information can be shared with non-relatives."

The Angamis were one of the most prestigious families in the region. Their influence ensured absolute secrecy around Pakhi's condition.

Inside the hospital, Pakhi endured surgery after surgery. Skilled local doctors worked tirelessly to repair damage from glass and fall. Blood-spattered gloves tossed into bins at dawn. Sagging shoulders beneath surgical gowns.

"We've done everything we can for the orthopaedic injuries," Dr. Bendang told Rick and Priya after the fifth operation. "Her bones will heal, though it will take months of rehabilitation. But the facial injuries... the scarring... we lack the specialized equipment for complex reconstructive work."

Priya kept vigil at Pakhi's ICU bedside, her world reduced to the rhythm of beeping monitors and the rise and fall of her daughter's chest. The once-vibrant girl now lay motionless, held to life by a web of machines.

On the twenty-seventh day, Dr. Bendang entered the waiting room where Rick had been maintaining his vigil. His face carried cautious optimism for the first time in weeks.

"She's out of danger," he announced simply. "The vital signs are stable, internal injuries have healed sufficiently, and we've successfully addressed all orthopaedic damage. She's going to live."

Rick closed his eyes and wept, overcome by relief, gratitude, and fierce love for his daughter who had clawed her way back to them.

Priya's first stop was the local church, where she'd never set foot in all her years in Kohima. She knelt before the cross and whispered prayers of thanksgiving in three languages—Nagamese, Bengali, English—pouring out gratitude to any divine force that might be listening.

From there, she called her mother in Kolkata. "Ma, she's going to live. Our Pakhi is going to live."

She called Anjali, her cousin. She called Megha, who still fought legal battles. Finally, she told the Hornbill Hearths community.

The news swept through like first light cresting the hills. An old gardener paused in his work, murmuring a prayer. Children shouted the news in playful sing-song. Vendors at the market spread the word with joyous exclamations. Women gathered, breaking into spontaneous song—a blend of traditional tunes and modern rhythms carrying their collective relief on the wind.

Prii, torn between Ana's recovery and Megha's investigation, crumpled into tears the moment she heard.

"She's safe," Prii whispered, then immediately called Aarav.

The phone rang three times before his hollow voice answered. "Hello?"

"Aarav, it's Prii. She's— she's out of danger. Pakhi is going to live."

Silence stretched so long Prii thought the call had dropped. Then she heard it—raw, desperate weeping from the depths of Aarav's soul.

Aarav collapsed to his knees outside the hospital, clutching the phone as sobs tore through him. The burden of twenty-seven days finally broke loose. Su and Subho knelt beside him, forming a circle of arms around his grief.

Deep in the jungle, Kyan sat beside his campfire, substances coursing through his bloodstream. He listened as one of his followers reported what they'd learned from hospital workers.

"She lives," Kyan murmured, staring into the flames. "The mountain gods have decided she should live."

Rather than relief or remorse, his drug-addled mind twisted the news with warped logic. "She was punished for betraying our ways. Now she must learn from this lesson. Perhaps she will finally understand that her place is here, in the hills, protected by those who truly love her."

He felt no guilt for his role in her suffering. In his corrupted worldview, this had been a necessary correction from the gods themselves.

The local doctors continued their honest assessments.

"The physical healing will take months," Dr. Bendang explained to Rick and Priya. "However, regarding the facial scarring—we've done our best, but our facilities aren't equipped to provide the reconstructive surgery she needs to fully restore her appearance. You'll need to explore options with specialists outside the region."

Priya gazed at her daughter through the ICU glass. Bandages masked Pakhi's face, plaster encased her limbs, wires traced every heartbeat. The radiant girl she remembered now looked like a fragile doll, pieced together with desperate care.

"She's alive," Priya whispered to herself. "She's alive, and that's all that matters."

Yet as the words left her lips, Priya wondered if Pakhi would feel the same when she awoke. Would she recognize her dreams or only see what the world had taken from her?

A songbird with bruised wings, once soaring freely, now painfully tethered to a reality not of her choosing.

Would Pakhi find the strength to heal those wings and take flight once more, or would she remain bound by the visible and invisible scars of her ordeal?

Chapter 73

The London Decision

Pakhi's survival cracked open London's grey hush. Alone in his Hampstead flat, Dan clutched the message as if it might dissolve in his hands. A tear slipped past his guard. In the next room, Lyna and little Natasha played, their laughter a gentle shield against the storm. Grief and guilt had carved deep furrows into Dan's face, but as the miracle sank in, a sob of relief escaped him.

"She lives," he whispered, then called immediately.

Within hours, Dan was arranging seats and securing travel permissions for a team of medical specialists to fly with him to India. The man who'd once run from Kohima was now prepared to return, driven by fierce resolve to save the girl scarred by his family's past.

Dan's arrival at the hospital sent a ripple through the community. John Angami, Pakhi's grandfather and founder of Hornbill Hearths, greeted him with an embrace heavy with years of love.

"My son," John said, voice thick with emotion. "You came back."

"I had to. Pakhi is family. I can't undo what Kyan did, but I can try to help now."

Together, they entered Pakhi's room, where Priya sat beside the bed.

"The local doctors have done miracles," Dr. Bendang explained to Dan's medical team. "But we lack the specialized equipment for complex reconstructive surgery. The facial injuries require techniques and technology we simply don't have."

Dan's lead consultant, Dr. Sarah Mitchell, examined Pakhi's charts with professional thoroughness. "With the right surgical team and facilities, much of this can be corrected. University College Hospital in London has one of the world's finest plastic and reconstructive surgery departments."

Priya hesitated, voice almost breaking. "London... so far from home." She paused, grappling with the decision. "But Pakhi deserves her best chance."

Rick squeezed his wife's shoulder. "We can't afford this. The cost..."

"Let me handle it," Dan said. "I failed before. Let me help now."

Family gathered around Pakhi's hospital bed for hours, John guiding the conversation as each person shared fears and hopes. They sought wisdom from elders, whose words flowed in their dialect, rich with history and resilience.

In the end, it was Pakhi who gave the answer, even in her unconsciousness. Under dim hospital lights, as Dr. Mitchell examined her, Pakhi's bandaged hand lifted in a trembling, urgent reach. Priya placed her hand in Pakhi's, and Pakhi squeezed—her grip surprisingly strong, sending a jolt of hope through her mother's sorrow.

That silent, determined gesture spoke louder than words. To her family, it felt like a blessing.

"She's a fighter," Dr. Mitchell said. "She'll recover better in London."

The night before departure brimmed with sorrow and aching tenderness. Prii arrived with Ana, who, despite exhaustion after treatment, came to spend these last precious hours with Pakhi. The close-knit circle huddled in a quiet hospital corner, tears flowing as they held each other close.

"Promise me you'll come back," Prii whispered. "Don't let this be goodbye."

Ana, still scarred, choked out, "I'm sorry, Pakhi. I hope you can forgive me."

The three friends—Pakhi silent in their arms, Prii, and Ana weighted with grief—clung to each other in a delicate embrace. The moment lingered, a slender thread tying them to lost innocence, their bond battered by storms none could have imagined.

Outside the hospital, Aarav maintained his vigil, unaware of the departure plans. Su and Subho sat with him, creating a small circle of devotion in the evening air.

"Jishu, you can't go on like this," Su said. "Let's go home. Return to music."

"I can't abandon her, Ma. She's fighting because of me..."

"No," Subho said firmly. "Your father's crimes are not yours."

But Aarav had stopped listening to reason. Guilt pressed in on him, suffocating and relentless, sealing him inside a shell that no comfort or logic could penetrate.

The medical transport arrived at dawn. Hospital staff carefully lifted Pakhi from her bed to a gurney, ensuring she remained stable and connected to portable monitors. Each movement was precise. Priya walked alongside, gripping the edge tightly.

Priya and Rick would accompany Pakhi to London, while Dan oversaw her medical care.

In the jungle, Kyan watched the convoy through binoculars, his drug-addled mind interpreting this as another sign of divine intervention. Clutched in his other hand was an old, worn talisman—a carved hornbill he'd carried since childhood.

"She is to be purified," he told his followers. "When she returns, she'll know her place is here."

As the ambulance disappeared, grief settled over the community like a suffocating shroud. The once-vibrant courtyard at the village heart, now dimmed and silent, became a poignant symbol of their collective mourning. Those left behind stood motionless, mourning not only Pakhi's absence but the loss of trust, innocence, and gentle simplicity that once defined their lives before violence shattered it all.

Outside the hospital, Aarav sat on his bench, unaware that the girl he loved had just been taken across the world.

He would wait there still. Unknowing. Unseeing.

A vigil with no end in sight.

Yet even in the depths of sorrow, one thing endured: the hope that love, at its purest, could outlast every force that sought to break it.

Chapter 74

Justice Served

Six months after the festival tragedy, two battles raged in different corners of the world. In London, Pakhi fought for her life in a sterile hospital room. In Kolkata, Subho fought for justice in the suffocating silence of his father's secrets.

Aarav had faded into a ghost of himself—barely eating, never sleeping, his world shrinking to faded photographs and an untouched guitar gathering dust in the corner. The hollow echo of unplayed strings filled his room like a requiem.

"He's drowning in guilt that's not his," Su whispered to Subho one evening.

"Aunty," Subho replied quietly, "I think I can help with that."

That night at 2 AM, Subho knocked softly on his father's bedroom door.

"Baba? We need to talk."

Ranjan sat up immediately, years of industry habits making him alert. "What's wrong?"

"If telling the truth meant losing everything—your job, your security, maybe even your freedom—would you still want me to tell it?"

Ranjan studied his son's face for a long moment, then got out of bed and put on his reading glasses. "Tell me everything."

Subho did. Every detail—Maya's deliberate kick, the phone call to LM, the threat against his father. His voice shook, but he didn't stop until the entire story was laid bare.

When he finished, Ranjan was silent for a full minute. Then he placed both hands on his son's shoulders.

"You know what I'm going to say?"

"That we can't afford to fight LM?"

"No." Ranjan's voice carried unexpected strength. "That we can't afford NOT to. I've spent twenty years watching him destroy talented artists, prey on young women, and build his empire on broken dreams. I told myself it wasn't my business, that I had to protect my family."

He gripped Subho's shoulders tighter. "But if I teach you that silence in the face of evil is acceptable, that money matters more than integrity, then I've lost something far more valuable than any job."

Tears streamed down Subho's face. "But Baba, your life's work—"

"My life's work is raising a son who knows right from wrong. Everything else is just noise." Ranjan pulled Subho into a fierce embrace. "Tomorrow morning, we go to the police. And to that journalist—Megha Dutta. If we're going down, we're taking that bastard with us."

By 9 AM, Subho sat in a police station with his father beside him, Megha's recording device on the table, two officers taking notes.

"I saw Maya kick Pakhi deliberately," Subho stated, voice steady despite trembling hands. "The timing was too perfect to be accidental. When I confronted her, she called LM. Within minutes, she was

threatening my father with false allegations and job loss. She said, 'Uncle always says the best way to ensure silence is to make speaking more expensive than someone can afford.'"

"You're certain she called LM?" Megha pressed.

"She said 'Uncle' and knew details only an insider would have—including a confidential accounting investigation."

Inspector Ghosh exchanged glances with his colleague. "This corroborates other complaints we've been receiving."

Ranjan pulled out a thick folder. "Dates, times, names, specific incidents. Twenty years of documentation. It's all here."

Megha's eyes widened as she flipped through documents. "This is exactly what we needed."

"I was afraid," Subho admitted, voice cracking. "Afraid of LM's power, afraid of being crushed. But I realized: being afraid of evil men is exactly how they stay in power."

Inspector Ghosh stood. "Based on this testimony and evidence, we have grounds for arrest warrants. Mr. Subho, you'll need to testify in court. LM will use every resource to discredit you."

"I understand. But Pakhi could have died because I was too afraid to speak up. I can't live with that."

Within hours, arrest warrants were issued for both LM and Maya.

That afternoon, Ranjan's carefully constructed walls finally crumbled.

"There's more you need to know," he said quietly. "I wasn't just LM's employee. I was his college friend. His accomplice."

Subho's fork clattered to his plate. "What?"

"I helped him become LM. I forged the documents—Aadhar, PAN, and birth certificates. I helped erase his past as Neev and create the myth of the self-made Lord of Music." Ranjan's voice was hollow with

shame. "I was there when Rick confronted him. I stood watch while LM destroyed him. I saw Rick's heart break, and I did nothing."

"Why?"

"I was young, desperate, and Neev offered a way out of poverty. Then I was complicit, trapped by my own cowardice." He looked at his son with eyes full of decades of regret. "I told myself it was loyalty, or fear. But the truth? I was just a coward."

Megha arrived then, equipment in hand. "The time has come to tell everything."

The story that emerged was darker than even Megha had feared. LM hadn't just stolen Rick's music—he'd systematically plundered countless young artists' dreams. He'd kept Rick's composition diary locked in his safe as "insurance." He'd built a network of informants across the Northeast, hunting for talent and threats alike. That's how he'd known about Pakhi long before Aarav mentioned her.

"I have proof of everything," Ranjan whispered, producing another folder. "I kept copies. Insurance. I always knew this day would come."

The evidence was damning—forged documents, financial records, correspondence with informants, copies of Rick's diary annotated in LM's handwriting.

"My God," Megha breathed. "This will destroy him completely."

Within days, the case transformed from hopeless to unbreakable. LM's high-priced lawyers found themselves cornered by overwhelming evidence. Raids on his offices and mansion revealed decades of corruption.

"You have no idea who you're dealing with," LM snarled at arresting officers. "I have power—"

"You had power," the lead investigator corrected. "Your partner turned. Your victims can finally speak. You have nothing left."

Ranjan was arrested too, though his confession earned him a plea deal and reduced sentence. As officers led him out, he turned to his son, tears streaming.

"I'm proud of you, Subho. You did what I couldn't. You chose truth."

When Prii, Megha, and Subho visited Ana in rehab, they found her changed—hollow-eyed but clear-minded, carrying the weight of her choices.

"I don't deserve forgiveness," Ana said, tears falling. "I betrayed everyone. I fed Kyan information, stalked Pakhi, hurt my friends."

"But you saved Aarav's life," Prii said softly. "You took the bullet meant for him."

"It doesn't erase what I did," Ana whispered. "But maybe it shows we can still choose right, even when we're lost in darkness."

The community rallied behind Ana's rehabilitation, recognizing her as both victim and perpetrator. Her testimony would illuminate the full scope of what Pakhi had endured.

After LM's arrest, the truth exploded into national headlines: *Music Mogul Built Empire on Stolen Dreams*. The story of how he'd destroyed Rick and Priya twenty years ago, then hunted their daughter a generation later, captivated the country.

Yet for Subho, victory tasted bitter. The evidence had freed LM's victims, but could it unlock the prison of guilt around Aarav's heart?

That answer lay not in courtrooms or headlines, but in a silent London hospital room, where a wounded young woman stared at her

reflection, tracing unfamiliar scars, trying to reclaim her memory by fragile memory.

Just outside her window, a lone guitar stood on its stand—a testament to the bond between guilt and healing, waiting patiently for the day its strings would sing again.

The Hornbill's song had fallen silent, but hope whispered that it would rise again."

Chapter 75

The Mirror's Truth

Six months after leaving the misty hills of Nagaland, Pakhi found herself in a stark London hospital room, heart pounding as Dan, Lyna, and Natasha readied to unveil her new face. Each day of recovery leading to this moment had been a gauntlet of surgeries, gruelling therapy, and the slow, aching mending of body and soul.

A single chilling doubt swirled in her mind: *What if the face staring back is a stranger?*

"Are you ready, Billy?" Dan asked gently, his weathered hands steady despite the emotion in his voice. Over the months, he'd become more than a family friend—her guardian, her advocate, the father figure who helped her navigate advanced medical care.

Natasha squeezed Pakhi's hand. "Remember, it's still you—just a new chapter on your face."

With painstaking tenderness, they unwound the bandages that had shielded her fragile skin for weeks. Each strip slipped away, unveiling the artistry of London's most skilled surgeons.

As the final bandage fluttered to the floor, Pakhi's breath snagged. She clenched her eyes shut, bracing for the unknown. Natasha pressed a cool mirror into her palms.

She dared to look.

Her heartbeat drummed in her ears as she caught a glint of her newly revealed cheekbone—sharp, unfamiliar, strikingly beautiful under the sterile lights. The reflection was both hers and not hers: her hair, once a dark river, was now short after the head injury; her features familiar, yet subtly reshaped by careful hands. Only faint scars near her eyes hinted at the ordeal. The rest was a testament to restoration, almost miraculous in its wholeness.

"I look..." she whispered, touching her cheek. "Like me. Just—stronger."

"The surgeries went better than we'd hoped," Dan said, relieved. "Dr. Mitchell said your bones helped, and your youth, too."

For the first time in half a year, Pakhi's smile bloomed—genuine, unrestrained—and her reflection answered with warmth untouched by pain.

That evening, she insisted on her first video call home. The laptop screen glowed with faces in their Kohima living room—Priya, Rick, John Angami, and elders whose prayers had quietly stitched hope into her recovery.

The instant Priya saw her daughter's face clearly for the first time since the accident, emotion broke over her in a crashing wave. "My Holud Pakhi," she sobbed, voice raw. "My beautiful bird, you've come back to us."

"Ma, I'm fine," Pakhi said through tears. "Actually, I'm ready to come home."

Rick peered at her face. "You look different, beta. In your eyes. Resolved."

"I am, Pa. Near-death teaches you what matters." Her voice was newly strong. "Ma, I need to ask about Aarav."

Silence. Priya finally spoke, voice controlled. "Holud darling, after everything—"

"No, Ma," Pakhi interrupted gently. "You've told me your fears, but we never discussed my feelings or my right to choose whom I love."

"Pakhi, you don't understand the danger—"

"I do understand. LM destroyed your happiness. Now he's facing justice. Aarav sat outside my room for months, unable to leave—even when you told him to."

Priya flinched as if struck. "How do you know about—"

"Dan uncle told me everything," Pakhi said, eyes blazing with determination. "Every day Aarav waited, every night on that bench. I fought to survive just to see him again and finish our conversation under the stars."

"Pakhi, you're still healing, your emotions—"

"My emotions have never been clearer," Pakhi said, voice steady as steel. "I love Aarav—the boy who chose our tents, learned our songs, protected me." She paused. "Ma, my love isn't your trauma. Aarav isn't Neev. Our generation doesn't owe for the last one's sins."

Only Priya's quiet weeping broke the silence.

"Where is he?" Pakhi asked softly.

Rick cleared his throat. "He's been here six months. He and Su Aunty rented a house. After you left, he stopped talking. Subho says he blames himself."

"I need to come home now," Pakhi said. "Not just to finish my own healing, but to help him find his way back, too."

Dan, quiet until now, stood. "Doctors cleared you for travel. If you're ready for home..."

"I'm ready," Pakhi said. "But first, I need to stop in Kolkata. There's someone I have to see, and a blessing to seek."

Two weeks later, Pakhi stood at the threshold of a modest South Kolkata flat. Facing her was Anjali Mashi, Priya's cherished cousin, who looked up from her tea to find a young woman whose face carried quiet signatures of survival and change.

"Holud?" Anjali whispered, rising. "Is it really you?"

"It's me, Mashi," Pakhi said, touching her feet. "I've come for your blessing—and a favor."

"Anything, my child."

"Come with me to Kohima. I want you there when I see Aarav, so you can tell Ma that real love is worth the risk."

That same day, Pakhi made a pilgrimage to the Kali temple, where her mother had once risked everything for love. She knelt before the goddess, laying down flowers and sweets, her heart brimming with gratitude.

"Ma Kali," she whispered, "my mother took from you out of love and desperation. I offer back what I can, and ask not for forgiveness of her crime, but for a blessing on the love that drove her to it. Let the cycle of guilt end with my generation."

Then she went to her Didun at the temple, where she found Abha stronger now, receiving devotees. The old woman's face lit up like a lamp rekindled when Pakhi entered.

"Didun," Pakhi said, holding her grandmother's weathered hands, "I promise I'll come back. And next time, I won't come alone. I'll bring Ma, Pa, and Aarav—the man I love. We'll come together and take your blessings properly, as a family."

Abha's eyes filled with tears. "Your Ma... after all these years... do you think she'll come? Can she forgive us?"

"She will come," Pakhi said with quiet determination. "Because love is stronger than shame, Didun. And because every story deserves a chance at a better ending."

The memory of her grandmother's trembling smile, the traditional blessing with both hands on her head—carrying the weight of generations—still warmed Pakhi's heart.

As she rose from prayer, deep calm settled over her, peace that reached beneath scars and broken bones. Her spirit felt whole at last.

Now, she was ready to return. To fight for love. To show that real courage was choosing joy even when the world tried to steal it away.

Chapter 76

The Hornbill's Return

The secret was guarded with the intensity reserved for priceless treasures. For two weeks, the Hornbill Hearths wove plans for a homecoming concert, their excitement hidden from the one heart most in need of hope.

Three days earlier, Pakhi's flight landed in Kolkata. As she stepped into thick, humid air, scents of earth and spice wrapped around her like a memory. Anjali Mashri waited, eyes shining with tears, arms wide with twenty years of love. Their journey to Dimapur began, tires gliding over rain-slicked roads. As the car climbed into the mountains toward Kohima, the air turned cool and sharp, laced with bird calls and the whisper of pine.

"Are you nervous, child?" Anjali asked as their taxi climbed through familiar hills.

"Terrified," Pakhi confessed, fingers brushing the small scars near her eyes, now barely visible. "What if he can't forgive himself? What if seeing me only makes his guilt worse?"

"Then you'll remind him that love isn't about perfection," Anjali replied, voice warm and steady. "It's about choosing each other despite the imperfections, the scars, the mistakes."

The taxi halted at the festival grounds. The stage, once witness to both glory and sorrow, now stood ready for different magic. At its heart, Rick commanded the sound setup, concentration fierce—a man reunited with his music.

Suddenly, a voice rang out, trembling with excitement. Rick spun around, and for a heartbeat, time paused. He saw his daughter, changed by survival yet unmistakably his. Joy broke across his face as he swept her into fierce embrace.

"My Holud Pakhi," he murmured into her hair. "Our yellow bird has found her way home."

Within minutes, news swept through the community. Priya hurried from their home, and seeing her daughter whole and radiant, her voice trembled. "I'm so sorry for trying to cage your heart with my fears."

"There's nothing to forgive, Ma," Pakhi said, voice steady with hard-won wisdom. "You were protecting me the only way you knew how. But now I need you to trust me to protect myself."

Prii and Ana interrupted the reunion, hands still powdered with concert preparations. The sight of Pakhi—scarred but unbroken, changed yet undeniably herself—brought tears and wild, joyful hugs.

"You look..." Prii started, then faltered.

"Like someone who almost died and decided to live instead," Pakhi said, her smile holding depths of experience none had possessed six months earlier.

Ana lingered at the edge, uncertain. Pakhi met her eyes and reached for her hand without hesitation. "You threw yourself between Aarav and that bullet. Whatever came before, that one act of courage earned my eternal gratitude."

As dusk deepened, the secret concert bloomed into life. Rick's band, reborn as Holud Pakhir Gaan in honour of their daughter, had

rehearsed for weeks with the remnants of Lord of Music Junior. The irony was unmistakable: LM's own band now played in tribute to what he once tried to destroy.

"Is he coming?" Pakhi asked, voice catching as she turned to Subho.

"Su Aunty promised to bring him," Subho replied, face showing uncertainty. "He's been difficult. Barely leaves his house. This might shock him too much."

"Then we'll trust that music can reach him when words have failed," Rick said, adjusting his guitar strings with practiced ease.

As the sun slipped behind Kohima's ancient hills, golden light poured over the festival grounds. A small crowd gathered—neighbours, friends, the Hornbill Hearths family—drawn by the sense that something sacred was about to begin. The air was rich with the aroma of smoked pork and bamboo shoots. Bright Naga shawls splashed colour everywhere, anchoring the moment in Kohima's living culture.

In the distance, Su walked slowly beside Aarav. His hesitant steps and hollow eyes told of six months exiled from happiness. He came only at his mother's urging, after she pleaded that the community needed to see him before he made his final choice about leaving Kohima for good.

The concert opened with traditional Naga songs, Rick's voice bearing the wisdom and ache of a man who had lost his music twice and reclaimed it through his daughter's bravery. The melodies floated on evening air like prayers, reaching every heart that had ever tasted both loss and hope.

Subho stepped in next, his bass anchoring the music as he always anchored his friends. One by one, the others joined, weaving voices into harmony, celebrating community, resilience, and the healing force of art.

Aarav hovered at the edge of the crowd, face composed but eyes hollow. Where music once filled him, only silence pressed in. Each note

seemed to linger, skipping a beat like hesitant breath. The space between beats felt heavy, weighing on his chest.

But then, something changed. A new voice soared into the harmony—clear, strong, achingly familiar. Aarav's head jerked up, heart pounding as he scanned the stage in disbelief.

And there she was.

HOLUD PAKHI'S SONG

Verse 1

Holud from the hills so high
In the land where flowers sigh
Kohima's sky they paint her dreams,
Life flows like a mountain stream.
Her laughter, like the morning breeze
Dancing through the forest trees
Echoes in the valleys deep
Keep Holud's heart a secret keep.

Verse 2

Grey-blue eyes like monsoon skies
Hold the wisdom of the wise
Warrior blood and gentle soul
Two worlds meeting to make whole
From the plains a voice did call
Breaking down the ancient wall
Love can bridge what fear divides
When two hearts beat side by side.

Verse 3

Through the storms and through the pain
Mountains bow to meet the plain
Grandmother's tears and mother's flight
Found their peace in morning light.
Temple bells and hornbill's cry
Singing truth beneath the sky
What was stolen, what was lost
Love redeemed at any cost.

As the music continued, Pakhi emerged from behind the backdrop, her dress shimmering in soft evening light. Her hair, cut short and simple, framed her face with beauty that carried both old familiarity and newfound strength. The faint scars near her eyes added depth to her appearance, like brush strokes in a painting whose meaning had deepened with time.

She spoke into the microphone, her voice clear and direct, traveling through the crowd to reach Aarav alone. "I've missed you."

The crowd turned, but Aarav saw only Pakhi. Six months of guilt and sorrow collided with sudden relief. Seeing her alive, looking at him with love, nearly brought him to his knees.

"Pakhi," he breathed, the word barely escaping.

"Come here," she urged, extending her hand. "We have a song to finish."

He stood frozen. His mind screamed that he was to blame for her pain, that forgiveness was more than he deserved.

But then she smiled, that same radiant smile that had first captured his heart. The love in her eyes melted every doubt, every ounce of self-blame, every barrier between them.

Aarav moved toward the stage, eyes never leaving Pakhi. The crowd opened before him. The same community that had seen their love unravel now watched it come alive again.

On stage, Pakhi took his hands, and the touch sparked between them—the meeting of souls that had always been meant for each other.

"I thought I'd lost you forever," he said hoarsely, emotion thick in his voice.

"Never," she declared. "You couldn't lose me if you tried. We promised each other forever under the stars, remember? I intend to keep that promise."

They sang as one, their voices flowing together like rivers joining the sea. The song, once Rick's, now belonged to them.

Verse 4 - Their Duet

Both together: In scars we find solace; in joy we rise anew.

Aarav: Now we sing with voices free

Pakhi: You and I are no longer we

Both: Hold Pakhi flies above

Born on wings of fearless love

Hills and plains no longer torn

Through the darkness, hope is born.

Hand in hand we face the day

Golden bird has found her way.

As they sang, Aarav's hands gently traced Pakhi's face, fingers trembling with tenderness as they lingered over the faint scars.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered between verses, reverence in his voice. "Even more beautiful than I remembered."

"I'm different now," she said quietly. "Scarred, changed, maybe stronger. Can you love this version of me?"

"I can love every version of you," he promised without hesitation. "Past, present, and future. Scarred or whole, broken or healed. You are the song my heart was meant to sing."

The concert swirled on around them, but they remained wrapped in their own world—a fragile bubble of rediscovered love, sheltered by the mountains. The community watched, tears and smiles mingling, witnessing not just a reunion but a rebirth.

In the crowd, Priya stood with Anjali's arm over her shoulders, finally realizing her daughter's love was not a shadow of her own painful past but something new and uniquely theirs.

Su wept openly, watching her son's hollow gaze ignite with life for the first time in six months.

Somewhere in the jungle beyond the festival grounds, a hornbill called. Its song, carried on the night breeze, seemed to echo the old folktale about the phoenix-like rebirth of souls. Elder Rani, standing among the crowd, mouthed a proverb as the bird called: *'When the hornbill sings, the hills remember.'* It was as if the bird's call was a blessing from ancient spirits, binding the couple's reunion to the collective heritage of their people.

As the last notes faded into the star-strewn sky, Aarav and Pakhi stood entwined on the stage where their love had almost ended in heartbreak.

The yellow bird had returned.

And she was singing.

THE END

Epilogue

Songs of the Future

Five years later

Morning mist wrapped the Kohima hills in a silvery embrace. On the veranda of their small house, Pakhi watched sunlight spill gold across the valley, her hands cradling the gentle swell of her belly—six months along, new life blossoming like hope reborn.

"The little one is restless today," Aarav said, stepping out with steaming tea. He wrapped her in a gentle embrace, his hands covering hers over their unborn child.

"Maybe she's excited about tonight's concert," Pakhi replied, leaning into his warmth. "Or he. We still don't know."

"Either way, our child will grow up surrounded by real music. The kind that heals instead of destroys."

Five years had passed since that fateful Hornbill Festival night when their world nearly shattered. Five years of healing, rebuilding, and learning to love with courage instead of fear.

They had done it right this time. No rushing, no shortcuts.

Pakhi earned her degree in comparative literature, weaving tribal oral traditions with modern Indian fiction. Aarav completed his music studies, then walked away from his father's tainted legacy to build something genuine from scratch.

Only then, with education complete and futures secured, did they marry.

The wedding had been small but perfect—a blend of Naga and Bengali traditions held in the same festival grounds where they'd almost lost everything. Rick walked Pakhi down the aisle while Su stood beside Aarav, both mothers weeping tears of joy. Priya and Abha, reunited after eighteen years, sat together, their reconciliation one of the most beautiful gifts to emerge from the tragedy. Later on they had a proper Bengali wedding in the nearby famous Kali Temple, everything done by Raja Mama.

Su had finally divorced LM two years into his prison sentence. The papers arrived at the same time as his conviction for fraud, conspiracy, and a litany of crimes spanning decades. She never looked back. In Kohima, she'd found what her marriage had denied her: community, friendship, freedom. She taught classical music to local children now, her voice regaining the beauty it had lost in years of silence.

"Su Ma is bringing the newspaper," Pakhi said, gesturing toward the path where her mother-in-law climbed with her daily offering of tea and maternal concern.

Su joined them on the veranda, beaming. "The reviews from last night's rehearsal are wonderful. They're calling Holud Pakhir Gaan 'a transcendent fusion that speaks to the soul of modern India.'"

Rick had returned to music a changed man, his voice bearing the scars and strength of survival. LM's confession had finally cleared his name after twenty-four years. Now, Rick's band performed across the Northeast, every concert a quiet prayer of gratitude.

"And Prii's documentary has been selected for three international film festivals," Su continued with satisfaction.

Prii had married Subho in a celebration that woven Bengali and Assamese customs together. Their documentary, "The Hornbill's Song," explored how communities heal, how love endures, and how art bridges old wounds to new hope.

"Any word about Kyan?" Aarav asked quietly, the question he posed every few months.

Su's expression grew sombre. "Dan says there have been sightings near the Myanmar border. He's leading a militant group now, lost to drugs and paranoia."

Not every story tied up neatly. Some souls wandered deeper into darkness. The sorrow touched them all, but none more than Dan, whose eyes drifted toward empty chairs at family gatherings.

"He made his **choice**," Pakhi murmured, hand shielding her belly. "We can't rescue those who refuse to be saved. But we can give the next generation brighter paths."

As twilight approached, their home filled with extended family. Anjali Mashi arrived from Kolkata with Bengali sweets. John Angami, now in his eighties but still sharp, held court with tales of old days and observations about new ones. Priya and Abha sat together, finishing each other's sentences—eighteen years of separation dissolved in laughter and shared memories.

Below, the festival grounds pulsed with excitement for tonight's fifth annual "Hornbill Hearts" concert—Rick's vision born from ashes, a celebration drawing musicians from across the Northeast.

In the audience, Maya sat quietly beside her mother—no longer the calculating girl who'd once schemed for love, but a woman who'd learned that redemption required more than apology. After testifying against LM, she'd rebuilt her life in New York, earning her MBA and working with nonprofits supporting assault survivors. Her annual visits

to Kohima had become a ritual of atonement and growth. Tonight, watching Pakhi glow with happiness, Maya finally felt the last chains of jealousy break. Some loves were meant to teach you to let go.

When evening fell, Pakhi and Aarav stepped onto the stage for their duet. Their voices, shaped by hardship and true partnership, intertwined in a song Rick had composed for this night—a song of enduring love, of families mending, of futures crafted from yesterday's fragments.

As they sang, Pakhi's hand slipped into Aarav's, their fingers entwined as instinctively as breath. Overhead, stars blinked awake. In their glow, she imagined countless other love stories struggling to endure, families seeking healing, young hearts choosing **hope instead of hate.**

This was their legacy—not only the child she carried, but living proof that love, met with courage and truth, could overcome any barrier, mend any hurt, and shape futures once thought unreachable.

The hornbill's song continued, carried by mountain wind—a promise and prayer echoing for generations yet unborn.

The yellow bird had found her flock.

And together, they were learning to fly.

"Hand in hand we face the day, golden bird has found her way."

THE END
