

SHE IS THE NIGHT AFTER I NEVER SLEPT

KRRISH CHATURVEDI



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She Is The Night After I Never Slept

A Novel By Krrish Chaturvedi

CHAPTER 1: THE KING OF ASHES

2024

Samar made everyone laugh at the dinner table, which was his specialty—being the sun in other people’s skies while living in permanent eclipse himself. His cousin’s wedding reception sprawled across the lawn of the farmhouse in Chattarpur, five hundred guests glittering under fairy lights, and he held court near the bar with his particular brand of charm: self-deprecating, quick-witted, effortlessly magnetic.

“No, no, seriously,” he was saying, gesturing with a half-empty glass of whiskey he wouldn’t finish, “I told the investor, ‘Sir, if you’re looking for someone who sleeps at night, you’ve called the wrong entrepreneur.’”

The circle around him—men in Canali suits, women in Sabyasachi—erupted in laughter. He smiled with them, a perfect replication of joy, while something behind his eyes remained absolutely still. Dead, if you looked closely. But nobody looked closely at Samar anymore. They saw the surface: the sharp jawline he’d inherited from his father, the expensive watch, the easy confidence of someone born into eight-figure bank

balances and ninth-generation privilege. They saw success—three companies before thirty, a penthouse in Golf Course Road, his face in Economic Times“ ’30 Under 30.”

They didn’t see the man who’d eaten one meal a day for the past six years because his body had forgotten how to want things.

“Bhai, you’re impossible,” his cousin Arjun said, slapping his shoulder. “How do you manage? Business, family obligations, social life—”

“I don’t sleep,” Samar said lightly, and it was the only true thing he’d said all evening.

He excused himself with practiced grace—“Need to take this call, European client”—and walked toward the perimeter of the property where the lights dimmed and the carefully cultivated joy thinned out. His phone was silent. There was no call. There was never a call that mattered.

The November air bit at his skin, but he welcomed it. Feeling anything physical was better than the numbness that had settled into his bones like sediment at the bottom of a poisoned well. He pulled out his cigarette case—sterling silver, a gift from his mother who pretended not to notice he smoked two packs a day—and lit up.

The first drag was meditation. The second was confession. By the third, he was having a conversation with God, which was the only conversation he trusted anymore.

Radhe Govinda, he thought, exhaling smoke into the darkness.
I'm still here. Still waiting. Still trying to understand what kind of karma deserves a life sentence.

He'd become a bhakt six years ago, after every other spiritual framework had failed to explain why he was still breathing when his soul had clearly departed. Radha and Krishna made sense to him in a way nothing else did—divine love that destroyed and transformed, separation that was itself a form of union. He understood Radha's longing now. The way you could spend your whole life waiting for someone who had already left.

His phone buzzed. His sister.

Didi: Why are you hiding? Maa is asking.

Samar: Just smoking. Back in 5.

Didi: You're doing that thing where you smile at everyone and die inside.

Didi: I can see you from the tent. Come back. Pretend better.

He smiled at his phone. His sister was one of three people on earth who knew him—actually knew him, past the performance. The other two were his mother and God, in that order. Everyone else got the edited version: Samar Malhotra, the boy who made good, the entrepreneur who turned his father's textile legacy into a tech empire, the most eligible bachelor in South Delhi who somehow never dated anyone seriously.

They didn't know about the transactional relationships. The women he paid—not street workers, but the sophisticated ones, the ones who understood that some men needed bodies without the pretense of souls attached. He couldn't date. Couldn't sit across from someone at dinner and pretend he believed in love, or future, or the possibility that another person wouldn't eventually use him as a rest stop on their way to someone else.

He couldn't pretend. That ability had died ten years ago in a computer lab that still smelled like her perfume in his nightmares.

Samar stubbed out his cigarette and immediately lit another. Chain-smoking was the closest thing he had to a hobby these days. That and work. He worked like a man possessed because possessed was exactly what he was—by the memory of someone who'd taken everything and left him with a pulse and a bank account and nothing else that mattered.

His phone buzzed again. Not his sister this time. A notification from his meditation app, the one his therapist had insisted he download three years ago before he'd fired her for asking too many questions about his past.

****Your daily reminder: The wound is the place where the Light enters you. —Rumi****

He laughed, bitter and genuine. The laugh of a man who'd been a wound for a decade and had seen no fucking light yet.

“Bullshit,” he said to the November air, to Rumi, to whatever cosmic joke kept him alive. “The wound is just a wound. And some of us bleed forever.”

He walked back toward the wedding, his face already rearranging itself into something appropriate. This was his talent—making everyone comfortable, being everyone’s favorite person, the one who remembered birthdays and asked about your parents and made you feel special. He was exceptional at loving other people’s lives while having none of his own.

“Samar!” his mother called as he entered the tent. She was elegant in a Kanjeevaram silk, diamonds at her throat, worry in her eyes that she’d learned to disguise as general maternal concern. “Where were you?”

“Just getting some air, Maa.” He kissed her cheek, and she held his face for a moment too long, searching for something she couldn’t name. His mother knew he was broken. She’d watched it happen in slow motion—the vibrant, brilliant boy she’d raised turning gradually into this handsome ghost who excelled at everything except living.

She’d tried everything. Therapists. Spiritual retreats. Setting him up with nice girls from good families. Nothing worked. Her son was successful, wealthy, kind to everyone, and completely unreachable. Like a king in a castle made of ashes, ruling over a kingdom of one.

“You’re not eating,” she said quietly.

“I ate earlier,” he lied.

“Samar—”

“Maa.” His voice was gentle but final. “I’m fine. I promise. Radhe Govinda takes care of me.”

It was the only argument that worked with her anymore. She was a devotee herself, and if her son had found God, who was she to question? Even if she suspected he’d found God because he’d lost everything else first.

The reception continued. Samar danced with his cousins, posed for photographs, gave a speech that was funny and touching and made the bride cry. He was magnificent, as always. A star that had burned out but still managed to give light.

It was only later, driving back to his penthouse at 3 AM—because he only went home when exhaustion was inevitable—that the mask finally slipped. Alone in his Audi, stuck at a red light on Ring Road, he caught his own reflection in the rearview mirror.

Dead eyes stared back at him. Eyes that had seen too much and felt too little since. Eyes that had once looked at a girl with otherworldly beauty and dark golden-brown eyes and believed she was his destiny, not his destruction.

The light turned green. He drove.

His penthouse was exactly what you’d expect: designer furniture, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city, a kitchen he never used, a bedroom he barely slept in. He’d

bought it four years ago because his mother said he needed his own space, that living at the family estate wasn't healthy for a man approaching thirty.

What she meant was: maybe if you lived alone, you'd finally let someone in.

What happened instead: he'd created a beautiful mausoleum for his ghost life.

He poured himself water—the only thing he could reliably keep down these days—and stood at the window. Delhi sprawled beneath him, millions of lives happening in real time, people falling in love and falling apart and putting themselves back together.

He'd stopped putting himself back together around year three. Now he just managed the pieces, kept them organized enough to function.

His laptop sat open on the coffee table, seventeen tabs of work he'd planned to finish tonight. But something else caught his eye: his email, the unread count at 47. He ignored it most days, let his assistant handle everything. But something pulled his attention.

There, three emails down: ****Ankita Sharma****.

His breath stopped, which was interesting because he'd genuinely thought nothing could make him feel anything anymore.

The subject line: ****I'm sorry. Again. I'll always be sorry.****

It was dated two days ago. He hadn't seen it. Or rather, his assistant had the standing instruction to filter anything from her into a folder he never opened. But this one had slipped through, probably because she'd created a new email address. She did that sometimes. Created new addresses to say the same thing she'd been saying for seven years now.

I'm sorry. I was young. I was stupid. I didn't know what I had. I didn't know what I was doing to you. Please forgive me. Please talk to me. Please—

He didn't open it. He'd made that mistake twice before, years ago. Reading her words was like drinking poison and expecting medicine.

Instead, he did what he always did: archived it without reading. Added the new address to the filter. Erased her, again, from his immediate reality while knowing she'd never leave his actual reality. The reality where she was the night after which he'd never slept. The night that stretched ten years and counting, dark and endless and absolutely unforgiving.

His phone rang. 4 AM. Only one person called at 4 AM.

"Didi," he answered.

"You're awake." His sister's voice was soft, knowing.

"I'm always awake."

“Come over. I made chai.”

“It’s four in the morning.”

“And you’re not sleeping anyway. Come over. We’ll sit on the terrace and you can smoke and I’ll pretend to judge you while actually just making sure you’re still human.”

Something in his chest cracked, just slightly. Just enough to hurt.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes,” he said.

“Good. Drive safely. Radhe Govinda.”

“Radhe Govinda,” he replied, and meant it.

He grabbed his keys, his cigarettes, and left the mausoleum. His sister’s house was in Vasant Vihar, fifteen minutes at this hour, and he drove in silence because music felt like too much emotion for a body that was already at capacity with numbness.

She was waiting on the terrace when he arrived, two cups of chai steaming in the December almost-winter. His sister had married well—a decent man who loved her and didn’t ask questions about her bizarre brother who visited at dawn. They sat in her wicker chairs, and for a few minutes, neither spoke.

“She emailed again,” Samar said finally.

His sister’s jaw tightened. She was the only person allowed to hate Ankita on his behalf, because she’d been there. She’d seen it

happen. She'd watched her brilliant, vibrant brother turn into this functional corpse.

"You didn't read it."

"No."

"Good."

"It doesn't matter anymore, you know," he said, lighting a cigarette. "Whether I read them or not. Whether she's sorry or not. It's been ten years. I'm not waiting for her. I'm waiting for my soul to come back, and I don't think it's coming."

"Samar—"

"I'm not being dramatic. I'm being accurate." He exhaled smoke into the pre-dawn darkness. "I function. I work. I take care of everyone. I'm good at life, Didi. I'm just not alive."

She was quiet for a long time. Then: "Do you remember what you were like before her?"

"No," he said, and it was true. He'd tried to remember—that boy who'd had thousands of friends, who'd believed in things, who'd been happy in an uncomplicated way. But that boy was a stranger to him now. A character from someone else's story.

"You were magic," his sister said. "Genuinely magic. Everyone loved you because you loved everyone. You saw the best in people. You believed in love, in friendship, in—" She stopped, emotional. "You were going to change the world."

"I'm changing it now. Three successful companies. Jobs for five hundred people. I'm doing fine."

"You're doing everything except living."

He smiled at her, the smile that broke her heart because it was genuine and sad and accepting all at once. "Maybe this is my life, Didi. Maybe some people are meant to be lessons for others. She learned something from destroying me, probably. And I learned that the universe gives you exactly as much as you can handle and then stops, because I clearly can't handle anything more than this."

"That's not Radhe Govinda's way," she said. "That's not what you believe."

"I believe," he said carefully, "that Radha waited her whole life for Krishna. And I believe that waiting was its own form of devotion. Maybe I'm just... waiting. Maybe that's my dharma."

"Waiting for what?"

He didn't answer because he didn't know. Not for Ankita—he'd stopped waiting for her years ago, around the time he realized her apologies were just words, that she kept reaching out not because she loved him but because she couldn't stand being the villain in someone's story. Not for healing, because he'd accepted he was broken in a permanent way.

Maybe for death. Maybe for the next life. Maybe for nothing at all.

They sat until sunrise, his sister beside him, God above him, and the ghost of who he used to be somewhere in the distance, unreachable.

When the city began to wake, he drove home to shower and change for another day of being Samar Malhotra: entrepreneur, son, brother, favorite person, king of ashes.

And as he dressed in his Tom Ford suit and Ferragamo shoes, as he checked his reflection to make sure the mask was perfect, he thought about something his last therapist had said before he'd fired her:

"You're not waiting to heal, Samar. You're waiting for permission to stop pretending you're okay."

She'd been wrong, though. He wasn't pretending. He was performing. And the performance was flawless.

It had to be. Because if he stopped performing, if he let anyone see the depth of the void inside him, they'd be terrified. They'd try to fix him. And he couldn't be fixed.

He'd made a deal at a crossroads ten years ago, though he hadn't known it was a deal at the time. He'd given his soul to a girl with dark golden-brown eyes who'd smiled at him like he was worth something and then proven, methodically, that he wasn't.

And the thing about deals with devils is: they're forever.

Samar grabbed his keys, his phone, his cigarettes. He had three meetings today, a board presentation, dinner with investors. He had work to do, people to impress, money to make.

He had everything except the one thing that mattered: himself.

But that was fine. That was manageable. That was his life.

He drove toward his office as the sun rose over Delhi, and if you'd seen him—handsome, successful, smiling at something on his phone—you'd never have guessed that the man behind the wheel had been dead for a decade, walking and talking and building empires on the grave of who he used to be.

You'd never have guessed that every single day was an act of endurance.

You'd never have known that she was the night after which he never slept.

And he'd never tell you. Because Samar Malhotra was nothing if not gracious, kind, and committed to making sure everyone around him felt good, even if he never would again.

That was his gift, his curse, his crown.

The king of ashes reigned on.

CHAPTER 2: BEFORE THE DARK

2014

Ten years earlier, Samar didn't know about darkness yet.

He knew about chemistry homework and basketball practice and the way his mother insisted he eat breakfast before school even though he was perpetually running late. He knew about his collection of fountain pens—twenty-three at last count, each one a different story from a different city his father's business had taken them to. He knew about the smell of old books in the school library and the specific angle of October sunlight that came through the windows of the computer lab during lunch period.

He knew about being happy in an uncomplicated way that would seem, in retrospect, almost obscene in its innocence.

Delhi Public School, Vasant Vihar, was the kind of institution that produced either future leaders or future cautionary tales, depending on how you navigated its ecosystem of privilege, pressure, and adolescent politics. Samar, at sixteen and in Class 11, had somehow managed to be universally liked without trying, which was its own kind of magic. He wasn't the most athletic boy—that was Kunal, his best friend since Class 6, all six feet two inches of him, captain of the basketball team and owner of a jawline that made junior girls write bad poetry. He wasn't the richest—there were always oil money kids or real estate dynasty heirs who made even the Malhotras look middle-class by comparison.

But Samar had something else: genuine curiosity about people, paired with the kind of intelligence that made teachers pray he'd show up to their classes and dread the questions he'd ask when he did.

"Mr. Malhotra," his physics teacher had said just last week, equal parts exasperated and impressed, "if you spent half the energy you use finding loopholes in quantum mechanics actually solving the problems I assign, you'd have a Nobel Prize by twenty."

"But sir," Samar had replied, grinning, "the loopholes are the interesting part. The problems you assign have answers in the back of the book."

The class had laughed. Even the teacher had smiled. That was Samar's gift—he could challenge you and charm you in the same breath, make you feel like you were part of something clever rather than being questioned.

It was a Tuesday in October when everything changed, though he wouldn't understand that until much later. Tuesdays were unremarkable in the grand scheme of things: physics first period, English third, lunch at 1 PM, then the slow afternoon decline through economics and mandatory games period. He'd spent the morning in his usual orbit—Kunal beside him in physics, cracking jokes; Aditya and Rohan arguing about cricket during break; the comfortable rhythm of a life that made sense.

Lunch period found him in the library, which was his preference when he wasn't feeling social. The library at DPS Vasant Vihar was the kind of room that made you believe in civilization—high

ceilings, dark wood, the particular silence that came from being surrounded by thousands of books. The librarian, Mrs. Kapoor, had long ago given up trying to enforce the “no food” policy where Samar was concerned because he was the only student who actually read the books he borrowed and returned them on time.

He was deep into his current obsession—astrophysics, specifically the poetry of Carl Sagan—when he felt someone’s presence beside him. Not intrusive, just... there. He looked up.

And there she was.

Later, he’d try to explain it to Kunal, the moment he first saw Ankita Sharma, and he’d fail completely because how do you explain the way reality shifts when you see something that shouldn’t exist in the ordinary world? She was beautiful, yes—that was the inadequate word everyone would use.

“Otherworldly” was closer. Extremely fair skin that looked like it had never seen Delhi’s pollution, dark golden-brown eyes that seemed to hold entire universes of things she knew and you didn’t, hair that caught the library’s fluorescent light and turned it into something that belonged in a Renaissance painting.

But it wasn’t just her face. It was the way she stood—confident but not aggressive, like she knew exactly who she was and had no interest in proving it to anyone. She wore the standard DPS uniform like it was designer clothing: white shirt, grey skirt, house tie. On her, it looked intentional. Artistic.

“You’re Samar Malhotra,” she said. Not a question. Her voice was lower than he’d expected, textured with something he couldn’t quite identify. Amusement, maybe. Or knowledge.

“I am,” he managed, trying to restart his brain. “And you’re...”

“Ankita. Ankita Sharma. I’m in Class 12.”

A year older, then. That explained why he’d never noticed her before—different sections, different social orbits. Though how he’d gone this long without seeing her seemed, in that moment, like a criminal oversight on his part.

“I know who you are,” she continued, sliding into the chair across from him without asking permission. The presumption should have been annoying. Instead, it felt right, like she belonged in that chair, in that moment, in his immediate proximity. “You’re the guy who won the inter-school science fair last year with the project about urban water contamination. And you write for the school magazine. And you’re part of the quiz team that went to nationals.”

Samar blinked. “You... know all that?”

“I pay attention.” She smiled, and it was the kind of smile that made you want to know what she was thinking even as you suspected you’d never fully understand it. “Also, you’re Kunal Mehra’s best friend, and everyone knows Kunal.”

There it was—the connection to something familiar. Kunal’s social gravitational pull. Samar was used to being known as “Kunal’s smart friend,” the sidekick in the movie of DPS social

hierarchy. It had never bothered him before because Kunal was genuinely a good person, and their friendship was real.

But something in her tone suggested she wasn't interested in Kunal. She was interested in him.

"What are you reading?" she asked, tilting her head to see the book.

"Pale Blue Dot. 'Sagan."

"We are a way for the cosmos to know itself," she quoted. "I love that line. So beautifully arrogant and humble at the same time."

Samar felt something click in his chest. This girl—this impossibly beautiful, confident, older girl—knew Sagan. Actually knew him, not just the famous quote everyone threw around.

"You've read him?" he asked.

"I've read everything," she said, and it didn't sound like a boast. Just a fact. "I'm addicted to books. They're the only honest things in the world."

"What about people?"

"Especially not people." That smile again, edged with something darker. "People perform. Books just are."

They talked for the rest of lunch period. Forty-five minutes that felt like ten minutes and also like a lifetime, the way time moves when you're discovering someone who speaks your language. She'd read everything—García Márquez, Murakami, even the obscure Borges stories that Samar had thought only he cared about. She loved poetry, specifically the brutal honesty of Sylvia Plath and the cosmic loneliness of Lana Del Rey's lyrics, which she considered poetry set to music.

"Everyone thinks she's just sad girl music," Ankita said, leaning forward, animated. "But 'Video Games'? That's about devotion as a form of self-destruction. That's about loving someone who barely notices you exist. That's honest in a way most people can't handle."

Samar found himself leaning forward too, caught in her orbit. "You like Honey Singh too, though, right? I saw you at the farewell party last year. You were singing along to 'Blue Eyes.'"

Her laugh was unexpected—bright and genuine, nothing performative about it. "God, yes. It's such trash music. But it's fun trash. Like, sometimes you don't want Plath. Sometimes you want Honey Singh telling you you're beautiful and it's all going to be stupid and fun."

"Exactly!" Samar said, perhaps too enthusiastically. "Everyone acts like you have to choose between intelligent and fun, between depth and enjoyment. Why can't you have both?"

"You can," she said, holding his gaze. "Most people just aren't capable of it. They're either pretentious snobs who only like 'important' things, or they're shallow and proud of it. But some

people—rare people—can hold contradictions. Can be serious and silly. Deep and light. Those are my favorite people.”

The bell rang for fifth period. Reality crashed back in—economics class, Mr. Sharma’s monotone voice, the slow death of Tuesday afternoon.

“I should go,” Samar said, not moving.

“You should,” Ankita agreed, also not moving.

They sat there for another thirty seconds, neither willing to be the first to break whatever spell had been cast.

Finally, she stood, graceful even in the awkward scramble of gathering books and bags. “We should do this again. Talk about books and music and why most people are disappointing.”

“I’d like that,” Samar said, trying to sound casual while his heart was doing something complicated in his chest.

“Good.” She paused at the library door, turned back. “You’re different than I expected, Samar Malhotra.”

“Different how?”

“Better,” she said simply, and left.

Samar sat in the empty library for another five minutes, Mrs. Kapoor giving him a knowing look over her glasses, before he finally gathered his things and walked to class in a daze.

Kunal found him after school, by the basketball courts where they usually met before heading home.

“Dude, where were you fifth period? Sharma actually noticed you were gone and made a comment about ‘even our best students abandoning ship.’”

“Library,” Samar said. “Lost track of time.”

“Doing what? Reading about stars again?” Kunal dribbled his basketball, casual and coordinated in the way naturally athletic people were. “You know they’re not going anywhere, right? The stars? They’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Talked to someone, actually. Ankita Sharma. She’s in Class 12.”

Kunal’s hands stilled on the basketball. Something crossed his face—recognition, maybe interest, maybe something else.

“Ankita Sharma. Yeah, I know her. Well, know of her. She’s in Preeti’s section.”

Preeti was Kunal’s girlfriend of six months, a perfectly nice girl who laughed at all his jokes and looked good in photographs. Their relationship had the easy, surface quality of high school romance—hand-holding in corridors, sharing lunch, the occasional movie date chaperoned by friends.

“She’s... interesting,” Samar said carefully, not wanting to reveal too much of what he was feeling, which was vast and confusing and entirely new.

“She’s hot,” Kunal said bluntly. “Like, ridiculously hot. But weird, you know? Doesn’t really hang out with anyone. Always has her nose in a book. I think she writes poetry or some shit.”

“She’s not weird,” Samar said, defensive in a way that surprised him. “She’s intelligent.”

Kunal grinned, that shit-eating grin that meant he’d noticed something. “Ohhh. You like her.”

“I just met her.”

“You like her. I can tell. You have that look.”

“What look?”

“That ‘I’m going to overthink this person for the next six months’ look. It’s very you.” Kunal threw an arm around his shoulder, brotherly and obnoxious. “Good for you, man. You should ask her out. You need to finally get a girlfriend. Can’t have you being a virgin forever.”

Samar shoved him off, laughing despite himself. “Not everyone operates on your timeline, Kunal. Some of us actually want to, I don’t know, get to know someone first?”

“Boring,” Kunal declared. “But fine. Court her with your book knowledge and your fancy words. Just don’t take ten years about it.”

They walked toward the parking lot where Samar’s driver waited—one of the small embarrassments of wealth he’d never

quite gotten comfortable with. Kunal lived close enough to walk home, preferred it actually, said it gave him time to think.

“Hey,” Kunal said as they reached Samar’s car. “Seriously though. Be careful with that one.”

“What do you mean?”

Kunal shrugged, bouncing his basketball. “Just... I’ve heard things. About her. That she’s intense. That she messes with people. Probably bullshit, you know how school gossip is. But just... be careful. You’re, like, an innocent person. You see the best in people. And sometimes people aren’t their best.”

It was uncharacteristically serious for Kunal, this warning. And it was delivered with genuine care—the kind of thing you only say to someone you actually love as a friend.

“I’ll be careful,” Samar promised, having no idea that this promise was meaningless, that by the time he realized he should have been careful it would be far too late, that some people are destined to crash into your life regardless of how many warnings you receive.

He went home. Had dinner with his family—mother, father, sister. They talked about his day in the general, surface way families did. His father mentioned an upcoming business trip to Mumbai. His mother reminded him about his cousin’s birthday party that weekend. His sister complained about her Class 9 teachers being unfair about homework loads.

Normal. Safe. The comfortable routine of a life that made sense.

That night, Samar lay in his bed—the same bed he'd slept in since childhood, with its familiar sheets and the poster of Carl Sagan on the wall and the bookshelf overflowing with everything he'd ever loved—and thought about dark golden-brown eyes and a voice that said “you're better than I expected” like it was a revelation.

He didn't know, couldn't have known, that he'd just met the person who would define him. That ten years from now he'd be unable to sleep in this bed or any bed, that the boy currently smiling at his ceiling would become a ghost, that happiness was about to become a memory instead of a state of being.

He was sixteen and brilliant and loved, and the darkness was coming, but it hadn't arrived yet.

So he smiled. Thought about what they might talk about next time. Wondered if she liked astronomy, if she'd want to see the Orionid meteor shower that was supposed to peak next week, if maybe he could work up the courage to ask her.

Somewhere across the city, in a house he'd never see, Ankita Sharma was probably reading, or writing, or thinking her own mysterious thoughts. And maybe she was thinking about him too.

That possibility felt like magic.

It felt like the beginning of something important.

And it was. Just not in the way he imagined.

The darkness was coming, dressed in white shirt and grey skirt, carrying books and smiling like she knew something he didn't.

But tonight, Samar Malhotra was still innocent. Still whole. Still the boy who believed in good things.

Tomorrow, he'd see her again. They'd become friends. Best friends, even. She'd choose him, approach him, want to know him.

And it would feel like destiny.

It would feel like the universe giving him exactly what he needed.

He fell asleep smiling, which was something the Samar of ten years later would find almost unbearably sad—this boy who didn't know what was coming, who trusted so completely in the goodness of people and the fairness of the universe.

Sleep came easy then. Sleep was still possible. The night still ended.

The night always ended, back then.

Before she became the night that never would.

CHAPTER 3: THE ARCHITECTURE OF FALLING

2014

Friendship, Samar would learn, was the most effective disguise for destruction.

It started innocently enough—the way all catastrophes do, dressed in mundane clothes, pretending to be something safe. Ankita began appearing in the library during lunch with increasing frequency, always with a new book, always with that smile that suggested she knew something amusing about the world that she might share with you if you proved worthy.

The second time she found him there, three days after their first conversation, she slid a book across the table without preamble.

“Read this,” she said.

Samar picked it up. “The God of Small Things.” Arundhati Roy. He’d heard of it but never read it—one of those books that lived on his perpetually growing list.

“Why this one?” he asked.

“Because it’s about forbidden things. About love that breaks rules. About how society destroys beautiful things because they don’t fit into neat categories.” She leaned back in her chair, studying him. “I want to know what you think about it. Whether you’re the kind of person who believes rules matter more than feelings.”

"That's a false binary," Samar said, intrigued despite himself. "Rules exist for reasons. But feelings are what make us human. You can't privilege one absolutely over the other."

"Can't you?" Her eyes held challenge and amusement in equal measure. "What if you had to choose? What if loving someone meant breaking every rule you'd been taught to follow?"

"Then I'd examine why those rules existed in the first place. Whether they were protecting something real or just maintaining power structures that benefit some people at the expense of others."

She laughed, delighted. "See? This is why I like you. You actually think. Most people just recite what they've been told."

"What about you?" he asked. "What would you choose?"

"I'd choose feeling, every time." She said it with such certainty, such conviction. "Rules are made by people who are afraid of chaos. But chaos is where all the interesting things happen. Order is just another word for death."

Samar would remember this conversation later, when he understood that she'd been telling him exactly who she was from the beginning. That she'd been honest, in her way. But in that moment, sixteen and naive and desperately wanting to impress this brilliant, beautiful girl who'd chosen to spend time with him, he heard it as philosophy. Abstract. Intellectual.

Not prophecy.

They fell into a pattern. Lunch periods in the library, trading books like they were trading pieces of themselves. She introduced him to Sylvia Plath's rawness, the way "Lady Lazarus" could make you feel powerful and destroyed simultaneously. He gave her Sagan's "Contact," the idea that searching for meaning in the cosmos was its own form of faith. They argued about everything—whether Murakami was profound or pretentious (she said profound, he said both), whether Honey Singh's "Brown Rang" was objectifying or celebratory (they agreed it was both and that was okay), whether Miley Cyrus's "Wrecking Ball" was a masterpiece or melodrama (she insisted masterpiece, he reluctantly agreed after the fourth time she made him listen to it).

"It's about vulnerability as violence," Ankita explained, playing the song on her phone through smuggled earbuds, both of them bent close to hear. "She's not the victim in that video. She's the wrecking ball. She's destroying herself to prove she can feel something real. That's brave."

"That's terrifying," Samar countered, but he understood what she meant. There was something in the rawness of it, the refusal to be polite about pain, that resonated.

Within two weeks, they were inseparable during school hours. She'd wait for him after his classes, walk with him to the library or the computer lab where he sometimes helped underclassmen with their coding projects. She'd sit beside him during lunch, stealing food off his plate with the casual intimacy of someone who'd known him for years instead of weeks.

Kunal noticed, obviously.

"So you and Ankita are a thing now?" he asked one evening, the two of them shooting hoops in Samar's driveway, the October sun setting in that particular Delhi way that turned the pollution into accidental art.

"We're friends," Samar said, missing an easy layup because the word felt insufficient even as he said it.

"Right. Friends." Kunal's tone was elaborately neutral. "Friends who spend every lunch period together. Friends who text until 2 AM. Friends who look at each other like the rest of the world is just background noise."

"It's not like that."

"Dude." Kunal stopped dribbling, looked at him seriously. "It's exactly like that. Question is, does she know?"

"Know what?"

"That you're completely gone for her."

Samar felt his face heat. "I'm not—we're just—she's easy to talk to. She gets things. Books and ideas and—"

"Yeah, yeah, she's beautiful and smart and mysterious. I get it." Kunal threw the ball at him, harder than necessary. "I'm just saying, be clear about what this is. Because from where I'm standing, you're falling, and I'm not sure she's catching you. I'm not sure she even knows she's supposed to."

“We’re friends,” Samar repeated, firmer this time, as much to convince himself as Kunal.

“Okay.” Kunal raised his hands in surrender. “Your funeral. Just... remember what I said. About being careful.”

But Samar wasn’t careful. How could he be? Ankita was gravitational. Being near her felt like being more himself than he’d ever been—smarter, funnier, more interesting. She saw him in a way no one else did, listened when he talked about things that mattered, asked questions that pushed him to think harder.

It felt like being chosen. Like being special.

It felt like love, though he wouldn’t have named it that yet. Not out loud.

Three weeks after their first conversation, she invited him to her house.

“My parents are never home,” she explained during lunch, casual as if this was a normal thing to say. “Dad’s a consultant, travels constantly. Mom’s a doctor, works insane hours. I basically live alone. We could hang out after school. Actually listen to music properly, not through shitty phone speakers. I have a good sound system.”

Every teenage instinct in Samar’s body recognized this for what it was: an invitation to intimacy, to privacy, to the possibility of something more than friendship. His heart did something acrobatic.

“Yeah,” he managed. “That sounds good.”

“Friday?” she asked. “We could make it a regular thing. Like our own private book club. Music and conversation and no interruptions.”

Friday arrived with the weight of occasion. Samar told his driver to drop him at Ankita’s address in Defence Colony—a nice area, not as expensive as where he lived, but comfortable. The apartment was on the fourth floor of a building that had seen better days but still maintained respectability.

She answered the door in jeans and a loose white shirt, her hair down for once instead of in its usual school ponytail. She looked different outside of uniform—older, somehow. More real.

“Welcome to my cave,” she said, gesturing him inside.

The apartment was exactly what he’d imagined: books everywhere, papers scattered on surfaces, a faint smell of incense, posters of bands and poets on the walls. Her room—which she led him to without hesitation—was painted dark blue, almost navy, with fairy lights strung across the ceiling and a impressive sound system in the corner.

“Your parents really don’t care that you have a guy in your room?” Samar asked, still standing awkwardly by the door.

“My parents don’t care about anything as long as my grades are good.” She said it matter-of-factly, no self-pity. “Sit. I’m not going to bite you.”

He sat on her bed because there was nowhere else—no desk chair, no bean bag. Just bed and floor. She sat beside him, close enough that he could smell her perfume, something floral and expensive.

“What do you want to listen to?” she asked, scrolling through her phone.

“You choose.”

She picked Lana Del Rey. “Video Games.” The song filled the room, melancholy and beautiful, and Ankita closed her eyes, swaying slightly.

“This song destroys me every time,” she said. “The way she loves someone who barely sees her. The way she makes her own happiness out of scraps of his attention. It’s pathetic and beautiful and so fucking honest.”

Samar watched her, this girl who seemed to feel everything so intensely, and wondered what it would be like to be loved by someone who felt that deeply. To be seen the way she seemed to see the world—in high definition, every emotion at maximum volume.

“Do you love like that?” he asked before he could stop himself. “All or nothing?”

She opened her eyes, looked at him with something unreadable in her expression. “I do, actually. When I love someone, I love them completely. Obsessively. It’s probably unhealthy.” She

smiled, but there was something dark in it. “I warned you I was intense.”

“I don’t think that’s unhealthy,” Samar said. “I think most people are afraid to feel things fully. They hold back because they’re scared of getting hurt. But holding back is its own kind of death.”

“Exactly.” She turned toward him, fully focused now, knee touching his. “You get it. Most people don’t get it. They think safety matters more than truth. But what’s the point of being safe if you’re not actually alive?”

They talked for three hours. About everything and nothing. About their families—her absent parents, his close-knit one. About their dreams—she wanted to be a writer, something real and raw that would make people feel uncomfortable truths; he wanted to do something with technology that would actually matter, solve problems that affected real people. About their fears—she was afraid of being ordinary, of living a small life; he was afraid of disappointing people, of not living up to potential.

“That’s your problem,” she said, lying back on her bed, staring at the ceiling. “You care too much what other people think. You’re so busy being perfect for everyone else that you never consider what you actually want.”

“That’s not true,” he protested, lying back beside her, careful to maintain distance.

“Isn’t it? Name one thing you’ve done recently that was just for you. Not for your parents, not for your grades, not to impress anyone. Just because you wanted to.”

He thought about it. Couldn't come up with anything.

"See?" she said, turning her head to look at him, their faces inches apart. "You're so good at being what everyone needs that you've forgotten how to be selfish. It's going to destroy you eventually."

"And you're selfish?"

"Completely." She said it without shame. "I do what I want. I feel what I feel. I don't apologize for taking up space or wanting things or being too much. Life's too short to be small."

Samar's phone buzzed. His mother, asking when he'd be home for dinner.

"I should go," he said, not moving.

"You should," she agreed, also not moving.

They lay there for another minute, the space between them electric with everything unsaid. Then Ankita sat up, breaking the spell.

"Same time next week?" she asked.

"Yeah. Definitely."

Walking out of her building into the October evening, Samar felt like he'd crossed some threshold. The world looked different—sharper, more vivid, full of possibility. He was falling, exactly like

Kunal had said, and he didn't care. This was what people wrote songs about, what made poetry matter. This feeling of being alive in a way that was almost painful.

He texted her when he got home: *Thanks for today. Best afternoon in recent memory.*

Her reply came immediately: *You're easy to talk to. Most people are exhausting. You're not.*

And then: *I think we're going to be important to each other, Samar Malhotra.*

He stared at that message for a long time before responding: *I think so too.*

What he didn't know—what he couldn't know—was that she'd sent a similar message to someone else that night. That while he was lying in bed thinking about her dark blue room and her intensity and the way she made him feel seen, she was talking to Kunal. That the architecture of his falling was being built with precision, every beam and support designed by someone who knew exactly what she was doing.

But that night, innocent and unaware, Samar fell asleep with her words glowing on his phone screen: *I think we're going to be important to each other.*

He believed it was true.

It was true.

Just not in the way that would save him.

CHAPTER 4: THE TRIANGULATION

2014

The thing about falling in love is that you don't notice the exact moment you hit the ground. You just wake up one day and realize you've been shattered for weeks without knowing it.

For Samar, that realization came on a Thursday in November, during a moment so ordinary it should have been forgettable.

He was in the computer lab, helping a Class 9 student debug her Python code, when Ankita walked in. Nothing unusual about that—she'd been finding him during his free periods with increasing regularity, would sit on the desk beside him and read while he worked, her presence a comfortable weight in his peripheral vision.

But this time she wasn't alone.

Kunal was with her.

They were laughing about something, some private joke that made Ankita throw her head back in that unselfconscious way she had, and Kunal had his hand on her shoulder—casual, familiar, the kind of touch that suggested this wasn't the first time.

Samar's hands stilled on the keyboard. Something sharp lodged itself in his chest.

“Samar!” Ankita called out, noticing him. “We were looking for you. Kunal was just telling me about the time you two tried to sneak into that college fest in Class 9 and got caught by your mom in the parking lot.”

“It was his idea,” Kunal said, grinning. “I was the innocent victim led astray by Samar’s criminal mastermind tendencies.”

“That’s a complete revision of history,” Samar said, forcing his voice to sound normal. “You’re the one who stole your brother’s college ID.”

They bantered, the three of them, and it should have been fine. It was fine. Kunal was his best friend. Ankita was... Ankita. There was no reason for the tightness in his chest, the way his smile felt like a performance.

Except there was.

Because when Kunal touched her shoulder, she didn’t move away. When he made her laugh, she looked at him like he was genuinely funny, not just tall and handsome and socially powerful. When the three of them talked, there was an ease between Ankita and Kunal that Samar had thought was unique to his relationship with her.

He’d thought he was special.

Maybe he wasn’t.

"Listen," Kunal said after a few minutes, checking his phone.
"I've got to get to practice. Coach will kill me if I'm late again. But Ankita, that thing we talked about? Let me know."

"I will," she said, and there was something in her tone—promise, intimacy—that made Samar want to ask what thing, what had they talked about, when had they talked.

But he didn't ask. Because asking would reveal too much. Would show that he cared in a way that friends didn't care.

After Kunal left, Ankita stayed. Hopped up on the desk beside Samar's computer, swinging her legs.

"Your best friend is entertaining," she said.

"He has his moments."

"You two are really close, huh? Like brothers."

"Since Class 6," Samar confirmed, trying to focus on the code in front of him even though the Class 9 student had wisely made herself scarce when the seniors arrived. "We've been through everything together."

"That's nice," Ankita said, and something in her voice made him look up. She was studying him with that particular intensity she had, like she was reading a book written on his face. "Having someone who knows you that well. Who's seen you at your worst and still chooses you."

"Yeah," Samar said. "It is."

"Do you tell him everything? About your life?"

"Most things."

"Have you told him about me?" The question was casual, but her eyes were sharp. "About our... friendship?"

"He knows we're friends, yeah. He mentioned you're in Preeti's section."

"Right. Preeti." Ankita smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "They're cute together. Very conventional. Very safe."

There was judgment in her tone, the way she said "safe" like it was a criticism. Samar wanted to defend Kunal's relationship, but something stopped him. Maybe because he'd had the same thought—that Kunal and Preeti were playing at romance, following a script someone else had written.

Nothing like what he felt when he was near Ankita. Nothing like this electricity, this sense that every conversation might veer into dangerous territory.

"Not everyone wants complicated," Samar said carefully.

"No," Ankita agreed. "Most people want easy. They want relationships that don't challenge them, that don't ask them to be more than they already are." She leaned forward. "But you're not most people, are you, Samar? You want something real. Something that matters."

"I want..." He stopped, unsure how to finish that sentence without revealing too much. "I want honesty, I guess. Authenticity. Someone who doesn't perform."

"You mean like this?" She gestured around them—the computer lab, the school, the elaborate social theater of teenage existence. "All of this is performance. Everyone pretending to be someone they're not, or someone they think they should be."

"Not you," he said. "You're the most authentic person I know."

She looked at him for a long moment, something complicated moving across her face. Then she smiled—soft, genuine, almost sad.

"You're sweet," she said. "Dangerously sweet. Someone's going to break your heart, Samar Malhotra."

"Maybe I'll break theirs first."

"No." She reached out, touched his cheek—brief, electric, gone before he could react. "You're not built for cruelty. You're built for devotion. It's going to destroy you."

Before he could respond to that prophecy, the bell rang for the next period. She slid off the desk, grabbed her bag.

"Friday?" she asked. "My place? I got the new Arctic Monkeys album. Thought we could listen to it."

"Yeah," he managed. "Friday."

She left, and Samar sat in the empty computer lab trying to restart his brain. His cheek still burned where she'd touched it. His heart was doing something arrhythmic.

And his phone buzzed with a text from Kunal: *Dude, Ankita is actually cool. I get why you like her. We should all hang out sometime. The three of us.*

Samar stared at that message, trying to parse what he was feeling. Relief that Kunal approved? Jealousy that they'd apparently spent enough time together to form an opinion? Confusion about what "that thing we talked about" meant?

All of the above, probably.

He texted back: *Sure, sounds good.*

But it didn't feel good. It felt like something was shifting, some tectonic plate beneath his feet moving in ways he didn't understand.

Friday came. Samar showed up at Ankita's apartment at 4 PM, the winter sun already starting its decline. She answered the door in sweatpants and an oversized hoodie, hair in a messy bun, no makeup. Somehow more beautiful like this, without the careful construction of school appearance.

"Come in," she said. "I made chai. Figured we could be civilized about this."

Her room smelled like jasmine incense. The curtains were drawn, fairy lights providing the only illumination. Arctic Monkeys was already playing—"Do I Wanna Know?"—the opening guitar riff filling the space.

They sat on her bed, tea in hands, and for a while just listened. The song was perfect for the mood—all longing and uncertainty, Alex Turner's voice asking the questions Samar had been too afraid to ask.

"This song is about wanting someone who might not want you back," Ankita said quietly. "About that moment before you know. When everything is still possible but also terrifying."

"Do you ever feel like that?" Samar asked. "Uncertain?"

"About some things, yes." She turned to look at him. "About others, I'm very certain."

"Like what?"

"Like you." She said it simply, directly. "I'm certain about you. About this friendship. About the fact that you're important to me."

Samar's heart was trying to escape his chest. "You're important to me too."

"I know." She smiled. "I can tell. You're very obvious, Samar. It's part of your charm."

"Obvious how?"

“The way you look at me. The way you listen when I talk, like every word matters. The way you remember things—what books I love, what music makes me feel things. You pay attention. Most people don’t actually pay attention.”

“Maybe I pay attention because you’re worth paying attention to.”

The words hung between them, heavier than he’d intended. Ankita set down her tea, and for a moment Samar thought—hoped—feared—that she might kiss him. That this moment was the threshold, the point where friendship transformed into something else.

Instead, she said: “I need to tell you something. And I need you to not hate me for it.”

Everything in Samar went cold. “Okay.”

“I’m seeing someone. Like, dating someone. It’s new, just a few weeks, but it’s... it’s a thing.”

The world tilted. Samar managed to keep his face neutral—years of being polite, of being gracious, of being the person who made everyone else comfortable. But inside, something was cracking.

“That’s... that’s great,” he heard himself say. “Who?”

She hesitated. And in that hesitation, Samar knew. Before she said the name, he knew.

“Kunal.”

Of course. Of course it was Kunal. Because Kunal was six-two and athletic and effortlessly charismatic. Because Kunal was the sun and Samar had always been the moon, reflective, secondary. Because this was how the world worked—the brilliant, beautiful girls chose the obvious choice, not the complicated one.

“He asked me out last week,” Ankita continued, and she had the grace to look uncomfortable. “After we all hung out that day. He texted me that night and we got talking and... I don’t know, it just kind of happened. But I wanted you to know. Because you’re important to me, and I don’t want there to be secrets between us.”

“Does he know?” Samar asked. “About us? About how much time we spend together?”

“I told him we’re close friends. He said he’s fine with it. He trusts you.”

The irony was devastating. Kunal trusted him. Trusted that Samar wouldn’t try to steal his girlfriend, because Samar was good, loyal, decent. Trusted that Samar’s feelings—if they existed at all—would be subordinated to their friendship.

And Samar would prove him right. Because that’s who Samar was. The person who put everyone else first.

“I’m happy for you,” Samar said, and it was the greatest lie he’d ever told. “Kunal’s a good guy. Best guy I know.”

“You’re not upset?”

“Why would I be upset? We’re friends. You’re allowed to date whoever you want.”

Ankita studied him for a long moment. “You’re a terrible liar, you know that?”

“I’m not lying.”

“You are. But I appreciate it.” She reached out, took his hand. “I don’t want this to change things between us. I don’t want to lose this—what we have. The conversations, the music, the way we understand each other. That’s rare, Samar. That matters more than dating.”

Her hand in his was torture and comfort in equal measure. “Nothing has to change,” he said.

But everything had already changed. The moment she’d said Kunal’s name, the entire architecture of Samar’s hope had collapsed. He’d been building a future in his head—unconsciously, maybe, but thoroughly. A future where eventually, inevitably, she’d see him the way he saw her. Where their friendship would transform into love because it already felt like love, just unconsummated.

But that future was gone now. Replaced by a present where he got to be her confidant, her best friend, the person she told about her relationship with someone else.

They spent the rest of the afternoon listening to music and talking, and Samar performed brilliantly. He asked about Kunal, made appropriate jokes, gave good-natured advice. He was supportive and kind and everything a good friend should be.

And inside, he bled.

When he left her apartment that evening, the winter dark complete now, he sat in his car for ten minutes before telling the driver to go. His phone had three texts from Kunal:

Dude, I told Ankita about us. She's cool with it right?

Thanks for being a real one. I know you guys are close.

Also mom's making your favorite for dinner tomorrow. You should come over.

Samar typed and deleted five different responses before settling on: *All good brother. Happy for you both. Will come for dinner.*

At home, his sister took one look at his face and said, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Samar."

He looked at her—the one person who'd always been able to read him, who'd shared a womb with him before they'd shared a world. "The girl I told you about. Ankita. She's dating Kunal."

His sister's face did something complicated. "Oh, Samar."

"It's fine. I'm fine. They're good together. He asked her out, she said yes, it's all very normal and fine."

"But you love her."

It was the first time anyone had said it out loud. The first time the word "love" had been attached to what he felt.

"I don't..." he started, then stopped. Because lying to his sister was different than lying to everyone else. She deserved truth. "Yeah. I think I do. I think I have been for weeks and I just didn't want to name it because naming it makes it real and I thought if I didn't name it, maybe it wouldn't hurt."

"And does it? Hurt?"

Samar smiled, and it was the saddest thing his sister had ever seen. "Like dying. It hurts like dying."

She hugged him then, fierce and protective, and he let himself be held for a moment. Let himself be sixteen and heartbroken and human.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Nothing. Be a good friend. Be happy for them. What else can I do?"

"You could tell her how you feel."

“She’s with Kunal. My best friend. I’m not going to be that person.”

“So you’re just going to... what? Watch them be together? Pretend you’re fine?”

“Yes,” Samar said. “That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

And he did. For the next three weeks, Samar Malhotra performed the role of supportive best friend with Academy Award-worthy precision. He hung out with Kunal and Ankita together, made jokes, gave relationship advice, listened to Kunal talk about how amazing she was and Ankita talk about how sweet Kunal was. He maintained his friendship with Ankita—still met her for lunch, still went to her apartment on Fridays, still had their deep conversations about books and music and meaning.

Nothing changed, except everything.

Because now when she touched his hand, it was friendly. When she looked at him with that intensity, it was platonic. When she told him secrets, they were the secrets of someone who trusted him not to want her.

And Samar learned what it meant to love someone who would never love him back. Learned to smile through devastation. Learned that the heart doesn’t actually break cleanly—it fractures slowly, a thousand small cracks that you don’t notice until one day you realize you’re held together by nothing but habit and performance.

He learned to be the moon, content to orbit someone else's sun.

It was the first lesson in his education of suffering.

There would be many more to come.

CHAPTER 5: THE FIRST BETRAYAL

2014

December came to Delhi the way it always did—sudden, cold, wrapping the city in fog that made everything feel liminal, caught between states. Samar's seventeenth birthday passed quietly, a small dinner with family, cake he didn't eat, well-wishes from people who didn't notice he was already becoming someone else.

Ankita gave him a first edition of "Pale Blue Dot," must have cost her a fortune, with an inscription inside: **"For Samar, who sees the universe in everything. Never stop looking up. —A"*

Kunal gave him a basketball signed by an NBA player he'd never heard of and a bear hug that lasted too long, the kind that said **I love you, brother** without needing words.

Both gifts made him want to disappear.

The relationship between Kunal and Ankita had solidified in the way high school relationships did—hand-holding in corridors, lunch periods spent together, the occasional movie date that Samar was sometimes invited to and always declined. They were cute together, everyone said so. Kunal was smitten in his straightforward way, and Ankita seemed... content. Happy, even.

Except when she looked at Samar, there was something else. Something hungry and sad and complicated that he couldn't name and didn't want to examine too closely.

Their Friday afternoons continued. Kunal knew about them—“It’s cool that you guys are close,” he’d said, generous and trusting. “She needs someone who gets the whole book thing. That’s not really my speed.”

So Samar continued showing up at her apartment, continued their conversations, continued pretending that his heart wasn’t actively trying to kill him every time she smiled. It was a specific kind of torture, being close to someone you loved who loved someone else, but he’d gotten good at torture. Good at smiling through it.

It was a Friday in mid-December, two weeks after his birthday, when everything shifted again.

He arrived at Ankita’s apartment at the usual time—4 PM—but something felt different the moment she opened the door. She was wearing a dress, which was unusual for their casual hangouts. Dark green, fitted, the kind of thing you wore when you wanted to be looked at.

“You’re dressed up,” he observed, trying to keep his voice neutral.

“I had to go somewhere earlier,” she said vaguely. “Didn’t bother changing. Come in.”

Her room was darker than usual, only the fairy lights on, and there was wine on her desk—actual wine, in actual glasses, which meant she’d raided her parents’ cabinet.

“We’re drinking?” Samar asked, uncertain.

"We're almost seventeen," Ankita said. "Don't be such a rule-follower. Besides, I need to take the edge off."

"Edge off what?"

"Life. School. Everything." She poured two glasses, handed him one. "Drink. It'll help you relax. You're always so tense."

He sipped. It was terrible, bitter and burning, but he drank it anyway because she was watching him and he didn't want to seem immature.

They sat on her bed—their usual spot—and she put on music. Not the usual Arctic Monkeys or Lana Del Rey. Something darker. The Weeknd. "Wicked Games."

I left my girl back home, I don't love her no more...

"This song is about using people," Ankita said, her voice slightly slurred. How much had she drunk before he arrived? "About wanting someone physically even when you know it's wrong. About being selfish."

"That's... dark," Samar said.

"Life is dark." She turned to him, and her eyes were strange—unfocused but intense, like she was looking through him instead of at him. "You ever think about that? How we pretend everything is fine and good and moral, but underneath we're all just animals wanting things we shouldn't want?"

“Not really, no.”

“Liar.” She moved closer, close enough that he could smell the wine on her breath, the perfume on her skin. “You want things you shouldn’t want. I know you do.”

Samar’s heart was racing. Every instinct told him something was wrong here, that they were crossing a line that shouldn’t be crossed. “Ankita—”

“Do you think I’m beautiful?” she asked suddenly.

“What?”

“It’s a simple question. Do you think I’m beautiful?”

“You know you are.”

“That’s not an answer. I want to hear you say it. Do you, Samar Malhotra, think I’m beautiful?”

“Yes.” The word came out rough. “You’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen.”

She smiled, but it was wrong—sharp and victorious and nothing like her usual smile. “And do you want me? Physically?”

The room was spinning and Samar wasn’t sure if it was the wine or the question or the way she was looking at him like he was prey.

“You’re with Kunal,” he managed.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Ankita, I don’t—this isn’t—”

“Just answer the question.” Her hand found his knee, moved higher. “Do you want me?”

“Stop.” He stood up, nearly knocking over his wine glass. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” She stood too, unsteady in her heels. “I’m giving you what you want. What you’ve wanted since the day we met. Don’t pretend you haven’t thought about it. About touching me. About—”

“You’re drunk,” Samar said, his voice harder than he’d ever heard it. “And you’re with my best friend. This isn’t happening.”

“Your best friend,” she laughed, bitter. “Your best friend who texts other girls. Your best friend who told me last week he’s not sure if he actually loves me or just loves how I look. Your best friend who’s too shallow to understand half the things I say. But you understand, don’t you Samar? You always understand.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“I think about you,” she said, and her voice shifted—softer now, almost vulnerable. “When I’m with him, I think about you. About how you look at me like I’m the only person in the world who matters. About how you listen. About how you make me feel seen in a way he never does. And I know you think about me too.

I see it in your face every time I touch Kunal in front of you. Every time I talk about him. It kills you, doesn't it?"

It did. It absolutely did. But admitting it felt like detonating his entire life.

"I need to go," Samar said, heading for the door.

"Don't." She grabbed his arm, and the touch was electric. "Don't go. Please. I'm sorry. I'm drunk and stupid and I'm saying things I shouldn't say but they're true. They're all true."

"Ankita—"

"I'm not asking you to date me. I know that's not possible. But this—us—this is real. What I have with Kunal is... it's easy. It's comfortable. But it's not real. Not like this."

Samar looked at her—really looked at her—and saw something he'd been too naive to see before. She wasn't vulnerable. She wasn't confused. She knew exactly what she was doing. This was a test, or a game, or something worse.

"If you think that," he said carefully, "then break up with him. Be with me properly or not at all."

"It's not that simple."

"It is exactly that simple. You're either with him or you're not."

"What if I want both?" She said it so honestly, so directly, that for a moment he couldn't process it. "What if I want him for what he

gives me and you for what you give me? Why do I have to choose?"

"Because that's how this works. Because you can't—" He stopped, understanding finally crystallizing. "You're not confused. You know exactly what you're doing. You want to keep him for status or security or whatever, and keep me on the side for the emotional connection. For the intellectual stimulation."

"Would that be so terrible?" she asked. "To have something real with me, even if it's complicated? Isn't something better than nothing?"

And there it was. The offer. The bargain. Take whatever scraps of her he could get, or have nothing at all.

A better man—a stronger man—would have walked out. Would have chosen self-respect over desire.

But Samar was sixteen and in love and desperate for any piece of her he could have.

"I need to think," he said.

"Don't think." She moved closer again, and this time he didn't step back. "Thinking ruins everything. Just feel. Do you want me?"

"Yes," he admitted, and something in him broke with the word.

"Then kiss me."

He should have said no. Should have left. Should have chosen literally anything else.

But he didn't.

He kissed her, and it was everything and nothing like he'd imagined. She tasted like wine and something darker. Her hands were in his hair, against his face, possessive and desperate. It was a drowning kind of kiss, the kind that pulled you under and made you forget about air.

When they broke apart, she was smiling—that sharp, victorious smile again.

“See?” she said. “Not so terrible, is it? Breaking rules?”

“This is—we can't—” Samar couldn't finish a sentence. His brain was static and guilt and want all fighting for dominance.

“We can,” Ankita said. “We are. It's already done.”

“Kunal—”

“Doesn't have to know. This is between us. Our thing. Separate from whatever I have with him.”

“That's insane. That's—”

“That's honest,” she interrupted. “More honest than pretending we don't want each other. More honest than you sitting here

every Friday pretending to be my friend when we both know you want more.”

She wasn’t wrong. That was the devastating part. She was naming a truth he’d been too cowardly to admit.

“I should go,” he said again, but weaker this time.

“You should stay.” Her hand found his again. “Stay. Please. I don’t want to be alone.”

And because he was weak, because he loved her, because some part of him had already made the terrible bargain, he stayed.

They didn’t have sex that day—some last vestige of moral sense prevented that. But they lay on her bed, tangled together, kissing and touching in ways that felt both sacred and profane. And with every kiss, every touch, Samar felt himself crossing further into territory he couldn’t return from.

This wasn’t love. Love was supposed to feel clean, uncomplicated, right. This felt like drowning. Like becoming someone he didn’t recognize.

But it also felt inevitable. Like everything had been leading here from the moment she’d walked into the library two months ago. Like he’d never had a choice at all.

When he finally left her apartment, it was past 8 PM. His phone had six missed calls from his mother and three texts from Kunal:

Yo where are you?

Mom's asking if you're staying for dinner

Nvm she said you left already. See you Monday bro

Samar sat in his car and thought about Kunal—loyal, trusting, good Kunal who'd been his brother since they were eleven years old. Kunal who trusted him. Kunal who'd never imagine that his girlfriend and his best friend were...

What? What were they?

Not dating. Not even really cheating, since Samar hadn't known she was going to kiss him, since he'd tried to stop it, since...

Except he hadn't tried very hard. And he'd stayed after. And some part of him was already calculating when he'd see her next, when they'd be alone again, when he could taste that drowning again.

He texted Kunal back: *Sorry man, lost track of time. See you Monday.*

Then he texted Ankita: *We need to talk. This can't happen again.*

Her reply came instantly: *Can't or won't? There's a difference. See you Monday, Samar. Sweet dreams.*

He didn't have sweet dreams. He barely slept. He lay in his childhood bed staring at his ceiling and feeling like someone had

scooped out his insides and replaced them with something rotten.

This was wrong. He knew it was wrong. Kunal trusted him. Ankita was using both of them. This could only end in destruction.

But knowing something intellectually was different from having the strength to act on it.

Monday came. School felt surreal, like he was watching his own life from outside his body. Kunal was his usual self—joking, easy, brotherly. Threw an arm around Samar's shoulders and said, "Dude, you look like shit. You sick?"

"Didn't sleep well," Samar said, which was true.

"You need to relax more. You're always so stressed about everything." Kunal grinned. "Hey, you should come to Ankita's on Friday. She's having a few people over. Nothing crazy, just music and hanging out. She specifically said to invite you."

Of course she did.

"I'll think about it," Samar said.

At lunch, Ankita found him in the library—their spot, though it felt tainted now.

"So," she said, sliding into the chair across from him. "Did you think about it?"

“Think about what?”

“Us. Friday. Whether it can happen again.”

“It can’t,” Samar said, but his voice lacked conviction.

“Okay.” She smiled, unbothered. “If you say so.”

“I’m serious, Ankita. What we did—what I did—it was wrong. Kunal is my best friend. I can’t—”

“You already did,” she pointed out. “You already crossed that line. You can either torture yourself about it or accept that sometimes people are more complicated than the rules allow for.”

“This isn’t about being complicated. This is about basic decency.”

“Decency,” she repeated, as if testing the word. “Is it decent to pretend you don’t want me? To lie to yourself and Kunal and me about what you feel? How is that more moral than being honest about desire?”

“Because—” Samar stopped, frustrated. She had a way of twisting logic, making wrong sound like philosophy. “It just is. You know it is.”

“I know it’s easier,” Ankita said. “Easier to follow rules than to think for yourself. But I thought you were braver than that.”

It was manipulation—obvious, textbook manipulation. But it worked anyway.

"I need time," Samar said finally. "To figure out what I'm doing."

"Take all the time you need." She stood, but before leaving, leaned down and whispered near his ear: "But we both know how this ends, Samar. You can't resist me. You never could."

She was right.

Three days later, on Thursday evening, she texted him:
Computer lab. 4:30 PM. Door will be unlocked.

He shouldn't have gone.

He went.

The computer lab was empty—she'd somehow gotten the keys, probably charmed some teacher with her smile and intelligence. She was waiting for him in the back corner, by the server racks where no one could see from the hallway.

"You came," she said, and it wasn't quite a question.

"I shouldn't have."

"But you did." She moved toward him, predatory and graceful. "Because you want this. Even though it's wrong. Even though it betrays Kunal. You want it anyway."

"Stop," Samar said, but it was barely a whisper.

"Make me," she challenged.

He couldn't. He'd lost the ability to resist her somewhere between that first library conversation and right now. Lost himself in her gravitational pull.

They kissed against the server racks, hard drives humming their indifferent witness. Her hands were everywhere, urgent and claiming. His mind was screaming that this was wrong, that he was becoming someone he didn't recognize, that this would destroy everything.

But his body didn't care. His body had wanted her for months, and now that she was offering herself—even in this twisted, compartmentalized way—it was impossible to say no.

"We can't do this here," he managed between kisses.

"Yes we can," she insisted. "The door's locked. No one comes here after 4."

"Ankita—"

"Don't think," she said again, that repeated instruction, the mantra of his corruption. "Just feel. Let yourself want something for once."

So he did.

They had sex on the floor of the computer lab, on industrial carpet that smelled like dust and electronics, surrounded by machines that processed information in clean binary while Samar processed the death of his innocence. It was graceless

and desperate and nothing like the romantic fantasies he'd had about his first time. It hurt—not physically, but some other way, some soul-deep way that would take years to understand.

After, they lay there in the fluorescent light, breathing hard, and Samar felt like he'd committed murder. Not of another person. Of himself. Of the boy he'd been that morning who'd never betrayed anyone, who'd still believed he was fundamentally good.

"That was—" Ankita started.

"Don't," Samar interrupted. "Don't say it was beautiful or meaningful or anything. Don't romanticize what we just did."

She looked at him, surprised. "I was going to say intense."

"It was wrong."

"Maybe," she conceded. "But it was also real. More real than anything I have with Kunal. He touches my body but you touch something deeper. That matters, Samar. That has to mean something."

"It means we betrayed someone who trusts us. Who loves us both."

"He loves the idea of me," Ankita said, sitting up, fixing her uniform. "And he loves you like a brother. But he doesn't really see either of us. Not the way we see each other."

"That doesn't justify this."

“I’m not trying to justify it. I’m trying to explain it.” She stood, offered him her hand. “Come on. We need to leave before the evening classes start.”

He took her hand—because even now, even after everything, he couldn’t resist touching her—and let her pull him up.

They left separately, five minutes apart. Samar walked home instead of taking his car, needed the cold December air to remind him he was real, that this had actually happened, that he’d actually done this.

His phone buzzed with a text from Kunal: *Bro you still at school? Want to grab food?*

Samar stared at that text for a full minute before responding: *Sorry man, already home. Another time?*

All good. Hey, I think I’m going to tell Ankita I love her tomorrow. Is that too fast? We’ve only been dating like a month but I really think she’s it, you know?

Something in Samar’s chest cracked completely.

He typed and deleted five responses before settling on: *If you feel it, say it. Life’s too short not to be honest.*

The hypocrisy was staggering. He was telling his best friend to be honest while keeping the most devastating secret possible.

That night, Samar's sister found him on the terrace, smoking a cigarette he'd stolen from their father's study—his first cigarette, which felt appropriate given the day's theme of corrupted firsts.

"Since when do you smoke?" she asked, sitting beside him.

"Since about an hour ago."

"That's dramatic, even for you." She studied his face. "What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Samar."

"Something terrible," he said finally. "Something I can never take back and can never tell anyone about and will probably destroy every important relationship in my life."

His sister was quiet for a moment. Then: "Does it involve Ankita?"

"How did you—"

"You've been different since she started dating Kunal. Quieter. Sadder. And now you're smoking and looking like someone died." She touched his shoulder. "What did you do?"

"I can't tell you."

"Was it consensual?"

“Yes,” he said quickly. “It’s not that. It’s just... wrong. In every way that matters, it’s wrong.”

“Then stop doing it. Whatever it is.”

“I don’t think I can.” He looked at her, desperate. “That’s the terrifying part. I know it’s wrong and I think I’m going to keep doing it anyway because I’m weak and I love her and she’s the only thing that makes me feel anything anymore.”

“Samar,” his sister said carefully, “that’s not love. That’s—”

“Destruction?” He laughed, bitter. “Yeah. I know. But I think maybe I’m already destroyed. I think it happened the day she walked into the library and I’m only now noticing.”

They sat in silence, his sister’s hand on his shoulder, watching the Delhi smog turn the sunset into art.

Somewhere across the city, Ankita was probably reading or writing or thinking her mysterious thoughts. And Kunal was probably at basketball practice, innocent and trusting, loving two people who were busy betraying him.

And Samar was learning what it felt like to become someone he hated.

The computer lab would haunt him forever—the smell of it, the fluorescent lights, the feeling of becoming someone who could betray his best friend for a moment of feeling wanted. It was the first real betrayal, but it wouldn’t be the last.

It was just the beginning of his education in darkness.

And he'd been an excellent student his whole life.

CHAPTER 6: THE UNDERSTANDING

2015

There's a special kind of hell reserved for people who betray those who love them, and Samar discovered it had excellent amenities: constant guilt, fractured identity, and the particular agony of watching your best friend's face light up when his girlfriend walks into a room, knowing you've tasted her mouth hours earlier.

January brought board exam pressure—Class 12 students, Ankita included, consumed by pre-boards and preparation, while Samar's Class 11 continued in relative peace. It should have created distance. Should have given him space to think, to extract himself from the situation before it metastasized further.

Instead, the limited time made every encounter more intense. More desperate.

They developed a system, unspoken but efficient. She'd text him a location—the empty chemistry lab during lunch, the library's restricted section, once, horrifyingly, the back seat of his car parked in a quiet corner of the school lot during a free period. They'd meet, touch, dissolve into each other for stolen minutes, then return to their separate lives like nothing had happened.

And every time, Samar hated himself a little more.

What made it worse—impossibly worse—was that Kunal seemed happier than ever. The basketball team was winning. His relationship with Ankita was solid. His best friend was there,

reliable as always, listening to him talk about his life with that perfect fake smile Samar had perfected.

"I think I'm really in love with her, man," Kunal said one evening in late January. They were at Samar's house, supposedly studying but mostly just existing in each other's presence the way they had for years. "Like, actual love. Not just high school infatuation. She gets me, you know? Makes me want to be smarter, more interesting."

Samar's pen stilled on his economics notes. "That's... that's great, bro."

"I know you two are close," Kunal continued, sprawled on Samar's bed while Samar sat at his desk. "What does she say about me? When you guys talk?"

She says you're shallow. She says she thinks about me when she's with you. She says you touch her body but I touch something deeper.

"She says you're sweet," Samar lied. "That you make her laugh."

"Just sweet?" Kunal sounded disappointed. "I want to be more than sweet. I want to be... I don't know, necessary. The way she seems necessary to me."

"You can't make someone need you, Kunal. They either do or they don't."

"Deep." Kunal threw a pillow at him. "See, this is why you're going to end up alone, philosophizing about love instead of

actually experiencing it. You need to get a girlfriend, man. Actually participate in life instead of just observing it."

The irony would have been funny if it wasn't devastating.

"I'm fine," Samar said.

"You're not fine. You've been weird for months. Distant. You barely come to parties anymore. You're smoking now, which—what the fuck is that about? You used to lecture me about how cigarettes were slow suicide."

"Maybe I changed my mind."

"People don't just change their minds about fundamental values. Something happened. You've been different since..." Kunal paused, thinking. "Since around the time I started dating Ankita, actually."

Samar's heart stopped. "That's coincidental."

"Is it?" Kunal sat up, serious now. "Because I'm not blind, Samar. I see how you look at her sometimes. And I see how she looks at you."

The room was suddenly airless. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not stupid," Kunal said quietly. "I know you like her. Probably liked her before I even asked her out. I saw it that day in the library, the way you talked about her. The way your whole face changed."

Samar couldn't speak. Couldn't breathe. This was it—the moment everything exploded.

"But here's the thing," Kunal continued, and his voice was strange—sad but accepting. "I asked her out anyway. Because I wanted her and I thought... I thought I could make her happy. Happier than you could, maybe, because I'm better at the simple things. The romance, the gestures, the uncomplicated affection."

"Kunal—"

"Let me finish." Kunal stood, walked to the window, looked out at the January night. "I know she has feelings for you too. Different feelings than what she has for me. Deeper, maybe. Definitely more complicated. She talks about you constantly—what book you recommended, what you said about some philosophy thing, how you understand her in ways I don't."

"Then why—" Samar's voice cracked. "Why stay with her if you know—"

"Because I love her," Kunal said simply. "And I think she loves me too, in her way. Maybe it's not the intense, soul-consuming thing she has with you. But it's real. It's comfortable. It makes sense. We look good together. We make each other happy most of the time."

"That's not enough," Samar said, though he didn't know if he was talking about Kunal's relationship or his own situation.

"Maybe not for you," Kunal agreed. "But for me? For now? It's enough. I'd rather have eighty percent of her than zero percent."

He turned back to face Samar. "And I think she wants both of us. You for the deep conversations and the intellectual connection. Me for the easy parts, the physical relationship, the social validation. Is that fair? Probably not. But life isn't fair."

Samar felt like he was being dissected. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying I know." Kunal's eyes held something Samar had never seen before—tired knowledge, resigned acceptance. "I know you two have something. I don't know what exactly, and I don't want to know details. But I know it exists. And I'm choosing to... look the other way. Because losing her completely is worse than sharing her."

"That's insane."

"That's love," Kunal corrected. "Real, messy, compromised love. Not the fairy tale version they sell in movies."

"And what about us?" Samar asked. "Our friendship? You can just... accept that your best friend and your girlfriend have feelings for each other?"

"No," Kunal said honestly. "It kills me. Every time I see you two together, something in me wants to punch you in the face. But I also love you, brother. You're the person I trust most in this world besides her. So I'm choosing to believe you won't actually do anything to hurt me. That whatever you feel for her, you love me enough to respect boundaries."

The guilt was suffocating. Because Kunal was right here, offering trust and understanding and mature acceptance, while Samar

had already crossed every boundary imaginable. Had already betrayed him in the worst possible ways.

“Kunal,” Samar said carefully, “what if those boundaries have already been—”

“Don’t.” Kunal’s voice was sharp. “Don’t tell me. Whatever you were about to say, don’t. I’m offering you plausible deniability here. I’m offering both of us the ability to keep pretending everything is fine. Don’t take that away.”

“But that’s not honest. That’s not—”

“Honesty is overrated,” Kunal interrupted. “Sometimes the kindest thing you can do is let people keep their illusions. I’m telling you right now, I don’t want to know. I want to keep believing my best friend and my girlfriend have innocent feelings they never act on. I want to keep believing in you both. So whatever you were about to confess—don’t.”

It was a gift and a curse simultaneously. Permission to keep the secret that was destroying Samar from the inside. Permission to continue the betrayal while maintaining the friendship.

It should have felt like relief.

It felt like drowning.

“Okay,” Samar said finally. “I won’t tell you.”

“Good.” Kunal’s smile was sad. “Now let’s talk about something else. Literally anything else.”

They spent the rest of the evening in forced normalcy—discussing basketball, upcoming exams, Kunal's plans to maybe study engineering in Bangalore. Surface conversations that felt like dancing on a frozen lake, neither of them acknowledging the depths beneath.

After Kunal left, Samar sat in his room and tried to process what had just happened. Kunal knew. Not everything, but enough. And he'd chosen to look away, to accept a compromised version of reality rather than face the full truth.

It was, Samar realized, its own kind of love. Flawed and painful, but real.

And it made everything worse. Because now Samar couldn't even tell himself he was fooling anyone. Kunal knew. Was choosing to be hurt silently rather than blow everything up.

That kind of selfless stupidity deserved better than what Samar was giving him.

His phone buzzed: **Ankita: Can you talk? Call me.**

He called.

"Hey," she said, her voice soft, intimate. "How was your evening with Kunal?"

"Complicated."

"He talked to you, didn't he? About us. About knowing."

“How did you—”

“He talked to me too. Last week. Said basically the same thing—that he knows something exists between us but doesn’t want details. That he’s choosing to look away.” She paused. “It’s very noble of him. Very stupid, but very noble.”

“It’s not noble,” Samar said. “It’s self-destructive. He’s letting himself be hurt because he loves us both.”

“People hurt themselves for love all the time. It’s practically the definition of love—choosing pain over emptiness.”

“That’s a fucked up definition.”

“It’s an honest one.” He could hear her moving, probably lying on her bed, that dark blue room that had become the setting for so much of his corruption. “The question is, what do we do now? Now that he’s given us permission, essentially.”

“He didn’t give us permission. He gave us plausible deniability. That’s different.”

“Is it?” She sounded genuinely curious. “He knows we have feelings. He knows we’re close. He’s choosing not to investigate further. That’s permission by omission.”

“That’s not how ethics work.”

“Ethics,” she scoffed. “You’re still trying to find the moral high ground in a situation that has none. We passed moral high

ground months ago, Samar. Now we're just negotiating how deep into hell we're willing to go."

"And how deep are you willing to go?" he asked.

"As deep as it takes to keep both of you," she said honestly. "Is that selfish? Absolutely. But I'm tired of pretending I'm not selfish. I want you. I want him. I want the intellectual intimacy with you and the social ease with him. I want it all."

"You can't have it all. That's not how life works."

"Watch me."

They talked for another hour—circular, philosophical conversations that went nowhere and revealed everything. Ankita was unapologetic about her desires. She loved Kunal in a real but limited way. She loved Samar differently, deeper, but wasn't willing to give up Kunal for him. She wanted both, and she was counting on both of them loving her enough to accept a fractional relationship.

And the devastating part was: she was right.

Samar would take whatever percentage of her he could get. He'd proven that already.

The pattern continued through February and into March. The three of them existed in a strange equilibrium—Kunal and Ankita's public relationship, Samar and Ankita's secret encounters, all of them pretending normalcy while the rot spread beneath the surface.

Samar's grades slipped for the first time in his life. His mother noticed, concerned, asked if he was okay. His sister watched him with worried eyes but stopped asking questions after he snapped at her once. His father, busy with business, barely noticed the change.

Only his three friends remained constant—God, whom he prayed to with increasing desperation; his mother, who loved him without understanding what was wrong; and his sister, who understood but couldn't fix it.

The thousands of friends he used to have faded into background noise. They bored him now, with their simple problems and uncomplicated lives. He stopped going to parties, stopped responding to group chats, stopped pretending he could relate to people who hadn't yet learned how to betray everything they believed in.

It was during one of their Friday afternoon sessions—now resumed since Ankita's boards had ended—that everything shifted again.

They were in her room, post-sex, lying tangled in her sheets while Lana Del Rey played low in the background. "Young and Beautiful." The irony wasn't lost on Samar.

"I need to tell you something," Ankita said quietly.

Samar's stomach dropped. Those words never preceded anything good.

“What?”

“I love you.”

The words hung in the air, impossible and devastating.

“You... what?”

“I love you,” she repeated, propping herself up on one elbow to look at him. “I’ve known for a while, but I wasn’t sure if I should say it. If it would make things more complicated. But I can’t keep not saying it. I love you, Samar. Not the same way I love Kunal, but deeper. Truer. You’re the person I think about when I’m alone. The person whose opinion matters. The person who sees me completely and doesn’t look away.”

Samar’s heart was doing something violent in his chest. This should have been the happiest moment of his life—the girl he loved, saying she loved him back.

Instead, it felt like a death sentence.

“You can’t love me,” he said. “You’re with Kunal. You can’t love us both.”

“But I do.” She touched his face, gentle, tender in a way that made everything worse. “I know it’s wrong. I know it’s complicated. But it’s true. And I thought you deserved to hear it. To know that this isn’t just physical for me. That you’re not just the friend I betray my boyfriend with. You’re the person I love.”

“Ankita—”

“You don’t have to say it back,” she interrupted. “I know you probably can’t, given everything. But I needed you to know. That this matters. That you matter.”

Samar should have been elated. Should have felt victorious, chosen, special.

Instead, he felt his phone buzz in his discarded pants on the floor.

“Hold on,” he said, extracting himself from her embrace to check it. Maybe his mother, maybe his sister, maybe—

It was Kunal’s friend. Rohan. Part of the basketball crew, someone Samar barely knew beyond casual hellos.

The message was short and devastating: **Dude, thought you should know. Just left Kunal’s place. Walked in on him and Ankita. They’re fucking. Like, right now. Thought maybe you’d want to check on him later, he seemed pretty into it.**

The timestamp was fifteen minutes ago.

Samar stared at his phone, the words refusing to make sense. Ankita was here. With him. In her bed. They’d just... they were literally...

“What’s wrong?” Ankita asked, seeing his face.

He showed her the message.

She barely reacted. Didn't even look surprised.

"Oh," she said. "That."

"That'?" Samar's voice was strange, distant, like it belonged to someone else. "Fifteen minutes ago you were at Kunal's house. Having sex with him. And now you're here. With me. Telling me you love me."

"I came here after," she said, like it was obvious. "I told him I had a family thing. Then came here."

"You had sex with him and then came directly here to have sex with me."

"Yes."

"And told me you love me."

"Yes."

"While his cum is probably still—" Samar couldn't finish the sentence. The room was spinning.

"Don't be crude," Ankita said, frowning. "It's not like that."

"It's exactly like that!" He was on his feet now, pulling on clothes with shaking hands. "You fucked him, told him whatever you told him, then came here to fuck me and declare love? What is wrong with you?"

“Nothing is wrong with me,” she said calmly, infuriatingly calm. “I love you both. I have physical relationships with you both. I don’t see why the timing matters.”

“The timing—” Samar laughed, slightly hysterical. “You don’t see why it might bother me that an hour ago you were in bed with my best friend?”

“You knew I was with him. We’ve been dating for four months. Did you think we weren’t having sex?”

“I knew intellectually. I didn’t—” He stopped, struggling for words. “I didn’t need the timeline. I didn’t need to know that you came directly from his bed to mine. That’s not—that’s not love, Ankita. That’s something else. Something sick.”

“It’s honest,” she insisted. “More honest than lying about what I want. I want both of you. I love both of you in different ways. Why is everyone so obsessed with choosing? Why can’t I have both?”

“Because that’s not how this works! Because people aren’t interchangeable! Because—” His phone rang. Kunal. “Fuck.”

“Answer it,” Ankita said. “Be normal. He doesn’t know you know.”

Samar answered, his voice mechanical. “Hey.”

“Bro!” Kunal sounded happy, energized. “Good news. Ankita and I—we took things to the next level today. Like, all the way. It

was amazing. She's amazing. I'm thinking this might be it, man. Like, the one."

Samar looked at Ankita, who was watching him with those dark golden-brown eyes, unashamed, unapologetic.

"That's great, man," Samar heard himself say. "Really happy for you."

"I know we have that understanding and everything, but I wanted you to hear it from me. That this is serious now. Like, I'm in this completely."

"I understand."

"You okay? You sound weird."

"Just tired. Long day."

"Alright. Get some rest. See you Monday. Love you, brother."

"Love you too," Samar said, and ended the call.

He looked at Ankita. Really looked at her. Saw, maybe for the first time, exactly what she was. Not confused. Not complicated. Just selfish. Brilliantly, beautifully, devastatingly selfish.

"I need to go," he said.

"Samar—"

“No.” He grabbed his bag, his phone, his dignity that was already mostly gone. “I can’t do this anymore. This isn’t love. This is insanity. You’re destroying both of us and you don’t even care.”

“I do care,” she said, and she actually looked hurt. “I love you. I just said—”

“You don’t love me. You love having me. There’s a difference.” He was at her door now, desperate to escape. “And I can’t be had anymore. I’m done.”

“You’re not done,” she said quietly. “You’ll be back. You always come back.”

She was right.

He knew she was right.

But he left anyway, walked out of her apartment into the March heat, got in his car and drove aimlessly for an hour, trying to outrun the truth.

He’d just heard his best friend talk about having sex with the girl Samar loved. The girl who’d then come to Samar, still warm from Kunal’s bed, and said “I love you.” The girl who saw no problem with any of this, who thought love meant taking whatever you wanted from whoever would give it.

And Samar had nowhere to put this information. Couldn’t tell Kunal because Kunal had specifically asked not to know. Couldn’t tell his family because how did you explain you’d been

sleeping with your best friend's girlfriend who'd just slept with said best friend before coming to you?

He was trapped in a nightmare of his own making, and the worst part—the absolutely worst part—was that Ankita was right.

He would go back.

Because he loved her.

Because he was weak.

Because some part of him had accepted, months ago, that this was his life now. This was who he was. The boy who betrayed his best friend. The boy who accepted scraps of affection from a girl who loved chaos more than she loved anyone.

The boy who was learning, day by day, how to hate himself.

That night, Samar started smoking properly. Not one cigarette stolen from his father. A whole pack he bought himself, sat on his terrace and worked through methodically while looking at the stars Carl Sagan had once made him believe in.

We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.

Bullshit. The cosmos didn't want to know this. This self-betrayal, this corruption, this slow transformation from good person to something else entirely.

His phone buzzed. Ankita: **I meant what I said. I love you. Come back when you're ready.**

And below that: ****You will come back. We both know it.****

Samar didn't respond.

But she was right.

Three days later, she texted him a location. The chemistry lab.
After school.

He went.

He always went.

The understanding between him and Kunal held—barely. They were still friends. Still brothers. Still pretending everything was fine while the rot spread through all three of them, poisoning everything it touched.

And somewhere in that March, Samar realized he'd stopped fighting it. Stopped trying to be good. Accepted that this was his life now—loving someone who would never choose him, betraying someone who trusted him completely, becoming someone he despised.

The boy who'd believed in stars and meaning and the fundamental goodness of people was gone.

In his place: this. This hollow thing that went through motions, performed normalcy, and waited for the next text message that would bring him back to her.

Always back to her.

His beautiful, terrible devil at the crossroads.

Taking his soul piece by piece, while he helped her do it.

CHAPTER 7: NINE TROPHIES

2015

April in Delhi was the month where the city forgot about subtlety and committed fully to heat. The kind of heat that made thinking difficult, made everything feel surreal and slow-motion, made bad decisions feel inevitable rather than chosen.

Samar's life had settled into a rhythm that would have been funny if it wasn't tragic: school, stolen encounters with Ankita, pretending normalcy with Kunal, and an increasing reliance on cigarettes to make any of it bearable. His grades had stabilized—barely—because academic excellence was the one part of his identity he couldn't let go of completely. If he failed at being a good person, at least he could still be intelligent.

The astronomy conclave invitation came in late March, delivered by his physics teacher with an almost reverent expression.

"Samar," Mr. Khanna had said, "I've nominated you for the National Youth Astronomy Conclave in Gurgaon. It's prestigious—only fifty students from across the country. Three days, nine different competition categories covering everything from theoretical astrophysics to observational astronomy. I think you could win."

"All nine categories?" Samar had asked, half-joking.

"If anyone could, it would be you," Mr. Khanna had replied, dead serious.

The conclave was scheduled for the last week of April. Three days in Gurgaon, staying at a hotel, competing against the best young minds in the country in his favorite subject. It should have been exciting. Should have been the kind of opportunity that made him feel alive.

Instead, it felt like just another performance he'd have to give.

But he said yes anyway, because saying no would require explaining why he'd lost interest in things that used to matter, and he couldn't explain that without unraveling everything.

The news spread quickly through school. Kunal was proud in his uncomplicated way—"That's my boy! Going to show those nerds what DPS is about!"—and even organized a small celebration at his house, inviting their core group of friends.

Ankita was there, of course. Playing the perfect girlfriend, sitting close to Kunal, laughing at his jokes. But her eyes kept finding Samar across the room, holding his gaze for seconds too long, communicating things that no one else could decode.

After an hour, she excused herself to the bathroom. Two minutes later, Samar's phone buzzed: **Second floor guest room. Now.**

He shouldn't have gone. There were fifteen people downstairs, including Kunal. It was insane.

He went anyway.

She was waiting in the darkened guest room, door unlocked, and before he could say anything she was kissing him with desperate intensity.

"We can't—" he managed between kisses. "Not here. Not in his house."

"Everywhere else is fine but his house is sacred?" Her voice was mocking, hurt. "You've already betrayed him, Samar. Geography doesn't change that."

"This is different. This is—"

"This is what we do," she interrupted. "We take what we can, where we can, because you're too moral to actually leave him and I'm too selfish to choose. So stop pretending you have lines you won't cross. We crossed them all months ago."

She wasn't wrong. That was the devastating part. She was never wrong about the fundamental rot of what they were doing.

They had sex against the wall of Kunal's guest room, fast and guilty and hateful, while downstairs their friends laughed and Kunal probably wondered where they both were. After, while they were fixing their clothes, Samar said:

"I'm going to Gurgaon next week. For the astronomy thing."

"I know. Kunal told me." She was reapplying lipstick using her phone camera, casual as if they hadn't just done something unforgivable. "He's planning to surprise you there, actually. Drive up on the last day to watch you compete."

Samar's stomach dropped. "He's coming?"

"Yep. Sweet, right? He wants to support you. Be the good friend." Her tone was ambiguous—affectionate or mocking, impossible to tell.

"You'll be with him?"

"Maybe. Depends if I can get out of family stuff." She turned to face him. "Why? Want me to come?"

"No," he said, too quickly. "I want one thing in my life that isn't contaminated by this. By us. I want to do this thing I used to love back when I was still someone who could love things properly."

She studied him for a long moment. "You still love things, Samar. You just love them differently now. Darker. More honestly."

"That's not honesty. That's corruption."

"Semantics." She kissed his cheek, gentle, tender in that way that made everything worse. "Good luck at your competition. Win everything. Be brilliant. Show them who Samar Malhotra is."

Who Samar Malhotra is, he thought, *is a liar and a betrayer and a coward. But sure, I'll win some trophies.*

They returned downstairs separately. No one seemed to notice they'd both been gone. Or if they did, they were too polite to mention it.

The week before Gurgaon, Samar threw himself into preparation with manic intensity. Studied until 3 AM, did practice problems, reviewed every topic from stellar evolution to gravitational lensing. His sister found him one night, surrounded by textbooks and coffee cups, looking slightly unhinged.

"You're going to burn out," she said gently.

"I need to win," he replied, not looking up.

"Why? What happens if you don't?"

"Then I'm just the person who destroyed his best friendship and his own morality for nothing. At least if I win, I'm the person who did that *and* was brilliant. There's a difference."

"Samar, that's not—"

"I know it's not healthy. I know I'm a mess. But let me have this, okay? Let me be good at one thing. Let me prove I'm not completely worthless."

She sat beside him, took one of his hands. "You're not worthless. You're hurting and making bad choices, but you're not worthless."

"How would you know?" His voice cracked. "You don't know what I've done. What I'm still doing. If you knew, you'd hate me."

"I could never hate you."

"Then you'd be disappointed. Which is worse."

They sat in silence for a while, his sister's hand in his, the textbooks spreading their knowledge across the desk like they could solve problems that weren't mathematical.

"Win your competition," she said finally. "Be brilliant. But don't think it will fix what's broken. Trophies don't heal souls."

"Maybe not," Samar agreed. "But they're better than nothing."

The National Youth Astronomy Conclave was held at a resort in Gurgaon, the kind of place that tried very hard to feel less corporate than it was—manicured lawns, a pool no one used, conference rooms named after constellations. Fifty students from across India, all of them brilliant, all of them hungry to prove something.

Samar checked into his room—standard hotel bland, but clean—and immediately wanted to leave. The whole place reminded him of a life he used to have, back when academic achievement felt meaningful rather than like compensation for moral failure.

The opening ceremony was that evening. The organizers explained the structure: nine categories over three days, from theoretical problems to observational challenges to a final

presentation on original research. Winners would be announced on the last evening.

Samar recognized a few faces from other national competitions—kids from Bangalore, Kolkata, Mumbai. All sharp, all competitive. Under normal circumstances, he would have enjoyed this. The intellectual challenge, the meeting of minds, the pure joy of astronomy.

But these weren't normal circumstances.

He checked his phone compulsively. Nothing from Ankita, which was somehow worse than something. Three messages from Kunal:

****Kill it bro. Make us proud.****

****Also I'm definitely coming last day. Want to see you win.****

****Love you man. You're going to crush this.****

The guilt was physical, a weight in his chest that made breathing difficult.

The first day of competition was brutal but exhilarating. Theoretical astrophysics in the morning—complex problems about black hole thermodynamics and dark matter distributions. Samar solved them methodically, felt his brain clicking into gear for the first time in months. The problems were clean. They had right answers. Unlike his life, which had no right answers, only progressively worse choices.

Afternoon was observational astronomy—identifying celestial objects, calculating orbital mechanics, analyzing stellar spectra. He was good at this, had always been good at this, and for a few hours he forgot about everything else. Forgot about Ankita and Kunal and the person he'd become. Just existed in the pure space of astronomical phenomena and mathematical precision.

Evening was cosmology—questions about the early universe, inflation theory, the cosmic microwave background. By the end of day one, Samar had won three categories. The other students looked at him with a mixture of respect and intimidation.

His phone buzzed during dinner: **Ankita: Heard you won everything today. Told you you're brilliant. Miss you.**

He stared at that message for a full minute before responding: **Focused on competition. Talk later.**

Her reply was immediate: **So cold. This is why I love you. You're the only person who doesn't need me.**

Except he did need her. That was the problem. He needed her in a way that was destroying him, needed her like drowning people need air, desperately and uselessly.

He turned off his phone and went to bed early, needed sleep before day two.

Day two was harder. Stellar evolution problems that required intricate knowledge of nuclear physics. A telescope observation

session that tested practical skills and patience. A computational astronomy challenge that involved coding orbital simulations.

By evening, Samar had won six categories. Six out of six he'd competed in so far. The other students were starting to whisper. The organizers looked pleased—they loved a dominant performance, made for better publicity.

But Samar felt nothing. No joy, no satisfaction. Just a mechanical progression through tasks, like a machine designed to solve problems and win competitions.

That night, he turned on his phone to seven missed calls from Ankita and one text: ****Pick up. Important.****

He called her back.

"Finally," she breathed. "I've been trying to reach you all day."

"I told you I was competing."

"I know, I just—" She paused. "I needed to hear your voice. Kunal and I had a fight. About you, actually."

Samar's heart stopped. "What?"

"Nothing bad. He just... he asked if I'm in love with you. And I couldn't lie. I told him yes. That I love you both, differently, and I don't know how to choose."

"Ankita, what the fuck—"

“He didn’t break up with me,” she interrupted quickly. “He just... he cried. Said he’d suspected but hearing it was different. That he doesn’t know if he can keep doing this, the understanding, the looking away. That it’s killing him.”

“Of course it’s killing him! What did you think would happen?”

“I thought he’d understand that love isn’t binary. That you can love multiple people, that intensity doesn’t diminish just because it’s divided.”

“That’s not how humans work. That’s not how any of this works.”

“Then how does it work, Samar?” Her voice was sharp now. “Tell me. Because from where I’m standing, we’re all suffering. Kunal’s suffering because he loves someone who loves someone else. You’re suffering because you love someone you can’t have completely. I’m suffering because I love both of you and I’m tired of pretending I don’t. No one’s happy. But at least I’m being honest about it.”

“Honesty without kindness is cruelty.”

“And kindness without honesty is lying.” She sighed, exhausted. “I didn’t call to fight. I called because I miss you and I wanted to hear your voice and tell you that Kunal’s probably going to be weird tomorrow when he comes to watch you.”

“He’s still coming?”

“He says he is. Says he needs to see you, talk to you. I don’t know what he wants to say.” She paused. “I might come too. If that’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. Nothing about this is okay.”

“Then I won’t come.” Her voice was small, hurt. “Win your ninth trophy, Samar. Be brilliant for both of us.”

She hung up.

Samar sat in his hotel room and wanted to scream. Wanted to punch the wall, break something, make external pain match the internal devastation.

Instead, he lit a cigarette—had to go out to the resort’s designated smoking area, stood under April stars and thought about how the universe didn’t care about human suffering. How these same stars had been shining when he was eleven and happy and uncomplicated, and they’d keep shining long after he and everyone he loved were dust.

Carl Sagan was wrong. The cosmos didn’t need to know itself. Knowledge only made suffering more articulate.

Day three. The final day. Three more categories to go.

Radio astronomy in the morning—interpreting pulsar signals, understanding radiotelescopes, analyzing data from deep space.

Samar won, barely. His concentration was fracturing, thinking about Kunal coming, about whatever conversation awaited him.

Early afternoon was astrochemistry—understanding molecular formation in space, spectroscopy of complex organic molecules in nebulae. He won again, making it eight.

The final competition was scheduled for 4 PM: present original research. Samar had prepared a paper on habitability zones around red dwarf stars, had worked on it for months before his life imploded. It was good work, genuinely innovative.

At 3 PM, Kunal texted: **Just arrived. In the lobby. Come down?**

Samar's hands were shaking. He went down.

Kunal was there, alone. No Ankita, which was somehow both relief and disappointment.

They hugged—automatic, habitual—and Kunal held on a bit too long.

"We need to talk," Kunal said. "Before your presentation."

They walked to the resort's garden, away from other students, away from witnesses.

"She told you," Samar said. Statement, not question.

"About loving you? Yeah." Kunal's voice was carefully neutral. "I asked her directly and she couldn't lie."

"I'm sorry."

"For what? Feeling something? You can't control feelings." Kunal sat on a bench, gestured for Samar to join him. "I'm not mad at you for loving her. I'm mad that you've been lying to me for months. That you've both been lying."

"You said you didn't want to know—"

"I said I didn't want details. But you knew, Samar. You knew exactly what was happening and you let me make a fool of myself. Talking about how amazing she is, how I think she's the one, while you..." He stopped, breathing hard. "Have you touched her?"

The question hung in the April heat.

Samar could lie. Should lie. But he was so tired of lying.

"Yes."

Kunal's face did something terrible—pain and acceptance mixing into an expression Samar would remember for the rest of his life.

"How many times?"

"Does it matter?"

"How. Many. Times."

"I don't know. Many. Since January. Since—" Samar stopped, unable to continue.

"Since I told you about the understanding." Kunal laughed, bitter. "I gave you permission by not asking questions, and you took it and ran. God, I'm such a fucking idiot."

"You're not an idiot. I'm the one who—"

"Betrayed me. Yes. You did. My best friend since we were eleven years old. The person I trusted more than anyone. You've been sleeping with my girlfriend behind my back." Kunal stood, paced. "Do you love her?"

"Yes."

"Does she love you?"

"She says she does."

"But she won't leave me for you."

"No."

"Because she wants both of us. She's told me that too." Kunal turned to face him. "So what do we do now? I'm supposed to watch you give your presentation, cheer for you, be the supportive friend while knowing you've been fucking the girl I love?"

"I don't know," Samar said honestly. "I don't know what we do."

They stood in silence. Ten years of friendship, hundreds of shared memories, the kind of brotherhood that should have been unbreakable. All of it cracking, splintering, dying in real time.

"I can't watch your presentation," Kunal said finally. "I thought I could. I drove three hours thinking I could separate the competition from... everything else. But I can't. Every time I look at you I see betrayal."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Kunal's voice rose. "Do you understand that you've destroyed the most important friendship in my life? That I don't know if I can trust anyone anymore if I can't trust you? That she destroyed both of us and you helped her do it?"

"I'm sorry—"

"Stop saying you're sorry! Sorry doesn't fix this!" Kunal was shouting now, drawing stares from other students walking past. He lowered his voice. "I loved you, brother. Loved you like family. Would have done anything for you. And you did this."

"I know."

"I'm leaving," Kunal said. "I'm going back to Delhi. I'm breaking up with her. And I need—" His voice cracked. "I need you to not contact me. Not for a while. Maybe not ever. I don't know."

"Kunal—"

“Win your ninth trophy, Samar. Be brilliant. It’s what you’re good at—being brilliant while everything else burns.”

He walked away. Didn’t look back.

Samar stood in the garden until someone from the organizing committee found him: “Mr. Malhotra? Your presentation is in five minutes. We need you in the auditorium.”

He went. Gave his presentation on autopilot, fielded questions from judges, watched their impressed faces as he demolished their technical objections with ease.

He won. Nine categories, nine trophies. A record that would stand for years. The other students applauded. The organizers were ecstatic. Photos were taken. Press releases drafted.

Samar smiled for the cameras and felt absolutely nothing.

That evening, back in his hotel room, he stared at nine trophies arranged on the desk. Proof of brilliance, evidence of achievement, symbols of absolutely nothing that mattered.

His phone buzzed: **Ankita: Kunal called me. He’s breaking up with me. Says he can’t do this anymore. Says you and I deserve each other because we’re both selfish and destructive.**

And then: **Can I come to you? I don’t want to be alone.**

He should have said no. Should have ended it right there. Let her face the consequences of her choices without providing comfort.

But he'd never been good at saying no to her.

He sent her his room number.

She arrived at 11 PM, eyes red from crying, wearing jeans and a loose shirt, looking fragile in a way he'd never seen. She didn't say anything, just walked into his arms and held on like he was the only solid thing in a dissolving world.

They ended up in his bed—not sex, just holding each other, two people who'd destroyed everything good in their lives for moments like this. Moments that felt simultaneously real and worthless.

"I lost him," she whispered into the darkness. "He was the easy part of my life and I lost him because I couldn't stop wanting you."

"You didn't lose him. We destroyed him. There's a difference."

"Semantics."

"No. Responsibility."

She turned to face him, and in the dim light from the window she looked young, scared, nothing like the confident predator who'd stalked him in libraries and computer labs.

"Do you hate me?" she asked.

"Sometimes," he said honestly. "Most of the time I hate myself more."

“What do we do now?”

“I don’t know. We lost Kunal. We destroyed a friendship that mattered more than anything. For what? For this? Lying in a hotel room after I won nine trophies that mean nothing?”

“The trophies mean something. You’re brilliant, Samar. Don’t let this diminish that.”

“My brilliance doesn’t matter if I’m a terrible person. If I’ve betrayed everyone who trusted me.”

They lay in silence. Outside, Gurgaon’s lights sprawled toward Delhi. Somewhere in that sprawl, Kunal was driving home, heartbroken and betrayed. Somewhere, Samar’s family was proud of their son’s achievement, ignorant of what it had cost.

“I should leave tomorrow,” Ankita said quietly. “Leave Delhi for a while. My aunt has been asking me to visit in Bangalore. Maybe some distance would help. Help all of us figure out what we actually want.”

“You’re running away.”

“We’re all running away. You run into competitions and achievements. Kunal runs into denial. I run into geographical distance. We’re all cowards in different ways.”

She wasn’t wrong.

They fell asleep tangled together, two people who loved each other in a way that was indistinguishable from mutual destruction. In the morning, she was gone. Just a note on hotel stationery: *Congratulations on your nine trophies. You earned them. I'm sorry for everything. —A*

Samar packed his things, loaded nine trophies into his bag, and took a taxi back to Delhi. His parents were thrilled when he got home, wanted to celebrate, invited family over to admire the trophies.

He performed gratitude, performed humility, performed normalcy while everything inside him screamed.

That night, his sister found him on the terrace, smoking, surrounded by nine trophies that meant nothing.

"You won everything," she observed.

"I lost everything that mattered."

"Kunal?"

"Among other things." He picked up one trophy—first place in theoretical astrophysics. "Do you know what these prove? That I can solve physics problems. That I understand cosmology. That I'm very good at things that don't matter while being catastrophically bad at things that do."

"They matter, Samar. Your intelligence matters."

“Does it? If I use my brain to win competitions while simultaneously destroying my best friendship and my own moral character? What’s the point?”

She had no answer. Nobody did.

The nine trophies sat in his room, gathering dust, monuments to the day Samar Malhotra proved he could be brilliant and worthless simultaneously.

Kunal never called.

Ankita left for Bangalore two days later, sent one text: *I meant what I said. I love you. But maybe love isn’t enough. Maybe we’re just two people who bring out the worst in each other. Take care of yourself.*

And then silence.

Samar’s Class 11 ended. Summer break began. He spent it studying for Class 12, smoking two packs a day, avoiding everyone except his immediate family.

The thousands of friends faded completely. The world narrowed to three people: God, mother, sister. The only three who loved him unconditionally, who didn’t require him to be anyone other than broken.

He learned that you could win everything and still lose.

That brilliance was cold comfort when you’d betrayed everyone you loved.

That nine trophies, displayed on a shelf, were just metal and engraving and empty proof of a day when he'd been someone's pride and his own shame.

The record stood: Samar Malhotra, nine categories, nine wins. The newspapers covered it. His school celebrated it.

Nobody knew what it had cost.

Nobody knew that the boy who'd stood on that stage, accepting accolades, had already been dead inside.

Nobody knew that she'd come to his room that night, fresh from destroying everything, and he'd held her anyway.

Because that's what love did. It made you hold on to the person drowning you.

It made you brilliant and broken at the same time.

It made you someone you didn't recognize.

And somewhere in Gurgaon, in an anonymous hotel room that had witnessed the death of innocence, nine trophies had been won by a boy who'd already lost his soul.

CHAPTER 8: THE DISAPPEARANCE

2015

Summer passed like a fever dream—hot, disorienting, impossible to remember clearly later. Samar spent it in voluntary isolation, his room becoming a cell he'd designed himself. The nine trophies sat on his shelf, accusatory, while he worked through Class 12 syllabi with mechanical precision.

Ankita texted occasionally from Bangalore. Surface things, mostly: *The weather here is better. My aunt's nice. I'm writing again.* Never addressing what had happened. Never mentioning Kunal's name. Never asking if Samar was okay, because they both knew he wasn't.

Kunal didn't contact him at all. Samar would see his Instagram stories sometimes—basketball with other friends, parties Samar wasn't invited to, a studied happiness that looked genuine from a distance. Maybe it was. Maybe without Samar and Ankita in his life, Kunal was actually fine.

That thought hurt worse than anything.

Class 12 started in July, and Samar returned to school a ghost. Sat in classes, answered questions when called on, maintained his grades. But the spark was gone. Teachers noticed but didn't know what to ask. His remaining friends—the surface ones, the ones who'd never known him deeply—drifted away naturally. No drama, just entropy.

Kunal was there, of course. Captain of the basketball team, senior year, thriving. They'd pass each other in hallways and Kunal would look through him like he was transparent. Sometimes worse—like he was looking at a stranger who happened to resemble someone he'd once loved.

Samar deserved it. Knew he deserved it. Didn't make it hurt less.

Ankita returned to Delhi in early August. Texted him: *Back. Can we talk?*

They met at a café far from school, far from anywhere they might see someone they knew. She looked different—thinner, tired, her confidence dimmed to something more fragile.

"I missed you," she said simply.

"Don't."

"Don't what? Tell the truth?"

"Don't make this harder." Samar stirred his coffee, untouched.

"We destroyed Kunal. We destroyed our friendship. For what? So we could have these conversations where we miss each other and can't do anything about it?"

"We could do something about it," Ankita said carefully. "We could actually be together. Properly. No more hiding, no more complications."

"And be what? The couple who got together by destroying someone else? That's not a foundation. That's a crime scene."

“People move on, Samar. Kunal will move on. Eventually he’ll understand—”

“Understand what? That his girlfriend and best friend betrayed him for months? There’s no understanding that. There’s just learning to live with it.” He finally looked at her. “I can’t do this anymore. Whatever this is. I can’t see you, can’t talk to you. Every time I do, I remember what we did. What I did.”

“So that’s it? We just... end?”

“We ended in Gurgaon. This is just admitting it.”

She was quiet for a long time. When she spoke, her voice was small. “I really did love you. Do love you. That wasn’t manipulation or game-playing. It was real.”

“I know,” Samar said, and meant it. “That’s what makes it worse. If you were just using me, I could hate you and move on. But you loved me in your way, and your way was toxic, and I loved you enough to accept that. We’re both responsible. We’re both guilty.”

“So we just... what? Never speak again?”

“Maybe that’s kindest. For both of us.”

They finished their coffees in silence. When they parted outside the café, Ankita hugged him tight, whispered “I’m sorry” into his shoulder, and walked away.

Samar thought that was the end.

It wasn't.

September brought board exam pressure. Class 12 was the year everything supposedly mattered—grades, college applications, future trajectory. Samar threw himself into it because what else was there? Work was clean. Work had right answers. Work didn't require confronting the wreckage of his personal life.

He saw Ankita at school, obviously. Different sections meant limited contact, but sometimes their paths crossed. They'd nod, polite, strangers with a shared history that felt more like shared trauma.

Kunal graduated to pretending Samar didn't exist at all, which was somehow worse than active hatred.

In late September, Ankita stopped coming to school.

At first, no one noticed. Then a week passed. Then two. Rumors started—she was sick, her family had emergency, she'd transferred schools. Nobody knew for sure.

Samar tried to convince himself he didn't care. Failed completely.

He texted her: *You okay?*

No response.

He tried calling. Straight to voicemail.

He asked her friends—the few she had, the ones from her section. They didn't know anything. "Her phone's off. Her parents won't say anything. It's weird."

After three weeks, Samar did something stupid: went to her apartment. The one with the dark blue room and fairy lights and memories that felt like open wounds.

A different family answered the door.

"The Sharmas?" the woman said. "They moved out. Two weeks ago? Very sudden. The father got transferred, I think. Bangalore or maybe abroad? The landlord was annoyed, they broke their lease."

Samar stood in the hallway where he'd stood dozens of times before, trying to process this. She'd left. No warning, no goodbye beyond that café conversation. Just... gone.

He checked her social media. All accounts deleted.

He asked her few remaining contacts. No one knew anything.

She had vanished.

The first month after she disappeared, Samar was manic. Couldn't sleep, couldn't eat properly, smoked constantly. His

mother worried. His sister watched him with sad eyes. His father, oblivious, just reminded him about board exams.

He kept waiting for her to contact him. A text, an email, something. Surely she wouldn't just leave without explanation? Surely what they'd had—toxic and destructive as it was—meant enough for goodbye?

But nothing came.

By October, the manic energy turned to something darker. Depression, his sister said, though Samar refused to see a therapist. What would he say? That he was sad because the girl who'd helped him destroy his best friendship had disappeared? That he missed someone who'd been poison disguised as love?

He functioned. Went to school, maintained grades, performed normalcy. But something essential had broken. Food lost appeal—he started eating once a day, sometimes less. Not intentionally, just... forgetting. His body stopped sending hunger signals, or he stopped listening to them.

Sleep became impossible. He'd lie awake until 3, 4 AM, then drag himself through the next day on caffeine and willpower. The exhaustion was almost welcome—at least it was a feeling, proof he was still somehow alive.

The smoking intensified. Two packs a day became his baseline. His mother found the cigarettes once, confronted him with tears and anger. He promised to quit. Didn't. Just got better at hiding it.

His thousands of friends—the ones who used to fill his phone with messages and invitations—disappeared. Partly because he'd withdrawn, partly because high school friendships were transactional and he'd stopped being fun. Without Kunal's orbit to anchor him, without Ankita's chaos to distract him, Samar was just the smart, sad kid everyone felt vaguely bad for but didn't know how to help.

He didn't blame them. He wouldn't know how to help himself either.

By November, he'd narrowed his emotional investments to exactly three people: God, mother, sister. Everyone else was background noise, relationships maintained out of politeness rather than connection.

God he talked to constantly—on his terrace late at night, smoking and praying in equal measure. Radhe Govinda became his refuge, the only constant that didn't judge, didn't leave, didn't require him to be anyone other than broken.

His mother loved him with a desperation that hurt to witness. She didn't understand what was wrong but knew something was. Made his favorite foods he didn't eat. Sat with him during his insomniac nights. Prayed for him with a fervor that suggested she'd bargain with God directly if she could.

His sister was the only one who understood, mostly because she'd been there. Seen it happen in real time. She didn't offer solutions or platitudes, just presence. Let him smoke on the terrace while she sat beside him in silence. Reminded him, gently, that he was still loved even if he couldn't feel it.

December came. His eighteenth birthday passed quietly. Board exam prep intensified. Life continued in its mechanical way.

And Ankita remained gone.

It was in January, six months after Gurgaon, four months after her disappearance, that Samar found the first email.

He'd been checking spam periodically—paranoid that maybe she'd tried to reach out and the message had been filtered. Found nothing for weeks.

Then, one night, there it was: **Subject: I'm sorry. From: ankitasharma.new@gmail.com**

His hands shook opening it.

Samar,

I don't know if you'll read this. I don't know if you even want to hear from me. But I needed to try.

I'm sorry. For everything. For how I treated you, how I treated Kunal, how I treated the situation. I was selfish and cruel and I told myself it was honesty but really it was just cowardice. I wanted everything and didn't care who got hurt.

*My family moved to Bangalore. Dad's company transferred him and they decided a fresh start was good for all of us. They knew

something was wrong—I think Mom figured out there was boy drama even if she didn't know details. So we left. I didn't contact you because I thought clean break was kinder. Turns out I was wrong about that too.*

I'm seeing a therapist now. She's helping me understand some things about myself. About why I do what I do. It's not an excuse, but maybe it's an explanation.

I think about you constantly. About what we had, what we destroyed, what we could have been if we'd been different people. Better people.

I know you probably hate me. You should. I hate me too, most days.

I just wanted you to know: what I felt for you was real. Fucked up and toxic and destructive, but real. You mattered. You still matter.

I hope you're okay. I hope you're healing. I hope someday you can forgive me, even if I never forgive myself.

I'm sorry.

—A

Samar read it five times. Felt nothing, then everything, then nothing again.

He didn't respond. What was there to say? That he forgave her? He didn't. That he hated her? That wasn't quite true either. That

he missed her? God, yes, but admitting that felt like admitting defeat.

So he didn't respond.

But he didn't delete it either.

Over the following months, more emails came. Always apologetic, always reflective, always just present enough to keep the wound from healing. He never responded. Never deleted them. Just let them accumulate in a folder he labeled "Ghosts."

She was haunting him from Bangalore, and he was letting her.

Board exams came and went. Samar performed adequately—not brilliantly, not like he could have, but well enough. Got into a decent college for engineering because that's what smart kids did. His parents were proud. His sister was relieved he'd made it through the year at all.

Kunal got into a college in Bangalore. The irony wasn't lost on anyone.

School ended. The Class of 2016 dispersed. Samar walked away from DPS Vasant Vihar having destroyed everything he'd built there, leaving behind one former best friend who'd never speak to him again and one vanished girl who emailed apologies from a city he'd never visit.

Summer was preparation for college, mechanical and empty. His mother tried to be excited for him. His sister knew better than to pretend things were fine.

In August, another email from Ankita: *I heard you got into college. Congratulations. I'm proud of you. You deserve good things, even if I couldn't be one of them.*

He stared at it for an hour before closing his laptop.

College started in September. New city, new people, new chance at life. Samar thought maybe distance would help. Maybe without daily reminders, he could rebuild himself.

But you can't outrun yourself.

The patterns continued: minimal eating, no sleeping, constant smoking. The transactional relationships with women started in first year—paid, professional, no emotions involved. He told himself it was healthier than what he'd had with Ankita. At least everyone knew what the arrangement was.

His academics were good but not exceptional. He did well in subjects he cared about, coasted in others. Professors thought he had potential he wasn't fulfilling. They were right.

More emails from Ankita accumulated. He never responded. She never stopped sending them.

Years passed like this. Engineering degree completed with decent grades. Multiple companies started because work was

the one thing he could still do well. Money accumulated. Success by any external measure.

And inside, the decay continued. Slow, consistent, disguised so well that most people never noticed. He became very good at making people laugh while dying inside. Very good at seeming fine while being fundamentally broken.

The boy who'd believed in stars and meaning and love had died in a computer lab, or in Gurgaon, or in that slow autumn when she'd disappeared.

What remained was functional but not alive. Successful but not happy. Present but not really there.

He was waiting, though he didn't know for what. Not for Ankita—that ship had sailed, burned, sunk. Not for healing—he'd accepted he was broken in a permanent way. Not for forgiveness—from Kunal, from himself, from anyone.

Just waiting. In the darkness that had started the night she'd walked into a library and smiled at him like he was worth something.

The darkness she'd deepened with every kiss, every betrayal, every moment of choosing chaos over kindness.

The darkness that would define him for the next decade.

She was gone, vanished into Bangalore and therapy and whatever life she'd built.

But she'd left something behind: a boy turned ghost, successful and empty, brilliant and broken, loved by three people and unknowable to everyone else.

Waiting in a night that never ended.

The night after which he never slept.

CHAPTER 9: THE HOLLOW EMPIRE

2016-2024

Time, Samar discovered, was a strange thing when you were only technically alive. It passed both too slowly and too quickly—days dragged endlessly while years disappeared in retrospective blur.

College was four years of careful performance. He made surface friends, the kind who'd invite him to parties and laugh at his jokes but never know him. He dated occasionally, conventional attempts that lasted weeks before the girl would say something like "you're never really here" or "it's like talking to a wall who learned to smile."

They weren't wrong.

By second year, he'd abandoned pretense entirely. The transactional relationships were cleaner—everyone knew the terms, no one expected emotional availability. He could provide money, attention, physical presence. They could provide bodies without the requirement of souls. Fair exchange.

His family visited once per semester. His mother would cry, worried about how thin he'd gotten. His sister would smoke with him on his apartment balcony, both of them silent in their shared understanding that he was deteriorating but neither knowing how to stop it.

His father talked about the business, about expectations, about legacy. Samar nodded appropriately and felt nothing.

The emails from Ankita continued—less frequent as years passed, but consistent. Birthday messages. Congratulations on achievements she somehow knew about. Apologies that varied in their phrasing but never their substance. He never responded, but he never blocked her either. The emails accumulated like scar tissue.

In third year, he started his first company. A tech solution for supply chain management that he coded during his insomnia and pitched during his functional hours. It succeeded almost accidentally, grew faster than he'd planned. Investors appeared. Money followed.

Success was easy once you stopped caring about it.

By the time he graduated in 2020, he had two companies and more money than made sense for someone twenty-two. The pandemic hit, and while the world locked down, Samar barely noticed—his life had been lockdown for years already. Alone in his apartment, working eighteen-hour days, eating once if he remembered, smoking constantly.

His mother called weekly, begging him to move home. "At least during pandemic, beta. At least be with family."

He made excuses. The truth was simpler: being around people who loved him made the emptiness more obvious.

The business empire grew. By 2022, three companies. By 2023, he'd been featured in economic magazines, called a "young visionary" by people who'd never seen his dead eyes up close. He bought the Golf Course Road penthouse because his mother insisted he needed proper housing, then barely lived in it.

He worked because work was measurable. Problems had solutions. Code had logic. Money accumulated according to clear rules. Unlike human relationships, which were chaos wearing the mask of connection.

The smoking increased to two packs daily, sometimes three. His doctor warned about lung damage. Samar nodded and ignored him. His body was just housing anyway, functional enough to carry his brain from meeting to meeting.

Food remained optional. One meal a day if someone reminded him, sometimes less. His body had learned to run on fumes and cigarettes and the occasional coffee. His sister insisted on having him over for meals, would cook his favorites and watch him push food around his plate.

"You're killing yourself slowly," she said once.

"Everyone dies," he'd replied. "I'm just being efficient."

The women continued—different faces, same transaction. He was generous, never cruel, maintained clear boundaries. They provided what he needed without asking for what he couldn't give. Some tried to save him—saw the sadness behind the expensive suits, thought their love could fix him. He'd end those

arrangements quickly, kindly. He wasn't interested in being saved.

Sleep never returned properly. He'd learned to function on three, four hours maximum. The rest of the night he'd spend working, or on his terrace with his cigarettes and God. Radhe Govinda was his only consistent companion, the only one who didn't require him to pretend.

I'm still here, he'd pray. *Still waiting. Still trying to understand what I'm being punished for, or taught, or transformed into. Still wondering if my soul is coming back or if this emptiness is just who I am now.*

God never answered, but the prayers helped anyway.

His social circle remained exactly three: God, mother, sister. His mother understood by now that her son was broken in ways she couldn't fix but loved him fiercely anyway. His sister had married, had a child, maintained normalcy that Samar visited periodically—playing the uncle role, making the baby laugh, leaving before anyone could ask how he really was.

The thousands of friends from school were long gone, deleted from social media years ago. He'd stopped maintaining even surface friendships. People were exhausting—they asked questions, expected reciprocation, wanted things from him he didn't have to give.

Better to be alone. Alone was honest.

By 2024, at twenty-five, Samar Malhotra was everything success looked like from outside: wealthy, accomplished, handsome in his expensive clothes and practiced smiles. Magazine profiles called him “enigmatic” and “intense.” His employees respected him. His investors trusted him. His family loved him.

And inside, he remained exactly what he’d become in that computer lab nine years ago: dead in every way that mattered.

The emails from Ankita had slowed to perhaps quarterly. They’d evolved too—less apologetic, more reflective. She’d share things about her life: she was working in marketing, had dated people seriously, was in therapy still, had learned things about attachment styles and trauma responses.

In one email from late 2023, she’d written: *I think I understand now what I did to you. Not just the betrayal, though that was terrible enough. But I took your innocence. You were someone who believed in good things, and I corrupted that. I made you someone who expects pain, who can’t trust love, who thinks intimacy equals destruction. I’m sorry isn’t enough. Nothing is enough. But I’m sorry anyway.*

Samar had read that one several times. She wasn’t wrong—she’d seen clearly what she’d done. But knowing the diagnosis didn’t cure the disease.

He still didn’t respond.

In April 2024, fifteen years almost to the day since their first meeting, another email arrived. Different from the others.

Samar,

I'm getting married. In July. To someone good, someone stable, someone who knows my history and loves me anyway.

I wanted you to hear it from me rather than social media or mutual contacts. Not that we have many of those left.

I've written you so many emails over the years. Never knowing if you read them, if they helped or hurt, if you wanted them to stop but were too kind to say so. This will be my last one.

Not because I'm married—though that's part of it—but because I think after nine years, I need to let you go. Really let you go. Stop checking if you've responded, stop hoping someday you'll forgive me, stop using these emails as a way to avoid fully moving forward.

You deserved better than what I gave you. You deserved someone who loved you clearly, wholly, without complication. Someone who chose you completely instead of keeping you in pieces.

I hope you've found that. I hope you're happy, or at least healing. I hope the emails haven't been salt in wounds that needed to close.

I hope you're okay.

Goodbye, Samar. Really goodbye this time.

Thank you for being someone who saw me completely. I'm sorry I only knew how to destroy things back then.

—A

Samar sat with that email for hours. Felt something crack in his chest—not heartbreak exactly, more like the final breaking of something that had been fracturing for years.

She was moving on. Getting married, building a life, becoming someone who could love properly. Good for her. He meant that genuinely.

And him? He was still here. Still in the same holding pattern he'd been in since seventeen. Still waiting in a night that never ended.

For the first time in nine years, he responded:

Ankita,

Congratulations. I hope you're happy. I hope he's good to you. You deserve that.

I read all your emails. Never responded, but I read them. They didn't help or hurt—they just were. Reminders that someone else remembered what happened, that I wasn't crazy or overdramatic about how much it mattered.

I don't forgive you. I don't think I ever will. But I don't hate you either. You were young and selfish and didn't know what you were doing. I was naive and desperate and complicit in my own destruction. We were both responsible.

You didn't take my soul—though I've spent nine years feeling like you did. I gave it away. I made choices knowing they were wrong. You made it easy, but I still chose.

I'm not okay. I probably won't ever be okay the way I was before. But I'm functional, which is something.

Goodbye, Ankita. Really goodbye this time.

Live well.

—S

He sent it before he could reconsider. Closed his laptop. Lit a cigarette on his terrace.

Felt nothing. Felt everything. Felt relieved and devastated in equal measure.

She was moving on. Which meant he was supposed to as well.

But how did you move on when you'd never actually stopped?
When you'd been frozen at seventeen for nine years, existing but not living, successful but not whole?

The months between April and December 2024 passed in his usual pattern. Work, insomnia, cigarettes, God. His cousin's wedding came in December—the one where he'd make everyone laugh while being dead inside, where his sister would see through him immediately, where he'd get texts from Ankita that he wouldn't respond to.

No—wait. No texts from Ankita. That was over now. She was married, moved on, done with him.

Good. That was good. That was healthy.

So why did it feel like losing her all over again?

He sat in his penthouse in November, looking at his reflection in the dark windows overlooking Delhi. Twenty-five years old. Three successful companies. Wealthy beyond measure. Handsome, healthy by most standards if you ignored the smoking and the not-eating and the not-sleeping.

And completely, utterly empty.

The king of ashes, his sister had called him once. Ruling over an empire of nothing that mattered.

She'd been right.

He thought about that boy from ten years ago. Sixteen, brilliant, happy in his uncomplicated way. The boy who'd believed in stars and meaning and love. The boy who'd met a girl with dark golden-brown eyes and thought she was destiny.

That boy was dead. Had died gradually—in a library, a computer lab, a hotel room in Gurgaon, in the slow autumn of her disappearance. By inches and choices, corrupted from innocent to guilty, from whole to fractured, from alive to this.

This functional corpse. This performance of humanity.

This king of ashes who'd won everything and lost the only thing that mattered: himself.

Somewhere in Bangalore, Ankita was probably happy. Married, loved, healed enough to move forward. Good for her. He meant it.

And here, in Delhi, Samar Malhotra would continue his perfectly crafted half-life. Making people laugh, running companies, being everyone's favorite person while remaining fundamentally unknowable.

Waiting in the night she'd created. The night after which he'd never slept.

Not waiting for her anymore—that much was clear now.

Just waiting. For his soul to return, for the pain to end, for permission to stop pretending he was okay.

Or maybe not waiting at all. Maybe just existing. Day after day, year after year, until his body caught up with what his soul already knew:

He'd died years ago.

Everything since was just haunting.

CHAPTER 10: THE RETURN

December 2024

The thing about ghosts is they never stay buried when you want them to.

Samar was at a business dinner in Cyber Hub when his phone buzzed with an unknown number. He ignored it—probably spam, probably nothing. The investors across the table were discussing quarterly projections, and he was performing interested engagement while his mind was elsewhere. Or nowhere. Hard to tell the difference anymore.

The phone buzzed again. A message this time.

He glanced down reflexively.

I'm in Delhi. Can we meet? Please. It's important. —A

The wine glass in his hand suddenly felt very heavy. The restaurant noise became white static. The investors' faces blurred into abstract shapes.

She was here. In Delhi. After four years of Bangalore, after the marriage, after the final goodbye email that was supposed to be final.

She was here.

“Excuse me,” Samar heard himself say, standing abruptly. “I need to take this. Continue without me—my team will handle the details.”

He was outside before anyone could respond, in the December cold, lighting a cigarette with shaking hands.

He should ignore it. Should delete the message, block the number, go back inside and finish the dinner like a functional adult who’d moved past his teenage trauma.

He typed: *Where?*

Her response was immediate: *Your place? I have your address. I’m sorry to just show up. I wouldn’t unless it was important.*

Every instinct screamed danger. Every memory of pain, of corruption, of becoming someone he hated, told him to say no. This was how it started last time—innocent conversations that became destruction.

He typed his address. Added: *30 minutes.*

Then called his driver, abandoned the dinner entirely, and drove through Delhi traffic while his heart tried to escape his chest.

She was waiting in the lobby when he arrived. The security had let her wait inside—probably charmed them, she was good at that. Still beautiful in a way that hurt to look at, though different now. More polished, more adult. Hair shorter, clothes expensive

but understated. She'd grown into herself in the four years since he'd last seen her.

"Samar," she said, standing when she saw him. Voice the same, lower and textured with things unsaid.

"Let's go up," he said, not trusting himself to say more in public.

The elevator ride was silent. She stood on one side, he on the other, the space between them charged with everything they'd destroyed and everything they'd been.

His penthouse was pristine as always—interior designer perfect, unlivable except for his bedroom and the terrace where he smoked. She walked in, looked around, said nothing for a long moment.

"You've done well," she finally said. "I've followed your career. The magazine profiles, the success stories. I'm proud of you."

"Why are you here, Ankita?" His voice was flat, exhausted already. "You got married. You said goodbye. What could possibly be important enough—"

"I'm getting divorced." She turned to face him. "The marriage lasted six months. It's been finalized for three weeks."

Samar felt something lurch in his chest. "What?"

"Turns out I'm still fucked up." She laughed, bitter. "Therapy helped me understand my patterns, not fix them. I married someone good and stable and I couldn't stop sabotaging it."

Couldn't stop feeling trapped. Couldn't stop thinking about—" She stopped. "It doesn't matter. Point is, I failed at normal. Again."

"That's not my problem." The words came out harsher than intended. "I'm sorry your marriage failed, genuinely. But you can't just show up after four years and—what? What do you want from me?"

"Closure." She moved closer. "Real closure. Not emails that go unanswered or final goodbyes that don't actually feel final. I need to see you, talk to you, understand—" She stopped again, struggling. "I need to know if what we had was real or if I've been haunted by a fantasy for a decade."

"It was real," Samar said quietly. "Real and toxic and destructive. Real doesn't mean good, Ankita. We proved that thoroughly."

"Then help me put it to rest." Her eyes held something he remembered—that intensity, that hunger for truth even when truth hurt. "One night. Just talk. Help me understand what happened so I can finally move forward. So we both can."

He should have said no. Should have recognized this for what it was—danger wearing the mask of closure. Should have remembered that every time he'd said yes to her, he'd lost more of himself.

"One night," he heard himself agree. "Just talk. Then you leave and we don't do this again."

"Just talk," she echoed. "I promise."

They both knew it was a lie.

They sat on his terrace—the only real space in the apartment, the place where he actually lived. He lit a cigarette, offered her one. She declined.

“You still smoke that much?” she asked, watching him.

“Two packs a day. Sometimes three.”

“That’s—Samar, that’s self-destruction.”

“I’m aware.” He exhaled smoke into the December night. “You were asking about what happened between us?”

“Right.” She settled into the chair across from him, wrapped in her coat against the cold. “I’ve spent years trying to understand why I did what I did. The therapy helped—attachment issues, fear of intimacy, using sex and chaos to avoid real connection. All very textbook. But it doesn’t explain you. Why you, specifically. Why I couldn’t let you go even when I knew I was destroying you.”

“Because I let you,” Samar said simply. “Because I loved you enough to accept destruction. Because I was young and stupid and thought love meant sacrifice.”

“Was it love? Really?” She leaned forward. “Or was it obsession? Co-dependency? Some twisted thing we called love because we didn’t have better language?”

“Does it matter? The outcome was the same.”

“It matters to me.” Her voice was intense now, that familiar intensity that used to make him feel seen and now just made him tired. “I need to know if what I felt was real. If it wasn’t just me being broken and finding someone who’d accept that brokenness.”

Samar looked at her—really looked at her—and saw not the predator from his memories but someone equally damaged, equally searching for meaning in the wreckage.

“It was real,” he said finally. “Fucked up and toxic, but real. You loved me in the only way you knew how. It wasn’t enough, but it was real.”

Something in her face cracked. “I ruined you. I know I did. I can see it—you’re successful and functional but there’s nothing behind your eyes. You’re empty. I did that.”

“We did that,” Samar corrected. “I made choices. I betrayed Kunal—that was my decision. I kept coming back to you even when I knew better. You made it easy, but I still chose.”

“Do you ever wonder what we’d have been like if we’d met at a different time? If we’d been older, less damaged, more capable of actual love?”

“No,” he lied. He wondered constantly. Had spent nine years wondering.

They talked for hours. About Kunal—she hadn’t seen him either, had heard he was doing well, married to someone uncomplicated. About their families—hers still in Bangalore, his still worried about him. About their failed attempts at normal relationships, the patterns that kept repeating, the ways they’d both been stuck since seventeen.

Around 2 AM, she said: “Can I stay? Not for anything, just—I don’t want to be alone tonight. And I think you don’t either.”

He should have said no.

“Guest room,” he said instead. “There are clothes in the closet that might fit.”

But she didn’t go to the guest room. Followed him to his bedroom instead, and when he didn’t protest, she understood permission.

They lay in his bed—the same way they had in Gurgaon, bodies close but not touching, two people who’d destroyed each other trying to find comfort in proximity.

“I’ve missed this,” she whispered. “Not sex, just... this. Being near someone who knows all of me and doesn’t look away.”

“I should look away,” Samar said. “Self-preservation would be looking away.”

“But you won’t.” She turned to face him, close enough that he could feel her breath. “Because you’re still the boy who loved too much. Who gave everything and expected nothing back.”

“That boy died in a computer lab.”

“No.” She touched his face, gentle. “He’s still here. Buried, maybe. But still here.”

And then she was kissing him.

It was different from before—slower, sadder, edged with decade-old grief. Not the desperate teenager kisses from school, but something adult and broken and inevitable.

Samar knew he should stop this. Knew this was a mistake, a repetition of every mistake they’d made before. Knew that nothing good came from touching her.

He kissed her back anyway.

They had sex like they were trying to hurt each other, or heal each other, or prove something that had no proof. Intense and almost violent, years of anger and longing compressed into physical force. She cried halfway through. He didn’t stop. She didn’t ask him to.

After, lying in the wreckage of his sheets, both of them breathing hard, she said: “That wasn’t closure.”

“No,” he agreed. “That was the opposite of closure.”

"I can't do this again, Samar. Can't fall back into this pattern. It almost killed us last time."

"Then leave. Now. Before we make it worse."

But she didn't leave. And he didn't make her.

They spent the night tangled together, having sex and talking and smoking on his terrace in their underwear like the world wasn't real, like consequences didn't exist, like they were seventeen again and too stupid to know better.

Except they weren't seventeen. They were twenty-five and knew exactly what they were doing and did it anyway.

By morning, they'd crossed every line they'd promised not to cross. By morning, Samar felt like he'd been possessed by the ghost of his teenage self—the one who'd thought loving her was worth any price.

She was in his shower when his phone rang. His sister.

"Where were you last night?" she demanded. "The investors called me looking for you. You abandoned a dinner?"

"Something came up."

"What kind of something makes you abandon a business dinner? Samar, are you okay?"

"No," he said honestly. "But I will be."

Another lie. He was getting good at those again.

Ankita emerged from his bathroom, wearing one of his shirts, hair wet, looking like a fantasy and a nightmare simultaneously.

"I should go," she said, but made no move to leave.

"You should," he agreed.

She crossed to where he sat on the bed, stood between his legs, forced him to look up at her.

"This is insane," she said. "We both know this is insane."

"Yes."

"We'll destroy each other again."

"Probably."

"I should leave Delhi. Should go back to Bangalore and never contact you again."

"You should."

"But I don't want to." Her hands were in his hair, gentle and possessive. "I want to stay. I want to keep doing this insane, destructive thing because it's the only time I feel actually alive."

"That's not love, Ankita. That's addiction."

"Maybe love is just addiction by another name."

She kissed him again, and he responded like he'd been programmed to, like his body remembered hers in ways his mind couldn't override. They had sex again, morning light streaming through windows that overlooked a city full of people making sane choices, living normal lives.

They weren't those people. Had never been those people.

When she finally left—2 PM, having spent nearly twenty-four hours in his space—she said: "I'm staying in Delhi for a few weeks. Visiting family, figuring some things out. Can I see you again?"

He should have said no. Should have recognized that last night was a relapse, not a new beginning. Should have protected himself.

"Text me," he said instead.

She smiled—that sharp, knowing smile he remembered. "You're terrible at self-preservation."

"Always have been."

After she left, Samar sat on his terrace and smoked until his throat hurt. His phone was full of missed messages—work, family, friends he technically had but never really connected with.

And one new message from Ankita: *Thank you for last night. For seeing me. For still being you despite everything. I know this is dangerous. I don't care. Do you?*

He stared at that message for a long time.

The smart answer was yes. Yes, he cared. Yes, this was dangerous. Yes, they needed to stop before someone got hurt again.

But he'd stopped being smart at seventeen, in a library, when he'd let a beautiful girl with dark golden-brown eyes decide his fate.

He typed: *No. I don't care. Come back tomorrow.*

And somewhere in the universe, something laughed at the boy who'd learned nothing, who was about to burn himself alive for the second time, who thought maybe this time would be different.

It wouldn't be.

But he'd find that out soon enough.

CHAPTER 11: CONSUMPTION

December 2024

Addiction doesn't announce itself. It doesn't arrive with warning labels or dramatic music. It seeps in through cracks you didn't know existed, fills the spaces where better judgment used to live, and whispers that this time will be different.

Samar had been sober from Ankita for nine years. Nine years of careful distance, of emails left unanswered, of rebuilding himself into something functional if not whole. And it took exactly twenty-four hours in her presence to relapse completely.

She came back the next day. And the day after that. And the day after that.

They fell into a pattern that felt both new and horrifyingly familiar: she'd text around sunset, he'd send his address, she'd arrive after dark like a secret. They'd have sex immediately—urgent, almost violent, like they were trying to climb inside each other's skin. Then they'd lie in his bed and talk for hours about everything and nothing. Philosophy and pain. Memory and meaning. What they'd lost and what they'd never had.

"This is different from before," Ankita said one night, tracing patterns on his chest while Delhi's lights glittered through his windows. "We're not hiding from anyone now. We're adults. No Kunal, no school, no complications."

"We are the complication," Samar replied, exhaling cigarette smoke toward the ceiling. He'd started smoking in bed again,

something he'd stopped years ago. Old habits resurrecting.
"We're the same people who destroyed each other. Just older."

"But wiser?"

"No. Just more aware of what we're doing."

She propped herself up on one elbow, studied his face with that intensity that made him feel dissected. "Do you hate me for coming back? For not staying away?"

"I hate myself for letting you come back." He turned to look at her. "I had built something, Ankita. Not happiness, but stability. A life that made sense even if it was empty. And you walked in and—"

"And what?"

"And reminded me what it feels like to actually feel something. Even if that something is destructive."

She kissed him, soft and sad. "We're poison to each other."

"I know."

"But we can't stop."

"No."

They had sex again, and this time it was slower, more deliberate, almost tender. Like they were memorizing each other, knowing this couldn't last but trying to make it last anyway.

The thing about secret addictions is they require architecture. Careful construction to keep them hidden from the world, from the people who love you, from yourself.

Samar got very good at architecture.

During the day, he was still Samar Malhotra—entrepreneur, visionary, the boy genius who'd turned into an adult success story. He attended board meetings with perfect focus. Made decisions that added zeros to his companies' valuations. Smiled for business magazines and gave interviews about innovation and vision.

His work didn't suffer. If anything, it improved. The intensity Ankita brought back into his life translated into intensity everywhere else. He worked harder, thought sharper, moved faster. His team commented on his renewed energy. Investors were impressed by his drive.

No one knew that energy was just redirected obsession. That he was working eighteen-hour days not despite Ankita but because of her—because when he wasn't working, he was with her, and he needed to compress his professional excellence into smaller and smaller time windows.

His mother noticed the change first. "You seem different," she said during one of their weekly calls. "More alive, maybe? Are you finally taking care of yourself?"

“Just busy, Maa. Good busy.”

“Are you seeing someone? A girl?”

“No,” he lied smoothly. Because what he had with Ankita wasn’t seeing someone. It was something else entirely—more consuming, more chemical, more dangerous.

His sister was harder to fool. She showed up at his penthouse unannounced one evening, the way she did when she suspected something was wrong.

“You’re smoking more,” she observed, watching him light his third cigarette in an hour.

“Same amount.”

“You’re lying. And you look—” She searched for the word. “Manic. Like you’re running on something artificial.”

“Just work stress.”

“Samar.” She sat across from him on the terrace, her face serious. “I know you. Something’s happening. Something that’s making you act like you did in school, before everything fell apart.”

He wanted to tell her. Wanted to say that Ankita was back, that they were falling into the same patterns, that he knew it was destructive but couldn’t stop. But saying it out loud would make it real, would invite intervention, would require him to choose between her concern and his addiction.

“I’m fine,” he said instead. “Better than I’ve been in years, actually.”

It wasn’t entirely a lie. He felt more alive now than he had in a decade. The fact that feeling alive was indistinguishable from feeling consumed—well. That was just details.

By the second week, they’d stopped pretending this was temporary.

Ankita hadn’t gone back to Bangalore. Had told her family she was extending her Delhi visit, handling some personal business. The personal business was Samar, and the handling was mutual destruction dressed as reconnection.

They existed in a bubble separate from reality. His penthouse became their universe—all expensive sheets and floor-to-ceiling windows and the terrace where they’d stand at 3 AM, wrapped in blankets, smoking and talking about cosmos and chaos.

The sex was constant, varied, increasingly intense. They learned each other’s bodies with the thoroughness of addicts memorizing their drug of choice. Morning sex before he left for meetings. Afternoon sex when she’d show up at his office unannounced, lock the door, and they’d fuck against his desk while his assistant fielded calls outside. Evening sex that lasted hours, left them both bruised and exhausted.

"We're using sex to avoid talking about real things," Ankita said one night, lying in the aftermath of particularly intense encounter.

"What real things?"

"What this is. What happens when my Delhi trip ends. Whether we're healing or just reopening old wounds."

Samar lit a cigarette, offered her one. She took it this time—another old habit resurrecting. "What do you want this to be?"

"I don't know. Something. More than just sex, but I don't know if we're capable of more."

"We're capable of destroying each other. We've proven that thoroughly."

"And yet here we are. Again." She turned to face him, smoke curling between them. "Why can't we stop, Samar? Why does this feel inevitable?"

"Because we're addicts," he said simply. "You're my drug and I'm yours. And addicts don't stop because they should. They stop when the drug kills them or they hit bottom."

"Have we hit bottom?"

"Not yet." He pulled her closer, knowing even as he did that he was making everything worse. "Not even close."

The third week brought new dimensions to their destruction.

They started taking risks. Stupid, unnecessary risks that had nothing to do with desire and everything to do with seeing how far they could push before something broke.

She'd call him during board meetings. He'd answer, have entire conversations with investors while she whispered filthy things designed to break his concentration. Once, she showed up at a business dinner he was hosting, pretended to be a potential client's assistant, and he had to maintain professional demeanor while she sat across from him radiating intent.

They had sex in his office after hours, with the cleaning staff one floor below. In his car in the parking garage of his building. Once, memorably, in the bathroom of an expensive restaurant where he'd taken her for what was supposed to be an actual date.

It was reckless and compulsive and nothing like love. It was darker than that—something that lived in the spaces where love couldn't survive.

"We're spiraling," Samar said one night, watching her dress. She was leaving—rare, usually she stayed until morning—and he felt the absence already.

"I know."

"This isn't sustainable."

"I know."

"So why—"

"Because I feel alive with you." She turned to face him, and her eyes held something wild. "With everyone else, I'm performing. Being the version they need me to be. With you, I can be the fucked-up, broken thing I actually am. That's worth spiraling for."

"That's not healthy."

"Neither is smoking two packs a day or eating once every twenty-four hours or running yourself into the ground with work. You want to lecture me about health?"

She wasn't wrong. They were both self-destructing, just in different directions.

After she left, Samar stood on his terrace and looked at Delhi's nighttime sprawl. Millions of people down there, living normal lives. Going to jobs they tolerated and coming home to people they loved in uncomplicated ways. Having regular sex with partners who didn't feel like Russian roulette. Eating meals, sleeping through nights, existing without constant underlying sense of impending catastrophe.

He used to be one of those people. Sixteen and normal and happy in simple ways.

Now he was this: twenty-five and successful and hollow except for the hours when Ankita was there, filling the emptiness with

something that felt like life but was probably just accelerated dying.

His phone buzzed: **Miss you already. Hate that I miss you. Come to me tomorrow?**

She'd finally rented an apartment—short-term, in Defence Colony, coincidentally the same building she'd lived in during school. Different unit, but same ghost-haunted walls.

He shouldn't go. Should maintain some boundary, some space to think clearly without her presence disrupting everything.

He typed: **What time?**

Her response: **Whenever you're done pretending you have better things to do than me.**

He smiled despite himself. She was terrible for him, and she knew it, and she didn't care. There was something almost refreshing about the honesty of it.

He'd go tomorrow. Would cross whatever boundary still remained uncrossed. Would fall deeper into the addiction that was destroying everything he'd carefully built.

But not his companies. Never his companies. That was the strangest part—his professional life remained pristine. If anything, his success was accelerating. He'd closed two major deals this week. Had investors practically throwing money at him. His team was expanding, his vision sharpening, his empire growing.

It was only his soul that was dying. Only the parts that weren't measurable in profit margins or magazine profiles.

The fourth week, she said: "I think I'm falling in love with you again. Or maybe I never stopped. I can't tell the difference."

They were in her apartment—dark blue walls she'd painted herself, fairy lights she'd hung, an eerie recreation of her teenage bedroom. Like she was trying to go back, to fix something that had broken a decade ago.

"Don't," Samar said, not unkindly. "Don't fall in love. That makes this harder."

"It's already hard. Love doesn't make it harder, it just makes it honest."

"Love is what destroyed us last time."

"No." She straddled him, her face inches from his. "Fear destroyed us last time. Fear and youth and not knowing how to hold something good without breaking it. We're older now. We could be different."

"We're not different. We're just better at rationalizing."

But even as he said it, he was kissing her, pulling her closer, falling deeper into the thing that felt like love and was probably just sophisticated trauma.

They had sex slowly, almost gently, like they were trying to prove something. That they could be tender, that this was more than animal need, that somewhere underneath the destruction was actual connection.

After, she cried. Not dramatic tears, just quiet ones that slid down her face while she lay against his chest.

“I’m so tired of being broken,” she whispered. “Tired of destroying things I care about. Tired of not knowing how to love properly.”

“You love fine,” Samar said, stroking her hair. “You just love the way hurricanes love—intensely and catastrophically.”

“And you love like the ocean loves the shore—consistently eroding until nothing’s left.”

They were poets of their own destruction. Scholars of mutual collapse.

“We should stop,” he said, not for the first time.

“We should,” she agreed, not for the first time.

Neither of them moved.

By Christmas, they’d been in this pattern for three weeks. Three weeks of constant contact, escalating intimacy, deepening

codependence. Three weeks of Samar maintaining perfect professional excellence while personally spiraling into something that had no name but probably needed one.

His sister insisted he come for Christmas dinner. “The whole family will be there. You can’t hide forever.”

“I’m not hiding.”

“You’ve barely answered calls. Mom’s worried. I’m worried. Just come for dinner. Pretend to be okay for a few hours.”

He went. Performed normalcy with his usual excellence. Made his nephew laugh, helped his mother cook, talked business with his father. No one suspected that underneath his expensive sweater and practiced smile was someone being consumed inch by inch by an addiction he’d thought he’d beaten years ago.

His sister pulled him aside during dinner. “You’re seeing her, aren’t you? Ankita.”

He could have lied. Should have lied.

“Yes.”

“Samar—”

“I know. I know it’s stupid and destructive and history repeating. I know.”

“Then why?”

“Because I’m an addict.” He said it simply, clearly, the first time he’d named it out loud. “She’s my drug and I’m hers and we can’t stop even though we know we should.”

His sister’s face held so much pain it hurt to witness. “You’re going to destroy yourself.”

“Probably.”

“And I’m supposed to just watch?”

“What else can you do? Stage an intervention? Force me to stop seeing her? I’m twenty-five, didi. I make my own terrible choices now.”

“This isn’t a choice. This is a compulsion.”

“Same thing, in practice.”

She hugged him then, desperate and helpless, and he let himself be held while the family laughed in the other room and Delhi celebrated Christmas with lights and joy and all the things that felt foreign to him now.

“Promise me something,” she said against his shoulder. “Promise that if this gets too dark, if you can’t handle it, you’ll tell me. You’ll let me help.”

“I promise,” he lied.

Because the truth was darker than he could admit: he was already too far gone. Had been too far gone since she'd walked into his penthouse and reminded him what feeling felt like.

The darkness wasn't coming. It was already here, had been here for weeks, and he was welcoming it like an old friend.

After Christmas, he went back to her apartment. She was waiting, and the moment he walked in, she was on him—kissing him desperately, pulling at his clothes, needing him in ways that mirrored his need for her.

They had sex against the wall, on the floor, finally in her bed. Rough and consuming, more feeling than thought, more compulsion than choice.

"I love you," she said in the aftermath, and it sounded like confession and curse simultaneously.

"I know," he replied, because what else was there to say?

They were loving each other the way avalanches loved mountains—destructively, inevitably, with no regard for what remained after.

And Samar, successful and brilliant and professionally untouchable, accepted this. Accepted that while his companies flourished and his bank accounts grew and magazines called him visionary, his soul was being consumed by the same girl who'd consumed it at seventeen.

The darkness was here. Had always been here. Would always be here.

And he was done pretending he could live in the light.

CHAPTER 12: THE REVELATION

December 2024

The call came while they were driving through Gurgaon's outskirts, the city dissolving into farmland and open highway. Samar's Mercedes glided through traffic with the smooth inevitability of expensive machinery, and Ankita was mid-sentence about something—a book she'd read, a thought she'd had—when his phone rang.

He glanced at the screen. Something flickered across his face—not quite emotion, more like recognition.

"I need to take this," he said, and answered. "Haan?"

Ankita watched him as whoever was on the other end spoke. Samar's jaw tightened.

"Not now," he said, voice controlled. "I told you to handle it."

More talking from the other end. His knuckles went white on the steering wheel.

"I said not now. Deal with it yourself—"

Whatever was said next changed something. Samar's entire demeanor shifted—the careful control evaporating, replaced by something that made Ankita's breath catch.

"THEN MAKE IT MY FUCKING PROBLEM LATER!" The voice that came out of him wasn't the Samar she knew—not the controlled

entrepreneur, not even the intense lover. This was something else entirely. Something that belonged to a different person. "You have ONE job—keep things running smoothly. And you can't do that? You're calling me while I'm—" He stopped himself, glanced at Ankita, then continued in that same terrible voice: "Fine. FINE. I'm coming. Forty minutes."

He disconnected, and for several seconds said nothing. Just drove, his breathing measured, visibly pulling himself back into control.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, his voice almost normal again. "There's a situation at one of my properties. I need to handle it personally. It won't take long."

"What kind of situation?" Ankita asked carefully, because something about his tone suggested this wasn't a business meeting or property dispute in any conventional sense.

"The kind that requires my immediate attention." He looked at her, and his eyes were different—colder, more focused. "I'll take you home first, or—"

"I'll come with you," she heard herself say. "If that's okay."

He studied her for a long moment, something calculating in his gaze. Then nodded. "Alright. But you'll need to wait while I handle things. It might be... unpleasant."

"I can handle unpleasant."

His smile was strange—almost sad. "We'll see."

They drove in silence for thirty minutes, leaving Delhi completely, heading into territory that was more rural, more spread out. Finally, they turned onto a private road marked only by a discreet gate that opened automatically as they approached.

The property that sprawled before them was extraordinary—at least a hundred acres of manicured lawns, scattered buildings, walls that suggested both wealth and privacy. But there was something else about it, something in the way men were positioned at intervals, in the subtle suggestion of security that was more than residential.

Samar pulled up to what looked like the main house—a sprawling structure that was elegant but somehow severe. Before Ankita could process fully, her door was being opened by a man who looked more like an elite military commando than any driver or servant she'd ever seen. He was massive, professional, and completely deferential.

"Ma'am," he said, offering his hand to help her out.

She glanced at Samar, who nodded. "Jatin will take care of you. Wait in the lounge. This won't take long."

Another man was already leading her away—not forcefully, but with the kind of gentle insistence that suggested she had no real choice. She was escorted into a glass-walled lounge that

overlooked the lawn, offered a seat in furniture that cost more than most people's cars.

Through the glass, she could see activity—men moving with purpose, vehicles arriving. And then she waited.

Five minutes felt like five hours.

When Samar appeared, Ankita's breath stopped.

He was wearing the same clothes—white shirt, dark pants—but now there was a shoulder holster visible, suspenders holding two guns against his sides. His face was transformed: eyes red-rimmed and terrible, jaw set in something that was beyond anger. He looked like violence incarnate. Like death had put on expensive clothes and learned to walk.

He strode across the lawn toward a group she could now see clearly: an elderly couple, both looking terrified, holding each other. And beside them, five men—one clearly the leader, older, harder, the kind of man whose face had seen decades of things she didn't want to imagine. His gang surrounded him, all heads bowed, all looking at the ground as Samar approached.

The glass was thick, but she could hear muffled voices. Could see Samar speaking, though couldn't make out words initially. Then he started shouting, and she heard fragments:

“—ONLY THEIR PLOT? You couldn't earn somewhere else? It HAD to be this land?”

The mob leader tried to say something. Samar cut him off with a gesture that was more violent than any blow.

“Then wear some FUCKING BANGLES, you motherfucker! Wear a saree, cocktops! You’re not men, you’re bloody morons who think intimidating old people makes you powerful!”

He turned to one of his own men, snapped something. The man brought a shovel—just a standard garden shovel, mundane and terrible. Samar took it, hefted it, then turned to the old man.

His voice dropped to something almost gentle: “Uncle. He slapped you, right? He put his hands on you?”

The old man nodded, trembling.

“Okay,” Samar said. “Okay.”

And then he swung the shovel.

Ankita’s scream caught in her throat.

The shovel connected with the mob leader’s face with a sound that was wrong, that was wet and terrible. The man went down, and his howling was animal, inhuman, desperate. Blood sprayed across white stone. His gang started to move—then stopped as Samar’s men raised weapons, movements synchronized and professional.

“WHO THE FUCK MADE YOU A DON?” Samar’s voice carried across the lawn, clear and terrible. “Who told you that you know how to do business?”

While he spoke, Ankita could see his men moving efficiently through the gang members. Not killing them—no, something else. Systematically incapacitating them, zip-tying hands, the whole operation flowing with military precision.

Samar circled the bleeding, crying mob leader. Raised the shovel again.

“My Radhe Govind made me who I am today—” CRACK. The shovel came down.

“My Lord and my Mother made me a BILLIONAIRE—” CRACK. Again.

Blood was smearing across Samar’s face now, spraying up from the impacts. He didn’t seem to notice or care.

“They made me the DARKEST for dark fuckers like YOU, motherfucker—” CRACK.

Fourth hit. Fifth. Sixth. Ankita lost count after the seventh, her vision tunneling, her mind unable to process what she was watching. This wasn’t a man. This was something that wore a man’s shape but contained something else entirely—something ancient and wrathful and completely without mercy.

By the tenth hit, the mob leader wasn't moving anymore. Wasn't making sounds. Was just a shape on the ground that had been a person minutes ago.

Samar dropped the shovel. Pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face casually, like he'd just finished yard work. Then walked to the old couple, who were clinging to each other, the uncle's hands shaking violently.

"Uncle. Auntie." His voice was gentle again, completely gentle, like the violence hadn't happened. "Here's the key to your house. The possession is now in your hands—your land, your property. I apologize for this swine's mistake. He won't trouble you again."

The uncle's hands were shaking too hard to take the keys. But the auntie—the auntie stepped forward, and her face held something Ankita couldn't quite read. Not horror. Something else.

"You are our son," the old woman said, touching Samar's blood-stained face. "Our son who died ten years ago. You protected our dignity. Protected our homeland. You're our son."

Samar bent immediately, touching their feet in perfect reverence. When he straightened, the uncle was trying to speak through his trembling.

"Sir, please—please keep half our property. We'd lost it already. You're the one who got it back. Please, sir—"

"Uncle." Samar took the old man's shaking hands in his own steady ones, closed them gently around the keys. "I'm nothing.

Radhe Govinda brought back your property. You've called me your son—anything happens, anything at all, you come here. Stay as long as you want. Call for me if you need anything. I'll be there." He pressed his forehead to their joined hands. "Jai Shree Radhe Govinda."

He embraced them both, gentle as if they were made of glass, then gestured to his men. Two of them escorted the elderly couple away—carefully, respectfully, like they were precious cargo.

Then Samar turned and walked back toward the lounge where Ankita sat frozen.

He entered the glass room, hands still stained with blood, white shirt now spattered red. His eyes found hers.

"Baby," he said, voice completely casual, "sorry for the delay. Let's have whiskey. Jatin—" He called out without looking away from her. "Bring us the Swiss glasses. My baby loves Swiss crystal."

Ankita couldn't speak. Couldn't move. Could only stare at this man she thought she knew.

"You're quiet," he observed, moving to a bar she hadn't noticed, pouring expensive whiskey like nothing had happened. "Shocked, I imagine. Would you like to leave? I can have Jatin drive you back to Delhi. Or—" He brought her a glass, sat beside

her. "Or you can stay. Ask questions. Process. Whatever you need."

"You killed him." Her voice came out small, broken. "You just—with a shovel—you killed him."

"Yes."

"In front of those old people."

"They wanted to see it. Needed to see it." He sipped his whiskey. "He'd terrorized them for months. Slapped the uncle in his own home. Threatened to take everything they had. Men like that—they don't respond to reason or law. They respond to greater violence. So I provided greater violence."

"You're—" She couldn't finish the sentence. Couldn't find the words.

"A monster?" He suggested helpfully. "A psychopath? A mob leader? Yes. All of those things. Has been for years." He tilted his head, studying her. "You're wondering how you didn't know. How the man you've been fucking for three weeks could be this."

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"I'm Samar Malhotra. Entrepreneur. Philanthropist. Your ex-lover who never recovered from what you did to him." He smiled, and it was terrible. "I'm also Danny. That's what they call me in the underworld. The Ghost. The Devil's Accountant. The man you call when someone needs to stop existing."

“This isn’t—this can’t be—”

“Real? Oh, it’s very real. Has been for seven years. Started in college, actually. Met some people who needed problems solved. Turned out I was very good at solving problems. Turned out that the emptiness you left in me made me perfect for this work. No hesitation. No guilt. Just—” He gestured vaguely. “Purpose.”

“You said—” Ankita’s mind was racing. “You said you’re an instrument of God.”

“I am.” His face was completely serious. “The world has dark spaces. Predators who hurt the innocent. The law can’t touch them—too slow, too corrupt, too weak. So Radhe Govinda uses other instruments. Darker instruments. I’m one of them.”

“That’s insane. That’s—”

“Rationalization? Maybe. But tell me, Ankita—those old people. Did they deserve to lose their home? Did they deserve to be beaten and threatened?” He leaned forward. “Someone had to help them. Someone had to stop that man. The police wouldn’t. The courts wouldn’t. So I did. Is that more insane than letting evil prosper because we’re too civilized to get our hands dirty?”

She had no answer.

Dinner was served—elaborate, expensive, prepared by staff who moved with quiet efficiency. Ankita picked at her food, couldn’t swallow anything past the shock lodged in her throat. Samar ate normally, made casual conversation like he hadn’t just beaten a man to death with a shovel an hour ago.

"You have questions," he said finally. "Ask them."

"The bodies. That mob leader. His gang. What—"

"There's a hundred acres here. Plenty of space for disposal. My men are professionals. By morning, there will be no evidence any of them were ever here."

"How many?" Her voice was barely audible. "How many people have you killed?"

He considered. "Directly? Maybe forty. Indirectly—through orders, through operations? Several hundred, probably. I don't keep exact count. That would be morbid."

She laughed—slightly hysterical, couldn't help it. "You don't keep count. That's your line. You're a mass murderer and you don't keep count."

"Mass murderer implies innocent victims. Everyone I've killed needed killing. Rapists. Human traffickers. Corrupt officials who sold children. Men who beat their wives. Gangsters who preyed on the weak." He met her eyes. "I don't kill good people, Ankita. Only monsters. I just happen to be the bigger monster."

"And your companies? Your success? Is that all—"

"Completely legitimate. That's the beautiful part. I'm actually brilliant at business. The mob work is—" He shrugged. "Purpose. Service. My true calling. The companies just fund it and provide excellent cover."

They finished dinner in silence. Ankita drank more whiskey than she should have, needed something to dull the sharp edges of reality.

That night, in a bedroom that was too luxurious, too normal for what she'd witnessed, Samar came to her.

He didn't ask. Didn't seek permission. Just pulled her to him with the entitlement of ownership, like her body was his by right. And she—God help her—she didn't resist.

He fucked her like she was his wife. Like she belonged to him in ways that transcended choice. Rough and possessive and completely overwhelming. She came once, cried after, and before she could process he was moving her again, a simple gesture—hand motion that meant *open*—and her legs spread without her conscious decision.

Again. And again. Four times. Seven. She lost count after nine, lost herself in the physical intensity, in the way he seemed to know exactly how to touch her, exactly how much pressure, exactly when to be gentle and when to be brutal.

Eleven times. Eleven perfect orgasms that destroyed and rebuilt her each time. She cried after each one—couldn't help it, something in her breaking and reforming, breaking and reforming. And each time, his hand gesture, and she'd open for him again like she was programmed to.

Sometime near dawn, after the last time, she lay in his arms shaking.

"I should be terrified of you," she whispered.

"You should be," he agreed.

"I should run. Should report you. Should—"

"But you won't." His hand stroked her hair, gentle, tender.

"Because you understand now. What I am. What you made me. The boy you destroyed in that computer lab? He became this. You're looking at your creation."

"I didn't—I couldn't have—"

"You did. The pain you caused, the emptiness you left—it had to be filled with something. So I filled it with purpose. With power. With the ability to hurt people who deserved hurting." He tilted her face up to look at him. "You made me a monster. But at least I'm a useful monster."

"This is insane."

"Yes." He kissed her forehead. "But you're still here. Still in my bed. Still opened your legs eleven times for me tonight. So what does that make you?"

She had no answer.

As dawn broke over the hundred acres that held God knew how many buried secrets, Ankita lay beside the man she'd thought she knew and realized she'd never known him at all.

The boy she'd broken hadn't stayed broken. He'd transformed into something she couldn't comprehend. Something dark and terrible and somehow still devoted to her.

And the most terrifying part? She wasn't sure if she wanted to run from it or into it.

The darkness she'd created had grown up.

And it was so much darker than she'd ever imagined.

CHAPTER 13: THE COURT OF ASHES

December 2024

The morning after revelation, Ankita woke to find Samar already dressed, standing by the window overlooking the hundred acres that she now knew held more than gardens.

“We’re having people over tonight,” he said without turning around. “A gathering. I want you there.”

“I should go back to Delhi,” she said, though even saying it felt hollow. “Process everything. I need—”

“You’re not leaving.” He turned then, and his face was pleasant, almost gentle. But something in his eyes made it clear this wasn’t a request. “Not yet. Not until I say you can. Do you understand?”

She nodded, her mouth dry. Because what else could she do? She’d seen what he was capable of. Seen what happened to people who became problems for him.

“Good.” He smiled, and it almost reached his eyes. Almost. “I’m having designers come this afternoon. Makeup artists, hair stylists. You’re going to look absolutely extraordinary tonight.”

“What kind of gathering?”

“The kind that decides how this country actually runs.” He moved to the door, paused. “Wear whatever they bring you. Don’t argue with them about style. They know what I like.”

Then he was gone, and she was alone with the understanding that she wasn't a guest anymore. Wasn't a lover, even. Was something else—a possession, maybe. A trophy he'd decided to display.

The designers arrived at noon—three of them, carrying garment bags and cases of jewelry that probably cost more than most houses. They were professional, deferential, and clearly accustomed to working for someone who accepted only perfection.

They brought out the dress first.

Ankita's breath caught. It was obscene in its beauty—deep crimson silk that looked black in certain lights, cut to showcase every curve while somehow maintaining elegance. The back was nearly nonexistent, the front plunging just shy of inappropriate. It cost, she learned when she accidentally overheard them talking, eight hundred thousand rupees.

"Sir has very specific taste," one designer said, adjusting the fit. "He knows exactly what he wants you to look like tonight."

The makeup took two hours. Not regular party makeup—something more editorial, more severe. Dark eyes that looked almost predatory, lips the color of wine, skin highlighted until she looked otherworldly. They styled her hair in a way that was elegant but also slightly undone, like she'd been ravaged and then put back together.

When they finished, she looked in the mirror and barely recognized herself. She looked powerful. Dangerous. Like she belonged beside whatever Samar had become.

“Perfect,” the lead designer breathed. “Sir will be very pleased.”

Samar came to see her at seven, before guests arrived. He stood in the doorway for a long moment, just looking, and something in his face softened.

“You’re exquisite,” he said quietly. “Absolutely exquisite.”

He was wearing a Tom Ford tuxedo that probably cost as much as her dress, hair perfect, the faint smell of expensive cologne mixing with cigarette smoke. He looked like power incarnate. Like old money and new violence had merged into something that made the world bend.

“Who’s coming tonight?” she asked, her voice steadier than she felt.

“Everyone who matters.” He crossed to her, adjusted a strand of her hair with familiar intimacy. “Cabinet ministers. Industrialists. CEOs whose companies you’ve heard of. Film stars. Athletes. The people who move things in this country.” He leaned close, whispered against her ear: “And they’re all coming to kneel in my living room.”

The party began at eight. Ankita stood beside Samar in the entrance hall—massive, marble, the kind of space that echoed with wealth—and watched as India’s elite arrived one by one.

She recognized faces from newspapers. From television. From Forbes lists and movie screens. They came dressed in their finest, dripping with jewelry and status, and every single one of them greeted Samar with a deference that bordered on fear.

“Danny,” a minister said, using that name that still made Ankita’s skin prickle. “Thank you for the invitation. It’s an honor.”

“Minister Kapoor.” Samar’s smile was warm but his eyes were calculating. “So glad you could make it. We have much to discuss about that infrastructure project.”

“Of course, of course. Whatever you need.”

They passed into the main living room, which had been transformed into something that felt more like a throne room than a party space. The currency of the country—literally—was visible in the casual displays of wealth. Art that belonged in museums on the walls. Sculptures worth millions used as decoration. And the servers—

Ankita’s breath caught.

The servers were famous. Actually famous. A Bollywood actress whose movies had made hundreds of crores was serving champagne, dressed in an outfit that was technically server attire but cost more than most people’s wardrobes. A pop star

who'd performed for millions was carrying trays of hors d'oeuvres, her smile fixed and professional.

"They volunteer for this," Samar murmured, seeing her shock. "Beg for the privilege, actually. Being here, serving at my parties—it means you're trusted. That you're part of something larger. That you're protected."

"Protected from what?"

"From everything." He took two champagne glasses from the actress—a woman Ankita had literally seen on billboards—and handed one to Ankita. "From scandal. From failure. From their own mistakes. I make problems disappear. In exchange, they serve."

A tech billionaire approached—someone Ankita recognized from startup magazines, someone who'd been called 'India's youngest unicorn founder.'

"Sir," the young man said, and there was genuine reverence in his voice. "Thank you for the opportunity to attend. I've brought the projections you requested."

"Later," Samar said dismissively. "Tonight is pleasure. Business can wait."

"Of course, sir. Whatever you prefer."

They moved through the crowd, and Samar introduced her—always the same way:

“This is Ankita. My addiction. The night after which I never slept.”

The phrase clearly meant something to these people. Their faces would shift—understanding, sometimes sympathy, usually caution. Like she was something dangerous by association.

A minister—different from the first, older, more established—appeared with his wife. Both looked at Ankita with calculating interest.

“So this is the famous Ankita,” the minister said. “We understand now why you couldn’t sleep, sir.” His eyes traveled over her body, lingering too long. “A beauty like this would keep any man—”

The sound was subtle. Just a soft exhalation from Samar. But the temperature in the room dropped twenty degrees.

“Excuse me?” Samar’s voice was pleasant. Too pleasant.

The minister’s smile faltered. “I was just saying—she’s very beautiful, and obviously—”

“You were disrespecting what belongs to me.” Samar set down his champagne glass carefully. “In my house. At my table.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Jatin.”

The massive commando appeared from nowhere. “Sir.”

“The minister seems tired. Help him to the car.”

“Wait—” The minister’s face had gone white. His wife was pulling at his arm. “I apologize. I spoke out of turn. Please—”

Samar looked at him with eyes that held nothing. Nothing at all. “You looked at her like she was meat. Like she was available for your assessment. She’s mine. My addiction. My sleeplessness. My reason for darkness.” He stepped closer. “Do you understand what that means?”

“Yes, sir. I understand. I apologize—”

“Good.” Samar smiled, and it was terrible. “Then you’ll understand why I can’t let this go.”

What happened next occurred so quickly that later, Ankita would question if she’d actually seen it. Samar moved—just a simple gesture, reaching into his jacket. The minister saw, started to step back. Too slow.

The knife was small, elegant, the kind you’d use for cutting fine food. Samar drove it up under the minister’s ribcage with surgical precision, twisted once, and withdrew before the man could even scream. The minister dropped, blood spreading across his expensive sherwani, his wife’s scream cut short by Jatin’s hand over her mouth.

The party continued. The music didn’t stop. The other guests glanced over, saw what had happened, and simply... adjusted. Moved away from that area. Continued their conversations. A

Bollywood actor stepped forward to block the scene from casual view.

Ankita stood frozen, champagne still in her hand, watching as Samar wiped the knife on a white napkin someone handed him.

“Anyone else have comments about what’s mine?” Samar asked the room conversationally.

Silence. Absolute silence.

“Excellent.” He turned to Jatin. “Clean this up. Send the wife home with appropriate compensation and a very clear understanding about conversation topics.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And someone get me a new jacket. This one’s spotted.”

Within minutes, the minister’s body was gone. The blood was being cleaned. Samar had changed into a fresh Tom Ford jacket. The party resumed as if nothing had happened.

Because to these people, Ankita realized, nothing had happened. This was normal. This was how Samar’s world worked—swift justice, absolute power, no tolerance for disrespect.

He returned to her side, took her arm gently. “I apologize you had to see that. But he needed to understand boundaries.”

“You killed him.” Her voice was distant, shock making everything surreal. “You just—in the middle of a party—”

“He disrespected you. That’s not acceptable.” Samar kissed her temple, tender. “You’re mine. The night I never slept. Everyone here knows that story, knows what it means. He implied you were—” He stopped, visibly controlling anger. “He implied you were common. That’s a death sentence.”

“I don’t—” She couldn’t finish. Couldn’t process.

“Come.” He led her deeper into the party. “Let me show you your new world.”

The night descended into something that felt more like a fever dream than reality. The guests relaxed after the minister’s disposal, as if the violence had been a test they’d passed by not reacting.

In the main room, a stock market kingmaker was discussing policy with a film producer while a cricket star served them drinks. In another corner, a tech CEO was on his knees—literally on his knees—thanking Samar for some favor, some intervention that had saved his company.

“Rise,” Samar said graciously. “You’ve earned your position. I merely... smoothed certain regulatory obstacles.”

“You saved me, sir. I owe you everything.”

“You owe me loyalty. That’s all I ever ask.”

Everywhere Ankita looked, she saw power kneeling. Saw fame serving. Saw wealth deferring to something greater than money—the sheer force of Samar’s will, his capacity for violence, his position at the intersection of legitimate success and underground control.

A famous actress approached them—someone Ankita had admired for years, whose performances had moved her to tears.

“Sir,” the actress said, speaking to Samar but looking at Ankita. “Your companion is extraordinarily beautiful. You have excellent taste.”

“I do,” Samar agreed. “In all things.”

“If she ever needs anything—styling, connections, opportunities—please let me know. Anyone precious to you is precious to us.”

“That’s kind of you, Priya. I’ll remember that.”

The actress smiled at Ankita—genuine warmth mixed with something else. Fear? Respect? Impossible to tell. Then she moved away, back to her serving duties.

“She means it,” Samar said quietly. “They all do. Being in my favor means protection. Being the woman I claim? That makes you untouchable. Powerful by association.”

“I don’t want power.”

“Too bad.” He turned her to face him, both hands on her arms. “You have it anyway. Because you’re mine. Because I’ve decided you’re precious. That makes you dangerous to everyone here.”

“I’m not—”

“You are.” His eyes were intense, burning. “You’re the only thing that makes me feel, Ankita. The only addiction I have besides violence and God. That makes you the most powerful person in this room after me. Do you understand? These people would kill for you if I asked. Would die for you. Because I’ve claimed you as mine.”

She felt something inside her shift. Not love—she wasn’t sure she loved him anymore, wasn’t sure she’d ever really loved him. But something else. Submission. Acceptance. The understanding that she’d crossed into a world she couldn’t leave, attached to a man who’d remade himself into something beyond human comprehension.

“I’m scared of you,” she whispered.

“Good.” He kissed her, deep and possessive, in front of everyone. Marking her. Claiming her. “Fear means you’re smart. Love me or hate me, but fear me always. That’s what keeps you safe.”

The party continued until dawn. At some point, Ankita stopped tracking time, stopped being shocked by each new revelation of excess and power. There was a room where decisions were being made that would affect millions—infrastructure projects

awarded, policies influenced, careers destroyed or elevated with casual conversation. There was another room where pleasures she couldn't name were happening, doors discreetly closed but sounds occasionally escaping.

Samar kept her close all night. Showed her off like a prize, introduced her as his addiction, his sleepless night, his darkness incarnate. And people bowed to her. Actual bows. Like she was royalty.

By the time the last guests left—3 AM, 4 AM, time had lost meaning—Ankita felt hollowed out. The dress that had made her feel powerful now felt like a costume. The makeup felt like war paint she'd worn into battle and barely survived.

Samar found her on the terrace, standing alone, looking out over the hundred acres that held so many secrets.

"You did beautifully tonight," he said, handing her a cigarette. She took it—when had she started smoking again? "Everyone was impressed."

"You killed a man at your own party."

"I've killed men at many parties. This was actually relatively restrained." He lit her cigarette, then his own. "He disrespected you. That couldn't stand."

"And his wife?"

"Will be compensated generously and will speak of nothing she saw tonight. She knows the alternative."

“Which is?”

“Joining her husband.” He said it simply, factually. “I’m not cruel, Ankita. But I’m practical. Loose ends get tied. That’s how this works.”

She smoked in silence, processing. Then: “Why am I here, Samar? Really? Is this revenge? Are you going to kill me eventually? Is this some elaborate—”

“I’m going to keep you.” He turned to face her fully. “I’m going to keep you because you’re the only thing left from my old life that still makes me feel anything. Because every time I fuck you, I remember what it felt like to be human. Because you’re my addiction and I’m done pretending I can quit.”

“That’s not love.”

“No.” He cupped her face, gentle despite everything. “That’s ownership. But it’s the only thing I have left that resembles love. So it’ll have to do.”

She should have fought. Should have argued, resisted, maintained some shred of dignity.

Instead, she leaned into his touch. Because what else was there? She’d seen his world now. Seen the power he wielded, the violence he was capable of, the absolute control he maintained over everyone in his orbit.

She couldn't leave even if he let her. Where would she go? Back to Bangalore, to her normal life, pretending she hadn't seen India's elite serving drinks and begging for favors? Pretending she hadn't watched a man die for disrespecting her?

She was caught. Not just by Samar's will, but by knowledge. By complicity. By the understanding that she was now part of something so much darker than she'd ever imagined.

"I'm yours," she heard herself say. Not a declaration of love. A surrender.

"I know." He kissed her forehead. "You have been since you walked into that library when you were sixteen. You just didn't know it yet."

They stood on the terrace as the sun rose over the empire of darkness Samar had built. And Ankita understood, finally, what it meant to be the night after which he'd never slept.

She wasn't his redemption. She was his reminder—of what he'd lost, what he'd become, what he'd sacrificed to transform from broken boy to dark king.

And she was passing into servitude. Not love. Not even fear anymore. Just acceptance of her place in his terrible kingdom.

The queen of ashes, standing beside the king.

Together, they watched the light creep across land that held countless buried secrets.

And neither of them looked away.

CHAPTER 14: DEVOTION

****December 2024****

Ankita woke alone in silk sheets that cost more than most people's monthly salary, in a bedroom the size of her entire Bangalore apartment, in a house that held secrets buried in its hundred acres. The morning light filtered through curtains that had been custom-made in Italy, and for a moment—just a moment—she forgot where she was.

Then memory crashed back: the party, the minister's blood, the way Samar had killed with the casualness of swatting a fly. The way everyone had bowed to him. The way she'd surrendered.

She was his now. Whatever that meant.

She found herself wandering the house in one of his shirts—white cotton that smelled like him, cigarettes and expensive cologne and something else she couldn't name. The staff moved through the hallways like ghosts, efficient and silent. When they saw her, they stopped, bowed slightly.

"Ma'am," one of them said—a woman in her fifties, kind eyes, the kind of face that had seen everything and judged nothing. "Can I get you breakfast?"

"I—yes. Thank you. And—" Ankita hesitated. "Where is Samar?"

"Sir left early this morning, ma'am. Temple visit, then the city office. He should return by evening."

Temple. The word seemed so incongruous with the man who'd killed someone at his own party. But then, he'd always talked about God. Radhe Govinda. Divine purpose.

"What's he like?" Ankita heard herself ask. "When he's here. When it's normal."

The woman's face softened with something that looked almost like love. "Sir? He's... he's the best man I've ever worked for, ma'am. Generous. Kind to staff. Never raises his voice unless—" She stopped, careful. "Unless someone deserves it. He pays for my daughter's education. Paid for my husband's cancer treatment. There are thirty families on this property, ma'am, and every single one of them would die for him."

"Because they're afraid?"

"Because he saved them." She said it with absolute certainty. "Each of us—we all came from nothing. From bad situations. And sir found us, gave us purpose, gave us safety. We're not afraid, ma'am. We're grateful."

Throughout the morning, Ankita asked others. The butlers, the housekeepers, the security staff. Always the same answer, variations on a theme: Sir is fair. Sir is generous. Sir protects us. Sir never forgets a birthday, a child's name, a family crisis.

"He paid for my son's wedding," one butler said, his eyes misting. "The whole thing. Said no man who works for him should have his daughter married without proper celebration."

“He saved my sister,” a young security guard offered. “She was in a bad marriage. Husband used to beat her. Sir... handled it. Now she lives here, works in the kitchen. Safe.”

Everywhere she turned, devotion. Not fear—genuine, earned devotion. People who’d seen both sides of him: the violence and the grace. And somehow, impossibly, they loved him more for the duality.

By afternoon, she needed to see him. Needed to reconcile this version—this generous employer, this protector—with the man who’d driven a knife under a minister’s ribs without blinking.

She called the number he’d given her. He answered on the first ring.

“Miss me already?” His voice was warm, amused.

“Where are you?”

“Radhe Govinda temple, then heading to the city office. Why? Want to join me?”

“Yes.”

“Jatin will bring you. One hour.”

The Rolls Royce moved through Delhi traffic like water parting around stone—smooth, inevitable, other vehicles making space automatically. Ankita sat in the back, wearing a simple salwar

kameez one of the staff had brought her (perfectly fitted, someone had taken her measurements while she slept), watching the city pass.

She'd lived here once. Gone to school here. Destroyed a boy here.

Now she was returning as—what? The consort of the city's darkest king? The woman who'd survived knowledge that killed others?

The temple was in Old Delhi, tucked into a neighborhood that smelled like incense and street food and centuries of prayers. The Rolls Royce looked absurd here, obscene wealth in a place of devotion. But when they arrived, people recognized the car. Faces lit up. Children ran forward.

"Sir is here!" someone shouted. "Danny sir is here!"

They used his underworld name at a temple. Somehow that seemed right.

Jatin escorted her inside, through crowds that parted naturally, respectfully. And there, in the inner sanctum, she saw him.

Samar stood before the deities—Radha and Krishna, eternal lovers, divine and terrible—holding fire in his bare palms. Not in an earthen diya, but directly on his skin, the flame dancing in his cupped hands like an offering. His eyes were closed, his face transformed into something beyond the violence she'd witnessed, beyond the control he maintained. He looked

peaceful. Holy. Like he'd found the one place where the darkness receded.

He was chanting, voice low and rhythmic, and the Sanskrit words washed over everything with the weight of ancient truth. Around him, other devotees maintained respectful distance, not interrupting, but watching with the same devotion the staff had shown.

When he finished—when he finally placed the flame back in the proper lamp—he opened his eyes and saw her.

Something crossed his face. Surprise? Pleasure? Relief? He moved toward her through the crowd, and people touched his feet as he passed, seeking blessings. He gave them freely, touching heads, murmuring prayers, completely comfortable in this role of spiritual conduit.

"You came," he said when he reached her, and his smile was genuine. "I'm glad."

"You were holding fire."

"Old practice. Proof of devotion. If your faith is pure, the flame doesn't burn." He showed her his palms—unmarked, perfect. "Radhe Govinda protects me. Always has."

"Even when you kill?"

"Especially then." His voice dropped lower, intimate despite the crowd. "I'm his instrument. The darkness the world needs. Every death I cause, I offer to him. Every act of violence, a prayer."

It should have sounded insane. Instead, it sounded true.

He took her hand, led her out to the courtyard where a donation box stood. He pulled out a stack of bills—she couldn't see the denomination, but it was thick—and placed it in the box without counting. Then more money for the head priest, for the temple maintenance, for the school attached to the temple.

"Sir," the priest said, "your generosity sustains us."

"Radhe Govinda's generosity. I'm just the delivery system."

Outside, children had gathered—a dozen of them, street kids and temple kids and neighborhood kids, all shouting his name. From the Rolls Royce's trunk, Jatin produced a football—expensive, professional grade—and Samar tossed it into the crowd.

"For you," he said, laughing as they scrambled for it. "But you have to share. No fighting."

"Yes, sir!"

"And—" He pulled out more money, handed it to the oldest boy. "Get everyone ice cream. The good kind, not the cheap stuff. Deal?"

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!"

He played with them for fifteen minutes. Actual playing—kicking the ball, showing them moves, laughing when a small

girl tackled his legs and tried to steal the ball. He picked her up, spun her around, and she squealed with delight.

“You’ll be a great player someday,” he told her seriously. “Keep practicing.”

“Will you come watch me, sir?”

“I’ll try. But if I can’t, you play for me, okay? Play like you’re showing the whole world what you can do.”

“Okay!”

That’s when the rain started. Delhi’s winter rain, sudden and cold, and the children scattered, laughing. Samar stood in it, face turned up to the sky, and for a moment looked young. Unburdened. Like the boy Ankita had met in a library ten years ago, before everything broke.

She watched him, and something in her chest shifted. Not love—she wasn’t sure she knew what love was anymore. But belonging. Recognition. The understanding that this man contained multitudes: killer and saint, monster and savior, darkness and light so intertwined they couldn’t be separated.

He was hers. And she was his. And that was simply how things were.

He turned, found her watching, and smiled. Walked to her through the rain, pulled her close, kissed her in front of the temple and the remaining devotees and God himself.

“Let’s go home,” he said against her lips. “I want to show you something.”

They drove to his city office first—a tower in Connaught Place, modern and severe, his name on the building. On the top floor, in a conference room overlooking Delhi’s heart, he had a surprise waiting.

His sister.

She was sitting in a chair by the window, and when she saw them enter, her face went through several emotions: surprise, concern, calculation, and finally, cautious welcome.

“Didi,” Samar said warmly, embracing her. “I want you to meet someone properly. Ankita, this is my sister. The person I trust most in this world.”

The sister studied Ankita for a long moment. There was knowledge in her eyes—she remembered. She’d been there, back in school, had watched her brother destroy himself over this same woman.

“Ankita,” she said finally, neutral. “It’s been a long time.”

“Ten years,” Ankita agreed. “I—I know you remember. I know you have reasons to hate me.”

"I don't hate you." The sister stood, moved closer. "I'm just... concerned. Samar is—" She glanced at her brother. "He's different now. Stronger, yes. Successful, obviously. But also—"

"Fragile," Ankita supplied. "In ways people don't see."

"Yes." The sister looked surprised. "Exactly. And you broke him once. Thoroughly. I watched it happen. Watched him become someone I barely recognized." She took Ankita's hands, her grip firm. "I don't know what's happening between you two now. I don't know if it's healing or hurting. But I need you to understand: if you break him again, there won't be anything left to put back together. So if you're not sure, if you can't commit to being careful with him—leave now. Please. While you still can."

Ankita wanted to laugh—slightly hysterical, couldn't help it. This woman, this loving sister, had no idea what her brother had become. Thought he needed protection from heartbreak, not realizing he'd transcended vulnerability years ago. That he was the dangerous one now, the one everyone else needed protection from.

But she couldn't say that. Couldn't reveal what she'd seen. So instead: "I understand. I promise I won't break him. Not again."

The sister studied her, then nodded. "Okay. Then welcome back into his life. God knows he needs someone. Just—be kind to him, please. Despite everything, despite his success, he's still the boy who feels too much."

Samar had moved to the window, giving them space. Now he turned back. "Are you two done discussing me like I'm not here?"

"Yes," his sister said, smiling. "I approve. Provisionally. Don't make me regret it."

"Wouldn't dream of it, didi."

They had tea—actual tea, with biscuits, normal and domestic and strange in its ordinariness. The sister talked about her child, about her husband, about their mother's latest attempts to get Samar married to "appropriate girls from good families."

"Maa means well," she said. "She just worries you're alone."

"I'm not alone anymore," Samar said, taking Ankita's hand. "Am I?"

"No," Ankita heard herself say. "You're not alone."

After the sister left—hugging Samar tightly, whispering something to him that made him nod seriously—they were alone in the office overlooking the city.

"She doesn't know," Ankita said quietly. "About what you really do. The underground."

"No one in my family knows. They see the businesses, the success. They worry I'm lonely, that I work too hard. They don't see the rest." He turned to her. "You're one of three people who

knows everything. Jatin, because he runs my operations. Me. And now you."

"Why tell me? Why show me?"

"Because you're mine." He pulled her close. "Because I decided that whatever we have—toxic, destructive, obsessive—is real enough to include you in all of it. The violence and the devotion. The killing and the prayers. All of me."

"I don't deserve that trust."

"Probably not." He kissed her forehead. "But I'm giving it anyway. Because I'm done pretending I can exist without you. So now you know everything. And now you're complicit in everything. Which means—"

"I can't leave."

"No." His smile was sad. "You can't leave. But also—" His voice softened. "I don't think you want to."

He was right. She didn't want to. That was the terrifying part.

The evening turned into something dreamlike. Samar took her shopping—not to a single store, but to a mall he apparently owned. They walked through after hours, past closed shops, and he gestured to the manager.

“Open Gucci. And Dior. And—” He looked at Ankita. “What do you like?”

“I don’t—this is insane—”

“That’s not an answer. What do you like?”

“Everything,” she admitted, helpless.

“Then everything it is.”

The stores opened for them. Exclusively. Staff appeared to help, respectful and professional, and Samar bought without asking prices. Dresses, shoes, jewelry. Half the Gucci store ended up in bags. A Dior handbag that cost more than a car. Jewelry from Cartier that came with its own security escort.

“You’re buying too much,” Ankita protested weakly.

“Impossible. I’m buying exactly the right amount to show you what it means to be mine.” He draped a diamond necklace around her throat, fastened it himself. “You’re the queen of my empire, Ankita. Start looking like it.”

By the time they left, three cars were required for the purchases. Ankita felt drunk on excess, on the sheer unreality of this life she’d stumbled into.

Back at the farmhouse, in his bedroom—their bedroom now, though when that shift had occurred she couldn’t pinpoint—he fed her dinner with his own hands. Literally fed her, bringing food to her lips, making sure she ate properly.

"You don't eat enough," he said. "I've noticed. You need to maintain your strength. For me."

"For you?"

"For what I do to you." His eyes darkened with intent. "For what I'm about to do to you."

After dinner, he braided her hair. Long, careful plaits like she was something precious, his fingers gentle against her scalp. No one had braided her hair since she was a child. The tenderness of it made her throat tight.

"You're mine," he murmured, working. "My addiction. My queen. The darkness I can't escape and don't want to."

"Samar—"

"Shh. Let me take care of you."

When he finished, he turned her to face him. The gentleness evaporated, replaced by something hungry and possessive.

"Now," he said, voice dropping to something primal, "I'm going to break you."

He did. Completely, thoroughly, repeatedly. Ten times through the night—she lost count after seven, lost herself in the intensity of it. He took her like an alpha claiming his mate: rough and possessive, then gentle and devastating, then rough again until

she couldn't remember where one round ended and another began.

Each time she came, he'd watch her fall apart with satisfaction that bordered on worship. Each time she thought she couldn't possibly do it again, he'd touch her in exactly the right way, whisper exactly the right words, and her body would respond like it was programmed to him.

"That's it," he'd murmur against her skin. "Give me everything. You're mine. Say it."

"Yours," she'd gasp, and mean it, and hate that she meant it, and not care that she hated it because the pleasure was too consuming.

By dawn, she couldn't move. Could barely breathe. Lay in his arms shaking, marked, claimed, thoroughly destroyed and remade in his image.

"I can't—" she whispered. "I can't breathe without you."

"Good." He kissed her temple, possessive. "That's exactly where I want you. So addicted to me that leaving would feel like dying."

"I hate you."

"No you don't." His hand traced patterns on her skin, gentle now, soothing. "You hate that you need me. That's different. But you'll get used to it. You'll learn that belonging to me is better than freedom. Safer than choice. Sweeter than any independence you could have."

She wanted to argue. Wanted to claim she still had autonomy, still had self. But her body was singing with satisfaction, her mind was quiet for the first time in years, and she felt held in a way she'd never felt before.

Not loved—that wasn't the right word. Possessed. Consumed. Integrated into something larger than herself.

She was his consort. His queen of ashes. The woman who'd seen all his darkness and stayed anyway—not because she was brave, but because she'd become part of that darkness.

As the sun rose over the hundred acres, Samar held her close and whispered prayers to Radhe Govinda, thanking his gods for returning what he'd lost, for giving him permission to keep her, for making his addiction holy through divine sanction.

And Ankita, exhausted and transformed, accepted that she'd passed beyond the point of return.

She belonged to him now. Mind, body, and whatever remained of her soul.

The predator had become prey.

And somehow, impossibly, she'd never felt more complete.

CHAPTER 15: THE LESSON RETURNS

January 2025

Ankita had been living in the farmhouse for three weeks when she started to believe in fairy tales again.

Not the sanitized Disney versions, but the original ones—dark and bloody, where love was obsession and possession and two people consuming each other until nothing remained but ash and bone. She'd found her fairy tale. She was living in it. The king of ashes had claimed his queen, and she was learning what it meant to reign beside darkness.

The mornings were her favorite. She'd wake to find him already awake—he never really slept, she'd learned, maybe three hours on good nights—sitting by the window with his cigarettes and his prayers. He'd pray to Radhe Govinda first, then turn to her, and the transition from holy to hungry was instantaneous.

"Good morning," he'd say, moving to the bed, and they'd have sex before breakfast, slow and possessive, him taking his time because they had all the time in the world now that she was his.

Then breakfast, which he'd feed her himself because he'd noticed she forgot to eat and had decided this was now his responsibility. "Open," he'd command gently, and she'd accept food from his fingers like a sacrament.

The days varied. Sometimes he'd work from the farmhouse, and she'd watch him transform from lover to king—phone calls in multiple languages, decisions that moved millions, the casual

violence of capitalism executed with precision. Other times he'd go to the city, and she'd explore the hundred acres, talk to the staff who all treated her like royalty, slowly understand the ecosystem he'd built.

The nights were when he truly owned her. Hours of sex that bordered on religious experience, him taking her apart and rebuilding her exactly the way he wanted. She'd lost count of how many times per night—ten, twelve, fifteen—her body had learned to respond to him like it was programmed, like she'd been designed specifically for his pleasure.

She was happy. Disgustingly, obscenely happy in a way that felt almost shameful. She'd found belonging. Found purpose. Found the place where she fit perfectly, even if that place was beside a man who killed without hesitation and ruled an empire of darkness.

This was love, she told herself. This consuming, obliterating thing that left no room for anything else. This was what she'd been searching for all along.

She believed it completely.

For three weeks, she believed it.

The calendar was an accident.

She'd been looking for his iPad—wanted to order books, he'd told her to use his—and found it in his study. Opened it. The calendar app was still running.

She shouldn't have looked. Should have closed it immediately. Should have respected privacy.

But something made her pause. A pattern in the entries. Names she didn't recognize, always at specific times, always with location pins to expensive hotels.

****3 PM - Priya Mehta - Taj President - Suite 1847****

****7 PM - Sharma Industries dinner - Leela Palace****

****11 PM - Ananya Khanna - Farmhouse (guest wing)****

Her heart started beating faster. Business meetings, probably. He had lots of those. The times were odd, but he kept odd hours. Nothing suspicious about—

She clicked on one. The entry expanded.

****Priya Mehta - Quarterly review. Bring standard contract. 2 hours. Usual terms.****

Standard contract. Usual terms.

Her hands were shaking. She clicked another.

****Ananya Khanna - New acquisition discussion. Extended session. Overnight approved. Discretion absolute.****

Another.

****Reema Patel - Mumbai connection. Hotel arranged. 4 hours minimum. Confirm protocol.****

The iPad slipped from her hands. Clattered on the desk. She stared at it like it was a live snake.

No. No, this was—this had to be—

She scrolled back. Weeks of entries. Months. Names she didn't recognize and names she did—that actress from the party, a tech CEO she'd seen in magazines, others. Always with times. Always with locations. Always with that clinical language: ***standard contract, usual terms, confirm protocol*.**

The door opened behind her.

"Hey, I thought you wanted to—" Samar stopped, seeing her face. Seeing the iPad on the desk. Understanding instantly. "Ah."

"What is this?" Her voice came out wrong. Too high, too thin.

"What are these meetings?"

He moved into the room, casual, unhurried. Picked up the iPad, glanced at the screen. "Exactly what they look like."

"They look like—" She couldn't say it. Couldn't make the words real.

“Like I’m sleeping with other women. Yes. I am.” He said it so simply. So matter-of-factly. Like discussing the weather. “I thought you understood. I never hid this from you.”

“You never TOLD me—”

“You never asked.” He set the iPad down, turned to face her fully. “Ankita, I run an empire. A real one, not just the public companies. You’ve seen pieces of it. The violence. The control. Did you think that power came from board meetings and stock options?”

“I don’t—what does that have to do with—”

“Everything.” He moved closer. “Power in my world isn’t just money or force. It’s connections. Bonds. Leverage. And the most powerful bond you can create with someone is physical intimacy. You make yourself vulnerable to them, they make themselves vulnerable to you, and suddenly you’re tied together in ways contracts can’t replicate.”

She was backing away from him without realizing it. “You’re talking about sex. You’re talking about fucking other women for business.”

“Yes.”

“While telling me you love me. While making me believe I’m yours, that you’re mine—”

“You ARE mine.” His voice was firm, almost confused by her confusion. “This has nothing to do with us. Those women—”

they're transactions. Necessary pieces of maintaining power structures. They mean nothing."

"NOTHING?" She heard her voice rising, breaking. "You have sex with them and they mean NOTHING?"

"Correct." He reached for her and she flinched away. He stopped, hurt flickering across his face. "Ankita, you know the difference between bodies and hearts. You were the one who taught me that lesson. Remember?"

The words hit like a physical blow.

"You taught me," he continued, and his voice was gentle, almost kind, which made it so much worse. "In school. With Kunal. You showed me that you could love one person while fucking another. That physical intimacy didn't require emotional investment. That sex was just sex, and love was something separate, something purer."

"That was different—"

"How?" He tilted his head, genuinely curious. "How is it different? You had a boyfriend. You loved him, maybe, in your way. And you fucked me. Repeatedly. While maintaining that relationship. While telling me I was special but not special enough to choose."

"I was seventeen—"

"And I was sixteen. And I learned. You were an excellent teacher, Ankita. You taught me that bodies are transactional. That you

can give physical pleasure without giving emotional access. That sex is just another tool, another currency, another way to get what you need."

He moved closer again. This time she didn't back away, couldn't move, frozen by the terrible logic of what he was saying.

"I'm just better at it than you were," he said softly. "More efficient. More honest. I don't pretend these women mean something when they don't. I don't manipulate them emotionally while using them physically. It's pure transaction—I give them access to my body and my protection, they give me their cooperation and their silence. Clean. Simple. Exactly what you taught me love could be."

"I didn't—" Her voice broke. "I didn't teach you that. I was young and stupid and cruel but I didn't—"

"You did." He cupped her face, forced her to look at him. "You absolutely did. And now you're upset that I perfected your lesson? That I took your philosophy and made it into an art form? Where's your consistency, Ankita? Where's your intellectual honesty?"

"I love you," she whispered, tears starting to fall. "I thought you loved me."

"I DO love you." He sounded almost desperate for her to understand. "You're the only person I love. The only one who has access to my actual heart. These other women—they get my body for a few hours. You get my soul forever. Can't you see the difference?"

“No.” She was crying fully now, ugly and helpless. “No, I can’t see the difference. I can’t watch you touch someone else and tell myself it doesn’t matter because you love me. I can’t—”

“But you did exactly that. To Kunal. For months.”

The words were a knife, precise and devastating. Because he was right. She had done exactly that. Had expected Kunal to understand that her body with Samar didn’t diminish her feelings for him. Had thought she could separate physical and emotional, had thought it was enlightened, mature, honest.

And now she was on the other side of that philosophy, and it was destroying her.

“How many?” she asked, her voice very small. “How many women?”

“Currently? Active contracts? Twenty-three.”

Twenty-three. The number fell like a stone.

“And how often do you—”

“It varies. Some are monthly arrangements. Some quarterly. Some only when specific situations require their cooperation. I’m very careful about scheduling. Nothing interferes with my time with you.”

“How generous.” Bitterness leaked through the tears.

"It is generous," he said, and he wasn't being cruel—he genuinely believed it. "You're my priority. Always. You get my mornings and my nights. You get my prayers and my darkness. You get the truth. These women get a few hours of physical transaction and then I come home to you."

"Home to me." She laughed, slightly hysterical. "After being inside someone else. After making them feel—after giving them—"

"I don't make them feel anything. That's the point. It's mechanical. Professional. I'm very good at separating emotion from action—you taught me that too. With you, I feel everything. With them, I feel nothing. That's the difference."

She sank into a chair, legs unable to support her weight. "I can't—I can't do this. I can't know about this and still—"

"You can." He knelt in front of her, took her hands. "You can because you love me. Because you understand, on some level, that this is necessary. That power requires sacrifice. That the empire I've built—the one that protects you, that keeps you safe, that gives you everything you need—requires maintenance."

"I'm not a thing you maintain—"

"No. You're the person I love. The maintenance is for everyone else." He kissed her hands, gentle. "Let me explain how this works. Please. Let me make you understand."

She should have said no. Should have left the room, the house, him. Should have chosen self-respect over submission.

But she was already addicted. Had been addicted since she'd come back. Maybe had been addicted since seventeen, just in denial.

"Explain," she heard herself whisper.

He explained. Clinically, clearly, with the precision of someone describing a business model.

The women were all powerful in their own right. CEOs, politicians, heiresses, high-level bureaucrats. Women who controlled things he needed—licenses, permits, market access, political protection. In India's corruption-riddled system, official channels were slow and unreliable. But personal connections, bonds of mutual vulnerability, those were currency.

"Sex creates obligation," he said. "Not in a gross way—I'm not blackmailing anyone. But when someone has been intimate with you, when they've been vulnerable, they're more likely to cooperate. More likely to prioritize your requests. It's psychology, basic human bonding."

"You're using sex as a business tool."

"Yes. The same way I use violence, money, information. Different tools for different situations. Some people respond to fear. Some to greed. Some to—" He gestured vaguely. "Connection. I provide whatever motivates them."

“And these women, they know? They understand this is transactional?”

“Absolutely. Every arrangement is explicit. They know I’m not offering romance or exclusivity. They know I have you. Most of them prefer it this way—no emotional complications, just mutual benefit.”

“Do they know about me? That you love me?”

“Some do. Others don’t ask. It’s not relevant to our arrangement.”

Ankita felt something crack in her chest. “And what about me? Am I just supposed to—what? Accept this? Be okay with sharing you?”

“You don’t share me.” His voice was firm. “They rent my body for specific purposes. You own my heart. That’s not sharing—that’s hierarchy. You’re the queen. They’re just...” He searched for words. “Subjects. Servants. Tools I use to maintain the kingdom you reign over.”

It was insane. The logic was insane. The whole situation was insane.

And yet, some part of her—the part that had been seventeen and selfish and convinced love and sex were separate—understood exactly what he meant.

She'd believed this once. Had operated on this exact philosophy. Had thought she was enlightened for being able to separate physical and emotional.

Now she was learning what it felt like to be on the other side. To be the one who was "loved" while someone else got the body. To be told she was special while he touched others.

Karma was a beautiful, terrible bitch.

"I want to leave," she said quietly.

"No you don't."

"Yes. I do. I can't—I can't watch this. Can't know about this. I'll go insane."

"Probably," he agreed. "But you still won't leave."

"You can't stop me—"

"I can absolutely stop you." He said it gently but absolutely. "But I don't need to. Because you're already addicted. You can't breathe without me—you said so yourself. You've structured your entire existence around being mine. Where would you even go? Back to Bangalore? To what? A life that feels empty compared to this?"

"This isn't a life—"

"It's the only life that feels real to you anymore." He stood, pulled her up to face him. "You love me. Disgustingly,

obsessively, destructively love me. The same way I love you. And that love doesn't disappear just because you're hurt. If anything, it intensifies. Becomes more desperate."

"That's not love—"

"It's the only love either of us knows how to do." He kissed her forehead. "Stay. Accept this. Learn to live with it the way I learned to live with what you did to me. It's your turn now. Your turn to understand what it feels like to love someone who can't be only yours."

"I hate you."

"I know. I hate me too sometimes." He pulled her closer. "But you'll stay. Because leaving would hurt more than staying. Because at least here, you have part of me. Leaving means nothing."

He was right. God help her, he was completely right.

She couldn't leave. Physically, mentally, emotionally couldn't conceive of existence without him. Even knowing about the twenty-three women, even feeling this tearing agony in her chest, the thought of actually walking away made her lungs constrict.

She was trapped. Not by him—by her own addiction.

"I want names," she said finally, voice hollow. "I want to know who they are. When you see them. I want full transparency."

“Okay.” He agreed immediately. “I’ll share my calendar with you. You can see everything. No secrets.”

“And I want—” She didn’t know what she wanted. What could she ask for? Monogamy? He’d already explained why that was impossible. His love? She already had it, for whatever that was worth. “I want to matter more than they do.”

“You already do. You matter more than anything. More than the empire, more than the power, more than my own life.” He tilted her face up. “You’re my addiction, remember? The night after which I never sleep. They’re just business hours. You’re eternity.”

It should have been romantic. Instead it felt like a life sentence.

But she nodded. Accepted it. Because what else could she do?

She’d taught him this. Had shown him how to love one person while fucking others. Had convinced him it was possible, even enlightened.

Now she got to live in the world she’d created.

And it was going to destroy her.

That night, he made love to her with devastating tenderness. Whispered that she was his everything, his only real thing, the center of his universe. Made her come eight times, each one

accompanied by declarations of love that felt both completely true and completely insufficient.

After, lying in the wreckage of her own pleasure, she realized something terrible:

She was going to stay. Was going to accept this. Was going to learn to live with the knowledge that he touched others, that twenty-three women had access to his body, that sex for him was just another tool.

She was going to stay because leaving would kill her faster than staying.

And in accepting this, in surrendering to this reality, something in her started to crack.

Not break—not yet. But crack.

The beginning of a descent into a darkness that would make his look pale by comparison.

Because if you're going to love a monster, she realized, you have to become monstrous yourself.

And Ankita was about to learn exactly how dark she could go.

The lesson was just beginning.

And she was going to be an excellent student.

CHAPTER 16: WITNESSING

January 2025

The shared calendar sat on her phone like a tumor. She checked it compulsively—every hour, every thirty minutes, eventually every few minutes. Watching the entries appear and disappear. Watching the architecture of her torture organized into neat time blocks with location pins and clinical notes.

****Tuesday 3 PM - Meera Kapoor - ITC Maurya - Presidential Suite - 2 hours****

****Thursday 11 AM - Kavya Srinivasan - Farmhouse (guest wing) - Extended session - Lunch included****

****Friday 8 PM - Anjali Mehta - Oberoi - Overnight - Return Saturday 10 AM****

Each entry was a small death. Each notification a knife sliding between her ribs with surgical precision.

Samar didn't hide anything. True to his word, he was completely transparent. Would tell her before leaving: "I have the Kapoor meeting at three. Should be back by six. We'll have dinner together."

He'd say it like he was going to a board meeting. Which, in his mind, he essentially was.

The first week after discovering the calendar, Ankita tried to pretend normalcy. Would smile when he left for these

“meetings.” Would be waiting when he returned. Would let him touch her, make love to her, whisper that she was his everything.

But something was changing inside her. Something fundamental cracking under the weight of knowledge she couldn’t unknow.

She started losing time. Would find herself standing in rooms with no memory of walking there. Would discover hours had passed while she sat staring at nothing. The staff noticed, grew concerned, but didn’t know what to say.

“Ma’am, you haven’t eaten today,” one of them would venture gently.

She’d look at the food like she’d forgotten what it was for.

Samar noticed too. “You’re getting too thin,” he said one morning, trying to feed her breakfast. “You need to eat.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. You’re disappearing.” He held her face, forced her to look at him. “Talk to me. Tell me what you need.”

I need you to not fuck other women, she thought. But didn’t say. Because he’d already explained why that was impossible. Because she’d already accepted this was her reality.

“I’m fine,” she repeated.

She wasn’t fine.

The breaking point came two weeks after the calendar revelation.

****Tuesday 11 AM - Priya Malhotra - Farmhouse (guest wing) - 3 hours - Light lunch after****

Ankita stared at the entry. The farmhouse. Not a hotel. Here. In their home.

He was going to bring one of them here.

“Why here?” she asked Samar that morning, trying to keep her voice level. “You usually use hotels.”

“Priya prefers privacy. Hotels have too many eyes.” He was getting dressed, casual and unhurried. “The guest wing is completely separate. You won’t hear anything. Won’t see anything unless you choose to.”

“Unless I choose to.”

He paused, reading something in her tone. “You can go to the city if you prefer. Go shopping. I’ll have Jatin drive you. By the time you’re back—”

“I’ll stay.”

“Ankita—”

"I said I'll stay." Her voice was flat, dead. "This is my home too, right? I should get comfortable with how things work here."

He studied her for a long moment. "If you're trying to hurt yourself by watching, that's not healthy."

"Is any of this healthy?" She laughed, and it sounded wrong even to her own ears. "Just do what you need to do. I'll be fine."

He didn't look convinced, but he didn't argue. Just kissed her forehead—tender, loving—and left to prepare.

Priya Malhotra arrived at 10:55 AM in a black Mercedes, driver holding the door for her like she was royalty. Which, in a sense, she was—Ankita had googled her. CEO of a pharmaceutical empire, forty-two, beautiful in that maintained way wealthy women achieved through expensive dermatologists and personal trainers.

She was wearing a business suit that probably cost fifty thousand rupees. Designer heels. Hair perfect. She looked like she was coming to a board meeting.

In a way, she was.

Ankita watched from her bedroom window as Samar greeted her at the entrance. Professional. Cordial. A handshake that lasted just slightly too long. Then they disappeared into the house, heading toward the guest wing.

She should have stayed in her room. Should have gone to the city like he'd suggested. Should have done literally anything except what she did next.

She followed them.

Not closely. Kept distance. Moved through the house like a ghost, silent and invisible. The staff saw her but said nothing, their faces carefully neutral.

The guest wing had its own entrance, its own living area. Luxurious but impersonal, like an expensive hotel suite. She could hear voices inside—muffled, professional sounding. They were talking. Actually talking. About what? Business? The weather?

Ankita found herself in an adjacent room. The walls were thick, but there was a bathroom that connected—old architecture, probably designed when the estate was built. The door on their side was closed but not locked.

She shouldn't. She absolutely shouldn't.

She opened the connecting door a crack.

They were still dressed. Still talking. Priya was seated on the sofa, Samar in a chair across from her, and they looked like they were having a perfectly normal conversation.

“—the regulatory approval should clear by March,” Priya was saying. “Your intervention with the minister helped considerably.”

“That’s what the arrangement is for.” Samar’s voice was business-casual. “Mutual benefit.”

“Speaking of which.” Priya stood, began unbuttoning her suit jacket. “Should we handle the other part of today’s agenda?”

“If you’re comfortable. There’s no obligation if you’d prefer to skip—”

“Don’t be silly. I scheduled three hours specifically for this.” She draped her jacket over the chair, began working on her blouse buttons. “Besides, you’re excellent at this part. Very... professional.”

Professional. She’d called him professional at sex.

Ankita’s hands were shaking. She should close the door. Should leave. Should—

Priya’s blouse came off. Expensive lingerie underneath—black lace, probably La Perla. The kind of thing you wore when you were going to be naked with someone but wanted to look powerful doing it.

Samar stood, began unbuttoning his own shirt. His movements were efficient, practiced. Not rushed, but not lingering either. This was routine for him.

"You seem tense today," Priya observed, stepping out of her skirt. "Everything alright?"

"Fine. Just busy week."

"Mmm." She moved closer to him, now in just lingerie and heels. "Well, hopefully this helps you relax."

She kissed him. Not passionate, not desperate—just a kiss. Like a greeting. Like something done because it was expected.

And Samar kissed her back the same way. Mechanical. Competent. Completely devoid of the intensity he brought to kissing Ankita.

That should have made it better. Should have proven his point—that this meant nothing to him, was just transaction.

It made it worse.

Because watching him touch another woman with that professional distance, that complete absence of feeling, somehow hurt more than if he'd been passionate. It proved this was routine. Normal. Just another task in his day between morning prayers and evening business calls.

Priya's hands went to his belt. He helped her, efficient. Soon they were both naked, and Ankita's brain couldn't process what she was seeing. This body she knew intimately—had worshipped, had submitted to, had believed belonged to her—being offered to someone else with the same casual ease he'd offer a handshake.

They moved to the bed. Priya lay back, Samar positioned himself over her, and—

Ankita made a sound. Small, choked, barely audible.

But Samar heard it.

His head turned toward the bathroom door. Toward where Ankita stood frozen, hand over her mouth, tears streaming down her face.

Their eyes met through the crack in the door.

His face held something—regret? Pity? Concern? Impossible to read.

He didn't stop. Didn't pull away from Priya. Just held Ankita's gaze while he entered the other woman, watched his addiction's face crumble while he fulfilled his contract obligations.

It was the cruelest kindness he'd ever shown her. Not hiding. Letting her see exactly what this was. Proving his point that it meant nothing while simultaneously destroying her with the visual reality of it.

Ankita ran.

She made it to her bathroom before the vomiting started. Violent, wrenching heaves that felt like her body was trying to

turn itself inside out. Nothing came up—she hadn't eaten in days—just bile and acid and the physical manifestation of psychological agony.

When her stomach was empty, the crying started. Not normal crying. Something else. Something that came from a place deeper than heartbreak, darker than betrayal.

She sounded like an animal. Like something dying. Keening noises she'd never made before, didn't know she was capable of making.

Her hands found her hair, started pulling. The pain was good. Was real. Was something to focus on besides the image of him inside someone else, his face calm and professional while Ankita's world ended.

She pulled harder. Felt hair coming out in clumps. Still not enough pain. Not enough to match what was happening inside.

Her nails went to her arms, scratching. Drawing blood. The red lines blooming on her skin were beautiful. Proof she could still feel physical sensation when everything else had gone numb.

"Ma'am?" A knock at the bathroom door. One of the household staff, voice worried. "Ma'am, are you alright? Should I call sir?"

"NO." Her voice came out wrong. Too loud, too sharp, edged with hysteria. "Don't—don't call him. Don't—"

She couldn't finish. Couldn't make coherent sentences. Could only rock back and forth on the bathroom floor, arms wrapped

around herself, bleeding from self-inflicted wounds, crying in a way that sounded like psychosis.

She didn't know how long she stayed there. Could have been minutes or hours. Time had stopped meaning anything.

Eventually, the door opened. She hadn't locked it—hadn't thought to.

Samar stood there, fully dressed again, his face carefully controlled. "Ankita."

"Get out." Her voice was raw from screaming or crying or both. "Get the fuck away from me."

"You watched." It wasn't a question. "I saw you."

"You SAW me and you KEPT GOING." She was laughing now, hysterical. "You looked right at me and you didn't stop. You just—you just—"

"I was proving a point." He knelt beside her, careful not to touch. "Showing you that it meant nothing. That you're the only one who matters. If it mattered, I would have stopped. Would have cared that you were watching."

"That's insane. That's—that's psychotic—"

"That's honest." He reached for her arms, saw the scratches, the blood. His face tightened. "What did you do?"

“What does it look like?” She pulled away from him. “I’m losing my fucking mind. That’s what I’m doing. Losing my mind watching the man I love fuck other women and call it business.”

“You were the one who taught me—”

“STOP SAYING THAT.” She was screaming now, properly screaming. “Stop throwing my mistakes back at me. I was seventeen and stupid and cruel and I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry for what I did to you. I’m sorry for Kunal. I’m sorry for all of it. Is this my punishment? Is that what this is? Cosmic revenge?”

“No.” He tried to pull her into his arms but she fought him, weak and ineffective, still fighting. “This isn’t revenge. This is just... reality. This is who I am. What I do. I didn’t bring you back to hurt you—”

“Then why? WHY bring me back if this was always going to destroy me?”

“Because I love you.” He said it desperately, like if he said it enough times it would make everything okay. “Because you’re my addiction and I’m yours and I thought—I thought you could handle this. Thought you understood—”

“I can’t handle this.” Her voice broke completely. “I can’t breathe. Can’t think. Can’t exist knowing you’re touching them. Being inside them. Giving them parts of yourself—”

“I give them nothing. Bodies aren’t parts of the self—you taught me that too. Remember? You fucked me while loving Kunal. You

gave me your body while giving him your heart. Said it was possible. Said it was evolved.”

“I was WRONG.” She was sobbing again, gasping for air between words. “I was wrong and selfish and stupid and now I’m paying for it. Paying for it by loving someone who learned my lessons too well.”

He finally managed to pull her against him. She fought for a few more seconds, then collapsed. Let him hold her while she cried against his chest, while her world fragmented into pieces too small to put back together.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered into her hair. “I’m sorry you’re hurting. But I can’t change this. Can’t be different than what you made me. This is who I am now.”

“Then I’ll go insane.” She said it calmly, certainly. “I’ll stay because I can’t leave. And I’ll lose my mind watching you live this life. And eventually there won’t be anything left of me except—” She didn’t know how to finish that sentence.

“Then we’ll be insane together,” he said. “You can go dark. Can become as broken as I am. Can descend into whatever darkness you need to survive this. I’ll love you through it. Love you sane or insane, whole or shattered. That’s the deal.”

It was the worst promise anyone had ever made her.

And she believed him completely.

Priya left at 2 PM, professional and satisfied. Ankita watched from the window again—this time not hiding, not caring if she was seen. Watched the woman who'd been naked with her man walk to her Mercedes with a slight smile, probably already thinking about her next meeting, her next business deal.

For Priya, this had been a productive afternoon. Regulatory approval secured. Contract obligations fulfilled. Profitable arrangement maintained.

For Ankita, this had been the day she started dying from the inside.

Samar found her at the window. Didn't apologize—they were past apologies. Just stood beside her, silent witness to her pain.

"How many more this week?" she asked, her voice empty.

"Two. Thursday and Friday."

"And next week?"

"Three."

"And the week after?"

"Ankita—"

"Tell me." She turned to look at him. "I want to know. Want to count them. Want to mark each one like a prisoner marking days on a wall."

“Four next week. Then a lighter month—only six for all of February.”

“Only six.” She laughed. “How generous. Only six times I get to feel this. Only six times I get to remember I’m not enough.”

“You ARE enough—”

“Then choose me.” She grabbed his shirt, desperate. “Choose only me. Walk away from the contracts. The power. All of it. Just choose me.”

“I can’t.”

“Won’t.”

“Can’t.” His face held genuine anguish. “The empire requires this. The protection. The network. Without these connections, everything collapses. And if everything collapses, I become powerless. And if I’m powerless—” He stopped.

“What? What happens if you’re powerless?”

“I can’t protect you.” He said it quietly. “Can’t keep you safe. Can’t maintain the world I’ve built where you’re untouchable. You saw the party—you saw the kind of people I control. The second I lose that control, you become vulnerable. Exposed. And I won’t—I CAN’T allow that.”

It was twisted logic. Protecting her by destroying her. Keeping her safe by breaking her heart.

But it was also true. She'd seen his world. Seen the violence, the power plays, the casual cruelty of people who operated outside normal rules. Without his protection, without his network, she would be just another woman who knew too much. A liability. A problem to be solved.

She was trapped. Not by him. By the life he'd built and the knowledge she carried and her own inability to conceive of existence without him.

"I hate you," she whispered.

"I know." He pulled her close. "Hate me. Go insane. Become dark. Whatever you need to do to survive this. I'll love you through all of it."

That night, he made love to her for hours. Gentle and devastating, whispering apologies his actions would never match, making her come until she cried from overstimulation and pleasure and pain all mixed together.

And somewhere in those hours, something in Ankita's mind shifted.

If she was going to survive this—if she was going to stay in this hell of her own making—she couldn't stay the person she was. That person was breaking. Fragmenting. Dying.

She needed to become someone else. Someone harder. Someone who could witness his contract obligations and not shatter.

Someone who could love a monster without being destroyed by it.

She needed to become monstrous herself.

The descent was beginning. And unlike Samar's transformation—which had taken years, had been gradual—hers would be rapid. Violent. A consciousness making a choice to survive by any means necessary.

Even if those means included losing herself entirely.

The calendar glowed on her phone: **Thursday 11 AM - Kavya Srinivasan - Farmhouse (guest wing) - Extended session**.

Ankita stared at it and felt something in her chest go quiet. Not peaceful—dead. The part of her that could feel normal human pain had died watching him with Priya.

What remained was something else.

Something that was learning to love darkness because light had become unbearable.

"I'm going to watch," she said into the darkness of their bedroom. "On Thursday. I'm going to watch again."

Beside her, Samar's breathing hitched. "Ankita, that's not—that will only hurt you more—"

"Good." Her voice was calm. Too calm. "I want it to hurt. Want to feel it fully. Want to stop running from it and just—" She turned

to look at him. "I want to accept this. Really accept it. And the only way I can do that is by witnessing it. Over and over. Until it stops meaning anything. Until I'm as numb to it as you are."

"That's not how this works—"

"How would you know? You've never been on this side of it. Never had to watch someone you love fuck other people. So let me figure out how to survive it my way."

He looked at her for a long moment, and something in his face held fear. Real fear. "You're going to destroy yourself."

"Maybe." She smiled, and it felt wrong on her face. "But at least I'll be destroyed on my own terms. By my own choices. That has to count for something."

He didn't argue further. Just held her tighter, like he could keep her from fragmenting through sheer physical proximity.

But they both knew the truth: she was already fragmenting. Had been since she'd seen that calendar. Since she'd understood what loving him actually meant.

The only question was what she'd become when the fragmentation was complete.

And whether that new thing would be recognizable as human.

Or as something else entirely.

CHAPTER 17: THE DARKENING

January 2025

Thursday came with the inevitability of execution day.

Ankita woke before dawn, before Samar, before the sun had any business rising over the hundred acres of buried secrets. She lay perfectly still in their bed, listening to him breathe, and felt nothing.

Not numbness—that implied something trying to break through. This was absence. A void where emotions used to live.

The scratches on her arms from two days ago were scabbing over. She touched them experimentally. Felt the pain, registered it intellectually, but didn't care. Pain was just sensation. Meant nothing.

Samar stirred beside her, reached for her automatically even in sleep. His arm came around her waist, pulled her close. Once, this gesture would have made her feel safe. Cherished. Now it just felt like chains wearing the disguise of affection.

"You're awake," he murmured against her neck. "What time is it?"

"Early."

"Can't sleep?"

“Don’t need to sleep.” Her voice was flat, factual. “Sleep is for people who aren’t dead inside.”

He pulled back, concerned. “Ankita—”

“Today’s Thursday.” She turned to face him, and her eyes were empty. “Kavya Srinivasan. Eleven AM. Guest wing. Extended session. I’ll be watching.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I want to.” She smiled, and it was a terrible thing. “I need to. Need to train myself to stop feeling this. And the only way to stop feeling is to feel it so much, so intensely, that something breaks. So I’m going to watch you fuck her. Going to stay for the whole thing. Going to memorize every detail until it stops hurting.”

“That’s not how trauma works—”

“How would you know?” She sat up, naked and perfect and completely hollow. “You’ve never processed trauma. You’ve just become it. So let me try my way.”

He looked at her—really looked—and she saw him seeing it. The change. The thing that was happening to her, had been happening since she’d discovered the calendar, had accelerated since watching Priya.

She was breaking. Not in the dramatic, fixable way. In the fundamental, irreversible way. The way that turned people into something else entirely.

"I'm losing you," he said quietly.

"No." She touched his face, gentle and empty. "You're keeping me. This is what keeping me looks like. This is the price of ownership."

The morning passed in surreal slow-motion. Samar tried to feed her breakfast—she ate mechanically, tasting nothing. He tried to talk to her—she responded with monosyllables. He tried to touch her—she let him, but it was like touching a doll. Present but not participating.

At 10:45, she positioned herself in the connecting bathroom again. This time she didn't hide. Opened both doors—the one to their side, the one to the guest suite. If Samar wanted to stop her, he'd have to physically remove her.

He didn't.

At 10:55, Kavya Srinivasan arrived.

Ankita watched through the open door as Samar greeted her. Kavya was younger than Priya—maybe thirty-five, tech CEO, beautiful in that understated way wealthy women achieved by pretending they didn't work at it. She was wearing jeans and a silk blouse, casual wealth.

"Samar." She hugged him, familiar. "Thanks for making time."

“Always.” He returned the hug with that professional warmth he did so well. “How’s the acquisition going?”

“Complicated. That’s why I need your help with the board member I mentioned.”

“I’ll handle it. That’s what today is about.”

They settled onto the sofa, and for the first fifteen minutes, it actually was a business meeting. They discussed strategy, timelines, who needed to be convinced of what. Kavya pulled out her tablet, showed him spreadsheets. Samar made notes.

Normal. Completely normal.

Then Kavya set aside the tablet.

“Well,” she said. “Should we address the other part?”

“Your choice,” Samar said. “We can skip if you prefer—”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Kavya stood, started unbuttoning her blouse. “I scheduled three hours. Might as well use them properly.”

She was more casual about undressing than Priya had been. No performance, no seduction. Just efficient removal of clothing like getting ready for a medical exam.

Samar stood too, began undressing with the same efficiency. Within minutes, they were both naked.

And Ankita watched. Didn't look away. Forced herself to see every detail. The way Kavya's body was different from hers—smaller breasts, wider hips, a C-section scar she didn't try to hide. The way Samar touched her—professional, adequate, nothing like the way he touched Ankita.

They moved to the bed. Kavya lay back, spreading herself with practiced ease. Samar positioned himself between her legs.

"Any particular requests today?" he asked, and his tone was like asking someone how they took their coffee.

"Just the usual. Whatever works."

"Alright."

He entered her. Simple. Clinical. Started moving with the kind of rhythm that was clearly designed for efficiency rather than pleasure.

Kavya made appropriate sounds. Not passionate, just—cooperative. Like she was helping him complete a task. Which, Ankita supposed, she was.

And Samar—Samar was barely present. His face held the same distant expression he had during boring conference calls. His body was performing, but his mind was clearly elsewhere.

It should have made it better. Should have proven his point—this means nothing, you're everything.

It made it infinitely worse.

Because this wasn't passion. This wasn't even desire. This was prostitution dressed in boardroom language. He was selling his body for influence, cooperation, power. And doing it with the same emotional investment he'd bring to signing contracts.

Ankita felt something in her chest tear. Not break—it had already broken watching Priya. This was deeper. This was the part of her that still believed in love, in connection, in sex as something sacred, dying its final death.

She started laughing.

Quietly at first, then louder. Hysterical, uncontrolled laughter that echoed through the bathroom and into the guest suite.

Samar's rhythm faltered. He looked toward the door, toward where Ankita stood in full view, laughing like she'd lost her mind.

Because she had.

"Don't stop on my account," she called out, still laughing. "Please. Continue. I'm learning so much. About business. About power. About what love looks like when it's honest."

Kavya had pulled away, was sitting up, alarmed. "There's someone—"

"That's Ankita," Samar said, not bothering to cover himself. "She's... she's watching."

“Your—” Kavya’s face went through several expressions. “Your girlfriend? The one you mentioned?”

“Yes.”

“And she’s—she just watches?”

“Apparently.” Samar was still looking at Ankita, his face holding something that might have been concern or regret or fear.

“Ankita, please. Go back to our room. You don’t need to—”

“Oh, I absolutely need to.” She walked fully into the guest suite, naked herself—hadn’t bothered dressing. Two naked women and one naked man, and the only thing more absurd than the situation was how completely Ankita’s mind had fractured to make it bearable. “I’m educating myself. Learning how the empire works. You were right, Samar. Bodies are just tools. Meaningless. So please. Continue using your tool. Don’t let me interrupt commerce.”

“This is—” Kavya was grabbing her clothes, clearly uncomfortable. “I should go.”

“No.” Ankita’s voice turned sharp. “Stay. Finish. You scheduled three hours. You’re getting three hours. I insist.”

“Ankita—” Samar started.

“FINISH.” She wasn’t laughing anymore. Was screaming.

“Fucking finish what you started. Show me how meaningless it is. Show me how it’s just business. SHOW ME.”

The room went silent except for her breathing, ragged and harsh.

Kavya looked at Samar, terrified. "I'm leaving. This is—this isn't what I signed up for."

"I understand." Samar was pulling on his pants, controlled despite everything. "I'll be in touch about the board member. Consider today's arrangement fulfilled regardless."

"Thank you." Kavya dressed faster than Ankita would have thought possible, practically running for the door. Before she left, she turned back. "Get her help. Seriously. Professional help. This isn't—" She stopped, shook her head, left.

Then it was just Samar and Ankita in the guest suite, both half-naked, surrounded by the wreckage of what had just happened.

"Well," Ankita said conversationally. "That went well. Very educational. I learned that if you traumatize the merchandise, they leave without completing the transaction. Noted for future reference."

"Stop." Samar moved toward her. "Stop talking like this. You're not—you're breaking—"

"Breaking?" She laughed again, brittle. "I'm already broken. Have been since I saw that fucking calendar. This—" She gestured around the room. "This is just accepting it. Embracing it. Becoming what I need to become to survive loving you."

“What you need to become is someone who leaves. Someone who chooses herself over this insanity.”

“Can’t leave.” She said it simply. “Tried. Can’t breathe without you. Literally can’t function. So if leaving isn’t an option, adaptation is. And I’m adapting. Becoming darker. Harder. Whatever I need to be to witness your life and not die from it.”

He pulled her against him, and she let him, limp and unresisting. “I don’t want you dark. Don’t want you hard. I want you whole.”

“Too late. You should have thought of that before—” She stopped. Before what? Before bringing her back? Before building an empire on sex and violence? Before being exactly what she’d made him? “Before everything.”

The next days were a descent into something that had no name.

Ankita stopped eating entirely. Not dramatically—just forgot. Food seemed irrelevant to a body that was clearly just housing, just transportation for a consciousness that was fracturing into pieces.

Samar tried to force her. Would sit with her at meals, bring food to her lips, plead with her to swallow. She’d comply sometimes, mechanically, just to make him stop talking.

She stopped sleeping too. Would lie awake all night watching him sleep, studying his face, trying to find the boy from the library in the man beside her. Couldn’t find him. That boy was

dead. This was something else. Something she'd helped create and now had to live with.

During the day, she wandered the farmhouse like a ghost. The staff watched her with worried eyes but didn't know how to help. She'd lost weight she couldn't afford to lose. Her clothes hung loose. Her eyes had developed the kind of hollow look you saw in war photographs.

On Friday, there was another appointment. **Meera Chopra - Farmhouse - Overnight**.

Ankita watched that one too. All of it. Watched them have dinner first—actual dinner, like a date—then move to the bedroom. Watched Samar fuck this one with slightly more engagement, probably because Meera was younger, more attractive, required more convincing of his... what? Attraction? Interest?

Watched the woman stay overnight. Sleep in the guest wing. Wake up to breakfast that Samar's staff prepared.

Watched the intimacy of morning after, even though it was fake intimacy, professional intimacy, the kind you performed because the role required it.

And felt nothing. The numbness was complete now. She could watch him inside someone else and feel the same distant curiosity she'd feel watching a nature documentary. Interesting. Clinical. Ultimately meaningless.

Samar was terrified. She could see it in his face every time he looked at her. He'd created this—had insisted she accept his

lifestyle, had explained why it was necessary—but now that she was accepting it, actually adapting to it, he was horrified by what she was becoming.

“Talk to me,” he begged one night after Meera had left. “Scream at me. Hit me. Do something besides this—this emptiness.”

“What do you want me to say?” Her voice was distant, intellectual. “That I’m hurt? We’ve established that. That I hate this? Obviously. But hating it doesn’t change it. So I’m learning to exist within it. Isn’t that what you wanted? For me to accept reality?”

“Not like this. Not by destroying yourself.”

“But this is the only way to accept it. To destroy the part of me that can’t handle it and build something new. Something harder. Something that can love you without dying from it.”

“That’s not love—”

“Then what is it?” She looked at him with dead eyes. “Tell me. What do you call staying with someone who destroys you daily? Who fucks other women and calls it business? Who’s honest about never changing? If that’s not love, what is it?”

He had no answer.

The transformation accelerated after that. Ankita stopped being the woman who cried, who hurt, who felt normal human emotions about betrayal and heartbreak.

She became something else.

She started attending his extreme sports. Found out about them accidentally—overheard him on a phone call about a wingsuit jump in Bir Billing.

“I’m coming,” she announced.

“Absolutely not—”

“I’m coming or I’m following you. Choose.”

So she came. Watched him throw himself off a mountain wearing a suit that turned him into a flying squirrel, watched him navigate through the air at speeds that should have killed him, watched him land with adrenaline-bright eyes and a smile that suggested he’d just had better sex than any human could provide.

“You’re courting death,” she observed calmly.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because feeling anything is better than feeling nothing. Because when I’m falling, I’m alive. Really alive. Not just existing.”

"I understand that." She did. Completely. "Can I try?"

"No. Absolutely not. It's dangerous—"

"And watching you fuck other women isn't dangerous? At least this way if I die, it'll be quick."

He stared at her, seeing the truth: she meant it. She'd reached a place where death looked preferable to the life she was living. Not because she wanted to die, but because she wanted to feel something, anything, besides the hollow emptiness that had taken residence in her chest.

"One tandem jump," he conceded finally. "With an instructor. Highly controlled."

"Deal."

The jump was transcendent. Falling through air at terminal velocity, the ground rushing up, every cell in her body screaming that this was wrong, this was death, this was the end—

And then the parachute opening. Floating. The quiet after the rush. The sense of having survived something that should have killed her.

She landed laughing. Really laughing, not the hysterical breakdown kind. Genuine amusement at the absurdity of being alive.

"Again," she told Samar. "I want to do it again."

“That’s not—”

“I’m doing it again. With or without you. Just like everything else in this relationship.”

So she did. Became addicted to the falling, the rush, the temporary obliteration of thought that came with jumping out of planes. Started training for solo jumps. Spent hours in the wind tunnel, learning to control her body in freefall.

The staff was alarmed. His sister called, worried. His mother cried. Everyone could see she was destroying herself, just in a different way than starving or cutting.

But Samar couldn’t stop her. Because she’d learned from him: the only way to survive unbearable reality was to court death so consistently that regular life felt safe by comparison.

She started watching all his appointments. Not from the bathroom—openly. Would sit in the corner of the guest suite in a chair she’d had brought in specifically for this purpose. Would watch the entire encounter with the detached interest of a researcher studying animal behavior.

Some of the women were uncomfortable with her presence. Would leave without completing the arrangement. Others didn’t care—figured whatever dynamic she and Samar had was their business.

One woman—Rhea Sharma, investment banker, forty, beautiful in a severe way—actually spoke to her.

“You know you don’t have to do this to yourself,” Rhea said, pulling on her clothes after. Samar had left the room to take a call, leaving them alone. “This watching. This self-torture.”

“It’s not torture. It’s education.”

“It’s psychological self-harm. And I say this as someone actively participating in the system that’s destroying you: leave him. You clearly love him, but love shouldn’t look like this.”

“What should it look like?” Ankita was genuinely curious.

“I don’t know. But not this. Not whatever Stockholm syndrome, trauma bond thing you two have going. He’s a good man in his way—fair, honorable by his own code. But he’s also damaged beyond repair. And he’s damaging you by making you exist in his broken world.”

“What if I’m already just as damaged? What if I can’t exist anywhere else?”

Rhea looked at her with something like pity. “Then you’re both lost. And I’m sorry. Because you seem like you were probably a good person before—” She gestured vaguely. “Before whatever this became.”

After Rhea left, Ankita sat in the empty guest suite and thought about that. Before. When was before? Before Samar? Before coming back? Before the original destruction ten years ago?

She couldn't remember being whole. Couldn't remember who she'd been before she'd met a sixteen-year-old boy in a library and decided he was worth corrupting.

Maybe she'd always been broken. Maybe Samar had just been the mirror showing her what she actually was underneath the performance of normalcy.

One night in early February, after watching him with someone particularly young and beautiful—a film actress who giggled through the entire encounter—Ankita did something new.

When the woman left, when Samar came to find her, expecting the usual empty acceptance, she pushed him onto their bed and fucked him with a violence that shocked them both.

Not making love. Not even sex. Just raw, aggressive claiming. Biting hard enough to draw blood. Scratching deep enough to leave marks. Riding him like she was trying to erase every other woman through sheer physical dominance.

“Ankita—” He tried to slow her down, gentle her, but she wouldn't allow it.

“Shut up. This is mine. You're mine. I don't care who else you fuck—this, us, this is MINE.”

She came with something that was half orgasm, half scream of rage. And kept going. Again. Again. Pushing them both past

pleasure into something that hurt, that felt like punishment and reclamation simultaneously.

By the time they finished—both of them marked, bleeding, exhausted—something had shifted.

“I’m not leaving,” she said into the darkness. “Ever. I’m staying and I’m going dark with you. Darker than you, maybe. Because if I’m going to be destroyed, I’m going to choose how. On my terms. In my way.”

“What does that mean?” His voice was wary.

“It means I’m done being the victim. Done being the woman who cries while you live your life. I’m going to become—” She searched for words. “Whatever I need to become. However dark I need to go. I’m going to match you. Meet you in the darkness. And we’re going to destroy each other properly. Completely. Until there’s nothing left but—”

“What?”

“I don’t know. But it’ll be honest. More honest than love. More real than happiness. It’ll be truth.”

He pulled her closer, and his hands were shaking. “You’re scaring me.”

“Good.” She kissed him, tasting blood—his or hers, impossible to tell. “You should be scared. Because the thing you’re creating—the thing I’m becoming—is going to be worse than anything

you've ever done. And you're going to love it. Love me. Love us. Even as we both burn."

"This isn't—we can still stop this. I can change—"

"Liar. You can't change and you won't. And I don't want you to anymore. I want you exactly as you are. Dark and damaged and broken beyond repair. Because that's what I am too. What I've always been. I just finally stopped pretending otherwise."

She meant it. Every word. The performance of normalcy was over. The pretense that she could be healthy, whole, sane—gone. She was descending into the same darkness Samar inhabited. And she was going to descend faster, harder, more completely than he could imagine.

Because women, when they break, don't break clean. They shatter. They fragment. They become something new and terrible and unstoppable.

And Ankita was shattering.

The pieces that remained were learning to cut.

CHAPTER 18: DIVINE ORCHESTRATION

February 2025

She stopped being Ankita somewhere between the fifteenth skydive and the night she watched him fuck three women consecutively and felt nothing but clinical curiosity about endurance limits.

The woman who'd walked into his penthouse in December—broken but still human, damaged but still capable of normal emotion—had died incrementally. Cell by cell. Breath by breath. Replaced by something that wore her face but contained none of her mercy.

The farmhouse staff noticed first. The way she moved through rooms like a predator now instead of a ghost. The way her eyes had gone from empty to sharp, calculating, cruel in their assessment. The way she'd stopped pretending kindness.

“Ma'am seems different,” one butler whispered to another, not knowing she could hear.

“Ma'am seems dangerous,” the other corrected.

They were both right.

Third Person Limited - Ankita

The mirror showed her a stranger. She'd lost fifteen kilos she couldn't afford to lose. Her body was angles and edges now, carved down to something essential and vicious. The scratches on her arms had become scars—deliberate ones, patterns she'd etched during moments when the numbness felt too complete and she needed proof she could still bleed.

Her eyes were the worst part. They looked like Samar's eyes now. Dead but aware. Present but absent. The eyes of someone who'd transcended normal human response to pain and found something darker on the other side.

She was beautiful in a terrible way. Like a knife was beautiful. Like poison was beautiful. Functional destruction disguised as aesthetic.

The calendar on her phone showed today's appointments: **11 AM - Priya Malhotra. 3 PM - Anjali Reddy. 8 PM - Kavya Srinivasan**.

Three women. Three separate encounters. A record day even for Samar's demanding schedule.

Old Ankita would have cried. Would have broken down. Would have begged him to choose her instead.

New Ankita felt her mouth curve into something approximating a smile. Three women meant three opportunities to practice the thing she'd been perfecting: complete dissociation. The ability to watch him inside someone else and feel less emotion than she'd feel watching paint dry.

She'd become very good at it.

This is what you made me, she thought, not to Samar but to her younger self. The seventeen-year-old girl who'd thought she was sophisticated, evolved, capable of loving multiple people simultaneously. *This is your lesson, perfected. Are you proud?*

The girl she'd been would have been horrified. Good. That girl deserved horror. Deserved to see what her philosophy looked like when someone else executed it flawlessly and forced her to witness.

Samar found her at the mirror, studying her own transformation with detached interest.

"You're getting too thin," he said quietly. Same concern he'd voiced a hundred times. Same useless observation.

"I'm getting appropriately sized for my new role," she corrected. "Queens of darkness don't need flesh. Just bones and will."

"Ankita—"

"That's not my name anymore." She turned to face him. "That was the name of someone who existed before. Someone who believed in things like monogamy and meaning and love that didn't destroy. She's dead. I'm something else now."

"What are you?" He looked genuinely afraid of the answer.

"Yours." She moved closer, her movements fluid and predatory. "Completely, irrevocably yours. The perfect consort for a king

who rules through violence and sex. I've adapted. Evolved. Become exactly what this relationship requires."

"This isn't what I wanted—"

"Liar." Her smile was sharp. "This is exactly what you wanted. Someone who could accept all of you without breaking. Well, congratulations. I broke. And on the other side of breaking is this." She gestured to herself. "Someone who can watch you fuck an entire city and feel nothing but professional interest in your technique."

He reached for her and she let him pull her close, but her body remained rigid, unyielding. Not pulling away but not surrendering either. A thing being held, not a person being embraced.

"I'm losing you," he whispered against her hair.

"You already lost me. Months ago. What you have now is something new. Something you created. Something that loves you the way fire loves oxygen—by consuming everything until nothing remains but ash."

The eleven AM appointment arrived on schedule. Priya Malhotra, pharmaceutical CEO, the first woman Ankita had watched Samar fuck. Back for her quarterly arrangement.

Ankita sat in her observation chair—she'd stopped hiding, stopped pretending this wasn't her life now—and watched with the clinical detachment of a scientist recording data.

Priya seemed uncomfortable with her presence. "Does she have to—"

"Yes," Samar said simply. "It's part of the arrangement now. If that's a problem—"

"It's fine." Priya started undressing, avoiding Ankita's gaze. "Just... unusual."

"Everything about this is unusual," Ankita offered conversationally. "But we're all adapting, aren't we? You adapt by pretending this is business. He adapts by believing it is business. I adapt by watching and cataloging and slowly becoming something that can exist in this reality without dying from it."

"You're very—" Priya struggled for words. "Direct."

"I'm very broken. There's a difference." Ankita tilted her head, studying the other woman with interest. "Do you ever think about what this does to you? Sleeping with someone for professional advancement? Does it damage you the way watching it damages me? Or have you found a way to separate yourself from the action entirely?"

"I don't—I don't think about it that deeply."

“You should. Compartmentalization only works until it doesn’t. Until one day you wake up and realize you’ve sold so many pieces of yourself that there’s nothing left that wasn’t purchased.” Ankita’s smile was sympathetic and cruel simultaneously. “But please, continue. I’m genuinely interested in your technique. He says you’re very professional. I want to see what professional looks like.”

Priya looked at Samar desperately. “I can’t do this with her talking. I’m sorry. I just—”

“It’s fine.” Samar was already reaching for his shirt, pulling it back on. “We’ll reschedule. Consider today’s arrangement fulfilled regardless.”

After Priya left—practically running, clearly traumatized—Samar turned to Ankita with something that looked like anger and sorrow mixed together.

“You’re sabotaging this on purpose.”

“I’m participating honestly. There’s a difference.” She stood, stretched like a cat. “I thought you valued honesty. I thought that was the whole point of this—being honest about desire, about transaction, about what bodies mean. So I’m being honest. Asking questions. Making observations. If that makes your contract partners uncomfortable, maybe the arrangement isn’t as clean and transactional as you pretend.”

“This isn’t about honesty. This is about you destroying yourself and taking me down with you.”

“Yes.” She said it simply. “That’s exactly what this is about. Mutual destruction. You destroyed me first, slowly, by making me love you while watching you fuck a roster of women. Now I’m destroying you back by becoming something you can’t recognize. Something that makes your carefully constructed system uncomfortable. We’re destroying each other, Samar. That’s what love looks like for people like us.”

“We can stop—”

“We can’t. You taught me that. Can’t change, can’t be different, can’t choose anything except this slow consumption of each other until there’s nothing left.” She moved close enough to kiss him but didn’t. Just stood there, breathing the same air, existing in the tiny space between contact and separation. “The question is: which one of us burns out first?”

The three PM appointment cancelled. Word had apparently spread about Ankita’s observation sessions. The eight PM appointment requested video call instead of in-person, which Samar declined.

By nightfall, his entire day’s schedule had collapsed.

He found her on the terrace—their terrace, where everything important happened—smoking. She’d started that too. Not chain-smoking like him, just enough to have something to do with her hands while she stared at nothing.

“You’re destroying my network,” he said without preamble.

"I'm destroying the illusion that any of this is sustainable." She didn't look at him, just kept staring at the darkness beyond the property. "Your empire is built on performance. Everyone performing their roles—you performing detachment, the women performing professionalism, me performing acceptance. But I stopped performing. And when one person stops, the whole theater collapses."

"So what—you want me to choose? You want me to walk away from the contracts, the connections, everything I've built?"

"I want you to be honest about what you've built." She finally turned to face him. "You didn't build an empire. You built a prison. For both of us. You're trapped by the system you created, and I'm trapped by loving you too much to leave. We're both prisoners pretending to be royalty."

"That's not—"

"It is." Her voice was flat, certain. "And the beautiful part—the truly cosmic joke—is that I did this. I created you. The boy in the library was innocent, whole, capable of normal love. I corrupted him. Taught him that bodies and hearts were separate, that you could love one person while fucking others, that transaction could disguise itself as connection. And he learned so well that he perfected it. Built an entire empire on my lesson. And now I have to live in the empire I made possible."

She started laughing. Not hysterical this time—genuine amusement at the cosmic irony.

“Do you know what the worst part is? The absolutely funniest fucking part?” She was smiling now, wide and manic. “I can’t even be angry. Because this is fair. This is justice. I did to you and Kunal exactly what you’re doing to me now. Made you watch me with someone else while claiming love. Made you accept crumbs of affection while giving my body elsewhere. I taught you this pain. And now I’m drowning in it. That’s not revenge—that’s karma. That’s the universe having a fucking sense of humor.”

Samar stared at her, and something in his face shifted. Recognition. Understanding. Horror.

“You’ve figured it out,” he said quietly.

“Figured what out?”

“That this was always going to happen. That the moment you walked into that library ten years ago and chose me, chose to corrupt me, chose to teach me your lessons—this became inevitable. You created your own punishment. Built it so thoroughly that even I didn’t realize I was executing it.”

“You didn’t plan this?” Her voice held genuine curiosity. “The bringing me back, the making me love you, the forcing me to watch—none of it was revenge?”

“No.” He moved closer, and his face held something she’d never seen before. “I just loved you. Genuinely, completely loved you. Wanted you back in my life because you’re the only thing that makes me feel human. But the universe—” He laughed, and it was the sound of someone understanding a joke told at their

own expense. “The universe planned it. Used me as the instrument. Made me into exactly the thing that would destroy you the same way you destroyed me.”

“Divine orchestration,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

They stood together in the darkness, two people who'd destroyed each other in perfect symmetry, and understood finally that none of it had been choice. It had been inevitability. Cosmic justice executing itself through human vessels too damaged to recognize they were just playing assigned roles.

****Third Person Limited - Samar****

Hours later, alone in his study while Ankita slept—or pretended to sleep, he could never tell anymore—Samar spoke to the empty room. To God. To the universe. To himself.

“I understand now,” he said quietly. “What I am. What she is. What we're doing to each other.”

He lit a cigarette, watched the smoke curl toward the ceiling, and continued.

“She thinks she created me. That the boy in the library was innocent and she corrupted him. But that's not quite right. The boy in the library was always going to become this. Was always

going to find darkness. She was just the catalyst. The specific poison that activated latent venom.”

He pulled out the calendar, looked at the appointments that no longer existed. Contracts dissolving because his perfect system had been disrupted by the one variable he couldn’t control: her refusal to keep performing.

“I built an empire on the lesson she taught me—that bodies and hearts are separate, that sex is transaction, that you can love one person while fucking others. I thought I was being honest. Evolved. Better than the hypocritical masses who pretend monogamy while cheating in secret.”

He laughed softly. “But I was just replicating my trauma. Repeating the pattern. Becoming the thing that hurt me and calling it strength. Calling it power. Calling it divine purpose.”

The smoke from his cigarette created patterns in the air. He watched them form and dissolve, form and dissolve.

“And she came back. Walked right back into my life like the universe sending me a gift. A chance to heal? To reconcile? No. A chance to destroy her the same way she destroyed me. Not intentionally—never intentionally—but inevitably. Because I am what I am. What she made me. What I chose to become.”

His phone showed a notification: another contract cancelling. Another piece of his carefully constructed empire crumbling because one woman had stopped pretending everything was fine.

“The empire is failing. Not because of external pressure. Because of internal truth. She’s forcing honesty into a system built on beautiful lies. And the system can’t survive honesty.”

He closed his eyes, feeling the weight of understanding settle over him.

“This is dharma. This is karma. This is the rhythm the universe plays—you hurt someone, you get hurt the same way, and the cycle continues until someone breaks it or everyone involved is destroyed. We’re choosing destruction. Both of us. We’re leaning into it, embracing it, becoming it.”

Opening his eyes, he stared at his own reflection in the darkened window. Saw what Ankita saw: a beautiful monster. A man who’d transcended conventional morality and called it enlightenment when it was just damage.

“The rhythm you pick is the rhythm on which you play the music of your life,” he said to his reflection. “I picked violence and transaction and controlled chaos. Thought I was composing a symphony. But it was just noise. Discordant, painful noise that sounded like power because I was too broken to recognize harmony.”

He thought about the boy in the library. The one who’d loved easily, believed in people, saw beauty in stars and meaning in connection. That boy had died in a computer lab, or maybe in Gurgaon, or maybe in the slow months after Ankita had disappeared the first time.

"I don't regret his death. He was too soft for this world. Too naive. Too—" He struggled for words. "Too human. What I became after—this thing that kills and fucks and builds empires—is better suited for survival. But better suited for survival isn't the same as better. Just more adapted to darkness."

The house was silent around him. A hundred acres of buried secrets. A staff that served him with devotion born from salvation and fear. A woman upstairs who loved him past sanity and was descending into his darkness with frightening speed.

"She's going darker than I ever did," he said wonderingly. "Faster. More completely. Because women, when they break, don't become half-measures. They become totality. She's becoming something worse than me. Something I created by being exactly what she made me."

He laughed again, and this time it was the laugh of someone who'd understood the cosmic joke completely and realized he was the punchline.

"We're destroying each other. Deliberately. Consciously. With full awareness that this is unsustainable and unhealthy and probably going to kill both of us—emotionally if not physically. And we can't stop. Won't stop. Because this is what love looks like for people who learned it wrong. For people who thought pain and passion were the same thing. For people who mistook consumption for connection."

Standing, he walked to the window, looked out over the property. Somewhere on those hundred acres were bodies he'd

buried. Evidence he'd destroyed. Proof of every violent thing he'd become.

"I tell myself it's divine purpose. That I'm Radhe Govinda's instrument. That the violence serves justice. And maybe it does. Maybe I am serving something larger than myself. But that doesn't make it less destructive. Doesn't make me less broken. Just makes the breaking meaningful instead of random."

He thought about tomorrow. About the appointments that would need to be rescheduled or cancelled permanently. About the empire that was crumbling because he'd allowed the one person who could destroy it to see inside. About the woman upstairs who was becoming something he couldn't control and wasn't sure he wanted to.

"The rhythm you pick is the rhythm on which you play the music of your life," he repeated. "I picked darkness. She picked chaos disguised as sophistication. And together—" He smiled at his reflection. "Together we're playing a symphony in the key of mutual destruction. It's beautiful in its way. Terrible and perfect and inevitable."

"And the universe watches and laughs because this is exactly what we deserve. Both of us. Every moment of pain, every fragment of sanity lost, every piece of ourselves we sacrifice to this thing we call love—deserved. Earned. Cosmic justice executing itself through our own choices."

He finished his cigarette, lit another immediately. The calendar glowed on his phone, empty now except for one entry:

****Tomorrow, All Day - Ankita - Everywhere - Forever****

He'd done it without thinking. Cleared everything else. Left only her. Because what was the point of maintaining an empire if the one person he'd built it for was being destroyed by its existence?

"I'm letting it fall," he said to the empty room. To God. To the ghost of the boy he'd been. "The contracts, the network, the carefully constructed system of power through transaction—letting all of it collapse. Not because she asked. Because it's killing her. And if I have to choose between the empire and her—"

He stopped, surprised by his own clarity.

"I choose her. I choose mutual destruction over successful empire. I choose watching us both burn over watching her burn alone. That's not noble. That's not romantic. That's just—" He searched for the word. "True. The only true thing left."

The smoke from his cigarette created patterns that looked almost like letters, like the universe writing messages he couldn't quite read.

"The rhythm you pick is the rhythm on which you play the music of your life. We picked wrong. Both of us. Her at seventeen, me at sixteen. Every choice since has been playing out that original rhythm. But maybe—" He paused, considering. "Maybe you can change rhythms midway. Maybe you can stop the discordant music and start something new. Not harmonious—we're too broken for harmony. But different. Quieter. Less violent."

He thought about it for a long moment, then laughed.

“No. We can’t change. That’s the point. That’s the cosmic joke. We’re locked into this rhythm forever. Playing it until it destroys us both. And the beautiful part—the part that makes this perfect instead of just tragic—is that we know it. We see it clearly. And we’re choosing it anyway.”

“Because that’s what love is for people like us. Not healing. Not growth. Not becoming better. Just—recognition. Seeing each other completely, understanding exactly what we’re doing to each other, and saying yes. Yes to the pain. Yes to the destruction. Yes to burning together rather than existing apart.”

He turned from the window, walked toward the door, toward the stairs, toward the woman who was destroying him by letting him destroy her.

“Divine orchestration,” he whispered. “The universe conducting a symphony of mutual destruction and calling it justice. Using us as instruments. Playing the exact rhythm we picked at seventeen and sixteen. Making us dance to music we composed in ignorance and now execute with full awareness.”

“We’re fucked. Both of us. Completely, irrevocably fucked. And there’s something beautiful about that. Something honest. We’re not pretending anymore. Not performing. Not lying to ourselves about what this is.”

“This is payment. This is karma. This is the price of hurting people who loved you. And the payment is being hurt by

someone you love. Forever. In perfect symmetry. Until there's nothing left but—"

He stopped at their bedroom door.

Inside, Ankita wasn't sleeping. Was sitting up in bed, staring at nothing with those dead-alive eyes that mirrored his own.

"I heard you," she said quietly. "Talking to yourself. Or to God. Hard to tell the difference with you."

"What did you hear?"

"That we're fucked. That this is karma. That we picked our rhythm and now we're stuck with it." She smiled, terrible and beautiful. "That we're destroying each other and calling it love because we don't know any other music."

"Yes."

"Good." She held out her hand. "Then come to bed. Come destroy me some more. Come let me destroy you. Come dance this sick fucking dance until one of us stops moving."

He took her hand. Lay beside her in the darkness. Two broken people who'd found each other across time and space and damage. Two instruments playing the universe's cruelest symphony.

"The rhythm you pick," she whispered against his shoulder, "is the rhythm on which you play the music of your life."

“Yes.”

“We picked wrong.”

“Yes.”

“And now we pay.”

“Yes.”

They held each other in the darkness, and somewhere above them—or inside them, or around them, impossible to tell—the universe watched and smiled and kept conducting. Kept playing them like instruments. Kept orchestrating their destruction with perfect, terrible precision.

Because that’s what happened to people who hurt each other and called it love.

They got exactly what they deserved.

Forever.

In perfect, agonizing rhythm.

The music played on.

The dancers kept dancing.

And the night—the night after which they’d never sleep—continued.

Eternal.

Inevitable.

Divine.

****THE END - “She Is The Night After I Never Slept”****

A novel of karma, corruption, and cosmic justice