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LAVANYA LAKSHMI

Leave and Come Back

Lavanya Lakshmi



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Dedication

To my mother, Nalini, and my father, Lakshmi Narasimhan. Everything is not big enough of a word for what you've given me. I love you both.

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•—•
Veena and Ashok Iyer

REQUEST THE PLEASURE OF YOUR PRESENCE
FOR THE MARRIAGE OF THEIR DAUGHTER,

Dr. Geeta Iyer, Md Facs
to
Rishi Yashvardan Chopra,

SON OF

Ravi and Manjula Chopra



ROKA/NICHYATHARTHAM

TEN O'CLOCK A.M. ON THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY
VENUE: SRI BALAJI TEMPLE, RIDGERIVER NJ

ENGAGEMENT CELEBRATION

ONE O'CLOCK P.M. ON THE FIFTEENTH OF JULY
VENUE: IYER RESIDENCE, ADDISON NJ

MEHNDI & SUMANGALI PRARTHNAI

FOUR O'CLOCK P.M. ON THE TWENTY-SIXTH OF JULY
IYER RESIDENCE, ADDISON NJ





SANGEET

*SEVEN O'CLOCK P.M. ON THE
TWENTY-SEVENTH OF JULY*
DIAMOND BALLROOM, CHARIOTT JEWEL
HOTEL & GROUNDS, RIDGERIVER NJ

BARAAT / MAPPILLAI ARRIVAL

EIGHT O'CLOCK A.M. ON THE TWENTY-EIGHTH OF JULY
SOUTH ENTRANCE, CHARIOTT JEWEL HOTEL
& GROUNDS, RIDGERIVER NJ

CEREMONY

NINE O'CLOCK A.M. ON THE TWENTY-EIGHTH OF JULY
DIAMOND BALLROOM, CHARIOTT JEWEL
HOTEL & GROUNDS, RIDGERIVER NJ
LUNCH TO FOLLOW.

COCKTAIL HOUR

SIX O'CLOCK P.M. ON THE TWENTY-EIGHTH OF JULY
GEM GARDEN, CHARIOTT JEWEL HOTEL &
GROUNDS, RIDGERIVER NJ

RECEPTION

SEVEN O'CLOCK P.M. ON THE TWENTY-EIGHTH OF JULY
DIAMOND BALLROOM,
CHARIOTT JEWEL HOTEL & GROUNDS, Ridgeriver NJ
DINNER AND DANCING TO FOLLOW.

FAREWELL BRUNCH

ELEVEN O'CLOCK A.M. ON THE TWENTY-NINTH OF JULY
VENUE: IYER RESIDENCE, Addison NJ



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Prologue

There's nothing the universe enjoys more than upending the plans of a carefully constructed life. Take Simran. She has always thought of herself like the heroines in her favorite Bollywood films—strong-willed, tenderhearted, and one hell of a dancer. She just never imagined that she'd act like one. But here she is, running through an airport to stop the man she's hopelessly fallen for from getting on his flight. Her lucent, parrot-green sari streams behind her like a windblown flag as she rushes past bay after bay of check-in counters, sidestepping wayward carry-ons and dodging confused travelers, head craned to spot that familiar crown of dark hair.

He's not here. She might have already lost him forever.

In any other situation, she would roll her eyes at herself for thinking in dramatic declarations like a movie character. But it's *him*. He's the only person who can make her throw away that marrow-deep instinct for isolated self-protection. She doesn't know how it all got so turned around, but she knows it's her fault and she can't let her family be the end of them.

Finally, the train of trolleys in her way clears and she rushes forward to the security check area. There are hundreds of people standing in the snaking line, with more joining every moment, and, crucially, more stepping through the body scanners and disappearing from her sight.

Please be here, she thinks. Don't become another person it hurts to remember.

Her gaze moves frantically over the people clustered in front of her: stone-faced men in pristine corporate uniforms, teenagers wearing jeans so ripped they're practically disintegrating, couples twinning in luxury-brand monogrammed sweat suits. So many anonymous bodies shifting and crouching and bending and stretching and shuffling, until, smack-dab in the center of the line—

He appears, his silhouette like a city skyline, a head taller than everyone around him. In that movie she's acting out, a touching acoustic version of

the theme song plays in the background and every single thing except the two of them fades away.

“Leo!” she calls.

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1.

First kisses, while important, get too much credit; it's second kisses that are the real magic. First kisses get all the glory, the dizzying delight of asking: Will they or won't they?

Last night, Simran and Leo answered that question. Under a sky streaked purple by the fading sun, no noise except for the slow glide of cars and murmurs of people walking home, what started as a hug good night slipped into something soft and clinging. His lips dragged over her cheek so slowly; she pressed her fingertips into his waist as if it could speed up time. Kissing him felt like she'd breached the surface of some deep blue body of water after having held her breath for so, so long.

It replays in Simran's mind now as she lets herself into the studio she rents weekly. Shafts of morning sunlight stream into the airy space where, in an hour, she'll hold a recital for her preschool Bharatnatyam-Bollywood fusion dance class. She imagines the teasing exclamations of "Finally!" from their friends when they find out about her and Leo. It had been months, maybe even years, of this playful push and pull between them and of her insisting to anyone who pointed it out that they were just friends. Though, in the back of her mind, she knew that people who *actually* were just friends rarely needed to say it out loud. Then, on an otherwise unmemorable day, a handful of weeks ago, everything had shifted. She'd been reading on a park bench, waiting for Leo to finish work before they went to a movie. When he walked up to her, his eyes had lingered over her shoulders, bare in a strapless dress, and the jolt down her spine made her realize she'd worn the dress hoping he'd do just that. From that moment on, being the object of Leo Bridgers's attention had felt like standing under the midday sun in August: scorching, direct, on the crest of unbearable.

Last night, she'd practically floated up to her apartment after she and Leo had parted ways, but this morning, she's back to longing. The time between a first kiss and a second one is a liminal space. It happened once, but will it happen again? First kisses are about acknowledging. Second kisses are about choosing.

She walks around, getting the space ready: connecting her phone into the sound system and testing it, laying out the colorful dupattas her students will tie over their clothes, and marking a makeshift stage with painter's tape. She brings out folding chairs from the storage closet and arranges them into rows, pausing when she sees a familiar pair of broad shoulders in the window. Her stomach swoops as the door opens and he enters the studio.

Leo.

"Hey," he says, striding in on long legs. His wavy brown hair is messy, and he rakes a hand through it to push it off his forehead, but like always, a thick shock flops forward.

"Hi," she says. "Going to work?"

"Well, home first," he says, walking over and helping her with the chairs, taking two at a time. "I think this pushes the limits of business casual." His threadbare Raptors T-shirt clings to the defined curves of his upper arms. He plays pickup basketball with his friends at a court nearby at some ungodly hour and always pops in to say hi to her on his way home. But today, there's a new energy between them, so height-ened it's almost tangible. It reminds her of listening to the radio in the car as a kid, hoping, hoping, hoping that the next song would be her favorite.

Leo holds up his palm and points to it. She squints to read the words "Happy Birthday" scrawled smudgily in Sharpie and lets out a huff, her exasperation clearly false because she can't stop smiling; it's his way of getting creative with her rule that her friends are allowed to wish her only once. She mouths "thank you" and he winks back.

"Sorry I can't come to the recital," Leo says, walking to the storage closet and grabbing chairs to help her.

"That's okay. Did you win your game?" she asks. He's on the opposite end of the same row, and they work their way in, closer and closer with each chair.

He gives her that satisfied, almost smug smile she knew was coming. "Damn straight we won." She laughs softly—for someone so easygoing, Leo has a competitive streak a mile wide. "Might have been the best game I've ever played. I woke up this morning energized and full of life and feeling kind of invincible."

They're only a few feet apart now. "Oh yeah? Why's that?" she asks. "Come on now, Sim," he says, as if it were obvious. They set up the last

two chairs and turn to each other, Simran a little more slowly. “It’s because I kissed you last night.” Warmth courses through her and she looks away, like his face is too bright.

“So much for playing hard to get,” she tells him. They’re now only a few inches apart, and he’s looking down at her, his gaze unwavering.

He scoffs. “I don’t play hard to get. I am not hard to get, not for you.”

She feels heat rising to her cheeks. Leo wears his heart on his sleeve in a way that baffles—and terrifies—her. It’s pretty much the worst place she can imagine keeping your heart, right out in the open. No, thank you. But he wears it so well.

He slips a hand behind her neck, pulling her lips to his. She tilts her head up and goes on her toes, surprising both of them with her fervency, pressing back against him. The other thing about second kisses is that they can very quickly turn into third and fourth ones, until she’s lost count.

A noise emerges from the back of her throat, unguarded and blissful, and she pulls away. “Forget I just did that,” she says, covering her face with her hand.

“Not a chance.” He tugs her hand away and pulls her back towards him.

After a few minutes, they stop reluctantly. Her students—and their parents—will start trickling in any moment now and he has to go to work. But he doesn’t let go of her and she doesn’t move away.

“You know, you cost me a hundred bucks,” she tells him.

“How’s that?” he says.

“Tia bet me a hundred dollars that you and I would ...” She trails off. “Clearly, I lost.”

“Tell Tia I’ll give her the money.” Brushing her lips with his, he says, “This may be the first bet I’m happy to lose.” He pulls away to look at her. “It’s not like a hundred bucks per kiss, is it? Because that’s going to get expensive.”

Simran pushes him away, rolling her eyes. “Okay, I think it’s time for you to get out of here.”

He walks backwards as he calls, “Worth every dollar!”

She watches him leave and then glimpses her radiant reflection in the wall of mirrors, biting down on her lip. It’s the kind of perfect linking chain of moments that, in a movie, might cue the credits to roll, happily ever after achieved. But this is life, not a movie, and today—her least favorite day, her

birthday—will keep going. The one bad thing about starting it with Leo is that it will be hard to top.



There's a different kind of delight in the twenty pint-size tornados zooming around as they get ready for their big performance. Despite the tall ceiling and row of windows, noise laps over the studio like a high tide, making it feel packed, thanks to the added presence of parents, relatives, and friends.

Simran puts her thumb and middle finger in her mouth and whistles, the way her father taught her many summers ago, and though it's not nearly as loud as he used to do it, the flurry of activity halts instantaneously.

"Good morning, class," she says in a clear, carrying voice.

The reply comes in something less enunciated but more endearing than in unison: "Good morning, Miss Simran!"

"Who knows what day it is?" she asks, beaming as every child raises their hands, some so eager that they go on tiptoes. From the back of the studio, her best friend and roommate, Olivia, raises her hand too, grinning. Another thought she'd pushed away, along with her birthday: Liv's reaction to the news that her brother and Simran kissed. Liv has loved to be deeply unpredictable since the day they met, paired as roommates freshman year of college, so her reply could be anything from a shriek to a shrug. Simran turns back to her students and says, "Why don't you *all* tell me?"

"Recital day!" they yell back. She springs into action, asking the parents to line their kids up at the front and grab a seat for the big show. Mothers fuss over unkempt braids and fathers tie shoelaces and Simran makes herself look away. Her heart clamps up anyway, an ache she will never quite get rid of, but she retrieves her smile. She was a kid once, just like them, happy and sticky and surrounded by love. She crouches down to adjust Vee Miller's dupatta, nodding along with the child's excited but incoherent story—after class, this kid is either getting a baby brother or a pet buffalo.

Moving to the middle of the studio, parents behind her, kids facing her, Simran says, "It's time for namaskaram." Twenty sets of elbows go up, thumbs, index fingers, and middle fingers joining with the remaining two spread as she leads the kids in the traditional demonstration of respect that

opens every class. They do the simple motions together, a couple of the kids toppling over when they have to squat down to touch the floor. But she's taught them well because without prompting, they remember her motto—"You're the only one who can pick yourself back up"—barely missing a beat. (Okay, maybe missing a couple of beats.) She hits play on her phone and the opening notes of the medley blare on the sound system.

She dances along for the kids who need guidance and by the time the final song, "Chaiyya Chaiyya," is blasting out, the kids are singing at the top of their lungs, mispronouncing almost every word. She pulled the moves directly from the movie, and, like her, the parents' love for this iconic song runs deep—some of them even dance in their seats. It's all out of tune and out of step; Simran doesn't sing, but her heart does.

As she does the signature hook step, she's struck by a visceral memory—she and her cousin Kavitha doing this exact move years and years ago. They'd practiced for weeks to put on a performance for the whole family, neighbors gathering too, right in the living room of Simran's home in Chennai, the bifold doors of the verandah flung open so the music could be turned all the way up. The memory is shiny and Technicolor, like the Simran in it. There was no place she'd ever felt safer in than that house, no people she'd ever been more herself with than her parents and cousin, no doubt that her life would be happy and full and lived out with all of them.

Emphatic applause bursts her out of her thoughts as the performance reaches its grand finish, and the adults rush forward, sweeping their children into hugs. She walks over to Liv, who has watched the whole concert from the back wall and now gives her an exaggerated slow clap.

"Thanks for coming," she says.

"These kids!" Liv says, purple streaks in her bobbed hair wiggling. "They're so adorable. They've made me realize how much I want to be a cool aunt one day."

Simran places a hand on her shoulder. "You were born to be a cool aunt."

"Thank you." Liv puts her hand over Simran's, pretending to tear up. "You're very sweet, and if I ever said sorry, I might say it for what's about to happen."

Simran's face drops. "What's about to happen?"

But she suddenly becomes aware that the crowd behind her is no longer noisy—extremely suspicious for a group of children. Liv twirls her finger and Simran turns to see the rest of the room looking at her expectantly.

“What’s going on?” she asks as giggles ripple through the kids.

One of the moms steps forward. “We heard that it’s your birthday today! So we all wanted to sing for you.”

Simran looks over her shoulder to narrow her eyes at Liv. Her friend smirks back and holds up her index finger; this is *her* one birthday greeting. Not that she actually listens; at least Leo pretends to try. Liv moves up next to her, waving her arms like an orchestra conductor, and then sixty or so voices are singing “Happy Birthday” to her.

Simran’s forced smile relaxes into something more genuine. She adores these kids, the ones who are trying to sing so loud they’re basically just shouting, adores finding out that Anju and Yami Suresh and their father all have identical, high-pitched voices, and even adores Liv, her pushy best friend who loves her too much to let this day pass without acknowledging it somehow. It doesn’t change the fact that she hates her birthday, hates that it used to be so special to her, hates what it’s become.

By the time the last few families have filed out, Simran has gotten so many birthday wishes, she won’t need one for the next ten years. She’s still got text and email inboxes full of messages that she’ll put off replying to until tomorrow. Liv hangs around, helping her clean up the space after everyone has left. Simran’s phone buzzes and she pulls it out of her pocket.

Kavitha Iyer [12:23 p.m.]: Happy birthday, Simran.

When they were growing up, Kavitha and Simran were forced by their parents to sleep in separate bedrooms because otherwise they’d never go to bed, yapping the night away. And now, Kavitha and Simran text exactly twice a year—one wishes happy birthday, the other politely replies thank-you. The last time they talked more than that was five years ago.

She stands stock-still. This year feels different, though. “Everything okay?” Liv asks.

Simran squeezes her hand around her phone as she says, “Yeah, no. Everything’s fine.”

“Let’s go home, then?” Somehow, even after all the years away and the places she’s lived since, the word “home” still conjures up the house in Chennai where she lived with her parents, though she hasn’t seen it in sixteen years. It takes a couple of seconds for her to shift back to the here and now. As they walk back to the apartment they share on the west side of Toronto, Liv prattles on about leaving for her Europe trip tomorrow, pulling

Simran's mind away from the message burning a hole in her pocket. She has to come clean to her friend before she goes on her trip.

"I kissed your brother last night," Simran blurts out as they walk down Queen Street. "And earlier, before the recital. And I'll kiss him again. A lot, probably."

Liv's jaw drops and Simran takes a second to relish the rare reversal of shocking her.

"I guess all I have to say is ..." Liv trails off and Simran's pulse hammers in her throat. Her best friend looks at her beadily, letting her squirm for a few long seconds before throwing her hands in the air. "Thank fu—Frank!" Her glance swings to two toddlers walking a few feet in front of them with their parents. "I was going to pickle my eyeballs and stick them in a martini if I had to spend one more second watching you two act all swirly and gooey around each other."

Simran scoffs, even as she thinks of Leo's full bottom lip. "We did not act swirly and gooey."

Liv smirks. "You're swirly and gooey right now! It's okay. He's worse than you are. Thinking he was so smooth, all these years, always asking about you, as if we didn't know that he's had a crush on you since he was fifteen. And then, when he moved back here, the way he'd make excuses to hang out with you!" She affects a frat-boy baritone that sounds nothing like the gentle rumble of Leo's voice. "*Should I get a ticket to the movie for Simran too? Heard Simran doesn't know how to ice skate—does she want me to teach her? Hey, I'm coming over—oh, what, Simran's also home? That's cool, I guess.*" What a punk. I kept telling him you were out of his league. Way to make me wrong for the first time in history. To make up for it, I'd like lilac for the bridesmaid color scheme and a summer wedding and—oooh, would I get to wear a sari?"

"Let's move on or I will start sharing details," Simran says, smiling when Liv looks the tiniest bit scared.

"I'm happy for the two of you, but I'm not sure I like this new power dynamic," she says, crossing her arms. When they reach their apartment, Simran stops short. On the dining table is a big red-and-gold envelope. Liv follows her eyeline. "I saw this in the trash bin in your bedroom when I was taking out the garbage downstairs," she says. "I wasn't sure if you meant to throw it away."

“Oh.” Simran looks at the New Jersey return address in the corner, where her aunt, uncle, and Kavitha live, and runs her fingers over her name, embossed in black on the front. She had tossed the envelope in the garbage in a fit of emotion when she woke up this morning. She’s not going to that wedding. But she does find it oddly comforting that the invite didn’t actually get thrown out. She picks it up. “I, um ... thanks.”

Later, in her room, Simran sits on the edge of her bed, holding her phone with both hands. Her glance flicks to the invitation, now reinstated in its place on the dresser, propped up against her mirror, like it has been for the three months since she received it. It’s so bright. So red. She looks down at Kavitha’s birthday message again.

Simran Gopal [6:59 p.m.]: Thanks, Kavi.

And then:

Simran Gopal [6:59 p.m.]: I miss you.

The moment her thumb hits send, Simran flings her phone onto the other side of her bed. She stands and paces in small circuits, from her dresser to the reading chair in the corner. She feels exposed. She shouldn’t have sent it.

She forces herself to take a deep breath. Outside her window, the late evening sun is finally setting, turning everything golden, and she can hear mockingbirds calling from the nearby park, and—who cares? She picks her phone up again.

No reply.

As night stains the sky with indigo, her birthday almost over, Simran expects to feel better, but instead her mood sinks lower and lower.

2.

Leo looks at his watch and sighs as he rushes into the elevator, dragging his carry-on suitcase behind him, a thick brown paper bag balanced on top of it. He knocks on the front door to his sister and Simran's apartment and quickly smooths his hair—though it falls back on his forehead like always—before discreetly pressing his nose to his shoulder. He doesn't smell like sweat or too much cologne, equal offenses in his book. If he didn't have to prepare for the most important work trip of his life, he'd have spent the day with Simran. Instead, he's showing up after eleven p.m. on her birthday to see her for a couple of hours before he has to get on a flight to New York.

"Bonjour, Léo! Le cheval est beau mais court vite," Liv declares as she opens the door. "I'm practicing my French for my trip."

"I gathered. You anticipate horses coming up a lot?" he asks. "Duolingo sure seems to." He tries to step inside but she blockades the door, crossing her arms. "You have anything to say to me?"

"Rarely," he says dryly. "You do enough of the talking."

Liv narrows her eyes. "I mean about Simran."

"Oh! Yeah, of course!" he says. He holds up a finger. "One: Butt out." He raises a second one. "Two: I'm here to see her, not you. Move."

"Show me some respect. I'm older than you."

"But I'm taller than you," he replies, using the flat of his forearm to push his sister to the side, a move that he's perfected in the many years since he started towering over her. She huffs in outrage but Leo's already inside the apartment, tucking his suitcase into a corner.

"How do I say 'Where is the closest bar?' in French?" she asks.

"Où est le bar le plus proche," Leo replies, setting a small bouquet of red tulips down before emptying the contents of the paper bag onto the dining table.

She cranes her neck in suspicion. "Is that actually how you say it or is it something really embarrassing?"

Leo slants a look at her. "Guess you'll find out."

“Nah. You believe too deeply in some nonexistent translator code of ethics to lead me astray,” Liv says. Leo says nothing, but she’s absolutely right. She glances down at the crowded table. “Bruh. She’s genuinely not into celebrating. Never once in the fourteen birthdays I’ve known her.”

He pauses and looks at his sister. “Yeah. What’s that about?”

Liv shrugs. “I gather it has something to do with her parents.” Leo nods and goes to the left drawer to grab a corkscrew. “It’s Simran. You know her well enough to know that there’s a lot you don’t know.”

“Yeah, but you’re nosy,” he says.

“She’s impervious to even my superlative powers,” Liv says. He tucks the stems of two wineglasses between the fingers of one hand. Walking back to his sister, he pulls the bar of dark chocolate she swiped from his spread out of her hoodie’s kangaroo pocket with the other. “Hey!” she complains. “Be nice to me or I’ll tell Simran how you watched *Titanic* every day for a month when Winnie Chan dumped you.”

The threat bounces off him. “There are butter tarts for you in the bag,” he says, rounding the table to grab the bottle of wine, Simran’s favorite white from Peller Estates, before heading down the hallway.

“Just kidding, you are a passably acceptable brother!” Liv calls to him.

Simran’s not in her bedroom and, for a moment, he wonders where she could be—then he looks through the glass sliding door at the end of the hall. There, on the love seat that barely fits in the tiny bucket of a balcony, is Simran, her thick, dark hair piled over one shoulder, skin burnished and smooth under the ambient light from the street.

“Hi,” he says, sliding the door open. Her arms hold her legs tight to her chest, chin resting on her knees, a compact ball. She startles at the sight of him, swiping at her face roughly.

“Hi,” she replies, and her voice is thick. She clears her throat and gives him a small smile. “You’re here.”

“Wanted to say goodbye before I left,” he tells her. Actually, he wants to kiss her again, to lock this thing down so that when he is back in a few days, they can pick up right where they’ve left off.

But Simran’s body language is all wrong. He sits on the other end of the love seat, mind racing. What happened between the last time he saw her and now? He holds off on opening the wine and puts the glasses down. “How did prep for your interview go?” she asks, still curled into that ball. “Do you feel like a lock for the dream job?”

She's pretending nothing is wrong, so he follows her lead. "I'm nervous—presenting to the head office is a big deal. But I've prepared a really good presentation. All I can do is be myself and bring my best. The rest is on them to decide if it's good enough," he says, eyeing the full seat of space between them. "How was your day? Heard the recital went really well."

"It was great." She doesn't say anything more, looking out at the zig and zag of cars on the street, tires slushing over the wet asphalt after an evening summer shower. The silence jabs bluntly at him till he has to speak. He turns to her, though he has no idea what he's going to say, when he sees tears dripping down her face.

This is not about them, Leo realizes. This is something else entirely. He slides across the bench and slips his arms around her. He feels her hesitation at being held, braces in anticipation of her pushing him away. But she turns into his body, burying her face in his chest, and then begins crying quietly. They stay like that, her sobbing and him holding her. After several minutes, she sits up, scrubbing a palm across one cheek, then the other.

"I never cry," Simran says defensively. He thinks that's the end of it. But she speaks again, voice so small. "I am thirty-one now. My parents died when I was fifteen. As of today, I have officially lived more than half of my life without them."

All Leo can do is add this scrap of information to the small collection of things she's let slip over the years. He knows that her parents passed away in a car accident. And because of that, she had to relocate from India to the U.S. to live with her aunt and uncle before moving again, to Toronto, seven years ago. Simran never talks about her deceased parents or the family who still lives in New Jersey whom she doesn't talk to very often, though he doesn't know anything beyond that. Sometimes he'll catch a look of pure sadness in her eyes and then watch as she pushes it down where no one else can see it. That's the space she puts between her and the world, and she wears it like armor, ever present even when she is laughing or happy.

"Most days, I function normally. But some days, I'm stuck in it, like quicksand. I don't understand why it's still so raw." She lets out a shredded laugh. "It's not like those beautifully melancholic movies where time heals all wounds. My parents are gone. I'm never getting them back. It hurts. The end."

Leo listens. He knows Simran isn't asking for something to solve this for her; if she was, it wouldn't be him who could. But his helplessness claws at

him. It hurts him to see her feel so broken.

She snuffles. “Every year, at midnight, they would sneak into my room and wake me up by singing to me. And then they would sing to me again at 11:59 p.m., while it was still my birthday. The first and last people to wish me. They loved my birthday. And now I’ll have more without them than I ever did with them. I’ll miss them for longer than I knew them.” She rests her head on his shoulder and he runs his hand gently over her hair. A few minutes later, church bells start to chime on the next block, the low notes melting into the dark as they announce that the day is almost over.

“Happy birthday,” he murmurs into her ear. He doesn’t want the tradition to be lost in her parents’ absence.

She pulls away slightly to look at him and gestures to where her mascara runs down her face in inky tracks. “Clearly, I’m having a very happy birthday.” She attempts a chuckle but it sputters out. He tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Okay. Sad birthday, then,” he says. Below them, the city has gone hushed and still, as if to mourn with Simran. She falls back into the crook of his neck and, softly, he sings to her, “Sad birthday to you, sad birthday to you. Sad birthday, dear Simran, sad birthday to you.”

He can barely hear her quiet, watery laugh over his own voice, but it’s real. It feels so good to be the one who can make her laugh. She’s invited him past that wall she keeps up, after all these years, and it’s what he’s always wanted but he’s paralyzed by it. He is a little in awe of all that she’s survived—losing her parents, moving and starting over in a new country so far from her home, not once but twice. What if he presses on the bruise instead of easing her pain?

“What were they like?” Leo asks. He feels Simran stiffen and he knows he’s said the wrong thing.

Her breath becomes stilted. “I can’t talk about them. Can we just ...”

“Yeah,” he says, tightening his arms around her. “We can.”

From the street below them, voices spike and peal with laughter and they lapse back into a silence that’s interrupted a few minutes later by an insistent rumbling from Simran’s stomach.

“I guess I skipped dinner,” she says as she sits up.

“You know what would be so good right now?” Leo says, picking up the bottle and glasses with one hand, holding the other out to her.

She takes it as they stand. “The mushroom tagliatelle from Gusto.”

“So, let’s have it.”

“It’s late! They’re closed,” she says.

“But what if someone picked up takeout on his way over?” Leo asks as they reach the dining table.

Simran rips the top off a container and inhales deeply. “Leo, this is perfect.”

He takes the plate she hands him, thumb brushing against hers. “Just a preview. When I get back from New York, you are getting wooed.”

From the other side of the table, Simran points to herself, eyes glinting. “I’m getting wooed?”

“So wooed.”

After they finish eating, Leo stands reluctantly, telling her that he needs to go if he’s going to make his flight. Simran holds his hand as they walk to the front door.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be such a bumner tonight,” she says, looking down.

He frowns. “Don’t say that.” He gets that she feels vulnerable, but she should realize he wants that part of her too.

“I just mean that it’s not an ideal day one of ... you know,” she says, gesturing between them. So they’re at least a “you know.”

“Today was a wash anyway,” he says. “I do my best work without a time constraint.”

When she looks up at him, the glint is a spark. “You’re setting a high bar.”

“Hold me to it,” he says as he drifts in towards her again. She kisses him back, deeply, and when they separate, he feels wrecked, almost drunk, his hair falling all over where her hands tugged at it. He blinks a few times, dazed, and she giggles as she pushes him and his suitcase out the door, wishing him good luck. He can’t think of a better send-off than the sound of her laughter trailing after him from the doorway of her apartment as he gets in the elevator.

3.

The next morning, Simran hurriedly dabs concealer at the dark splotches under her eyes before heading out. Her neighborhood is three long avenues bustling with bikers, and children, and dogs on leashes in and around the rows of two-story homes and small businesses. Heading to the streetcar station a few blocks away, she looks into the window of the wine bar where her book club meets every month—and the cheese shop next door that they raid after a couple hours of heated discussion and too many glasses on empty stomachs—before walking past the lot that hosts a farmers’ market in the summer and becomes a tiny ice rink in the winter, where Leo taught her to skate last year. She likes the meandering pace of the streetcar—she doesn’t sleep well so mornings are always slow—and especially the glimpse of the wide, blue yonder of Lake Ontario as the train turns onto King Street. Today, the lake goes unnoticed. She thought, like every year, getting through her birthday was all she needed.

Simran checks her phone for the millionth time. No reply from Kavitha.

She gets off at her stop and forces herself to focus on her job—the small team at the international students’ office of the Toronto university she works for is perpetually under-resourced and over-tasked. She enjoys it but her boss, Paulie, doesn’t like her and keeps subtly implying that he can end her contract whenever he wants to. Sometimes, in her head, she calls him Puli, the Tamil word for tamarind, a wonderful fruit that doesn’t deserve to be associated with her supervisor except that it is extremely sour, and so is he. Just as she turns into the small garden area outside of her office building on Front Street, her phone rings, and when she looks at the screen, she nearly drops the phone.

Kavitha is *calling*.

“Childhood” and “Kavitha” are synonymous for Simran. Growing up, they spent the school year on opposite sides of the world, with Simran in Chennai and Kavitha and her sister, Geeta, in New Jersey. But those summers when Kavitha would come back to India are the nexus of her best memories: running down to Marina Beach and playing in the tide; Simran

laughing so hard at Kavi rapping Jay-Z's "Beware of the Boys" that she fell backwards out of her chair, which only made them both laugh harder; playing infinite rounds of gin rummy on rainy days with her neighbors Payal and Kamal. There was nothing like those two months of endless, sun-sticky days that Simran, a prickly only child, got to spend with her cousin and best friend rolled into one.

"Hello?" she answers cautiously. Is Kavitha calling Simran for the same reason Simran sent that message yesterday—because she misses her too? She's scared to hope. It could be a butt-dial. Her stomach drops, remembering all those missed calls from five years ago. Maybe someone is in the hospital again.

"Hello, Simran," her cousin says.

A pack of joggers passes behind her. "Hi, Kavitha." She has no idea what to say next. "How are things?"

Simran needn't have worried.

"Things are ... things. Come to Geeta's wedding," Kavitha says with no preamble.

"What?"

"I'm calling to tell you to come to Geeta's wedding." Kavi's voice is rigid, almost clenched.

Simran clears her throat. "Kavitha—"

"She's your cousin, and Rishi is one of your oldest friends." Kavi sounds so measured, so pragmatic, so unlike her. "And I don't want to spend the whole wedding watching my mother and father explain to everyone who asks why you aren't there. They don't deserve that."

Her words press into Simran and grate against her. There are many things she deserved too, while in that house, that she didn't get. "Look, I—"

"It's been seven years," Kavitha says.

Simran is quiet as she sits on the lip of the small fountain. Little droplets of water tap at her back and arms. There's a feeling taking shape within her and she's surprised to recognize it as guilt. This is a big deal; it's the first wedding they've had in years, the first in her immediate family. Geeta, Rishi, and her uncle, Ashok, were collateral damage when Simran had fled Iyer House for Toronto without telling anyone. Leaving Kavitha behind had felt bad in the moment, but it was nothing compared to how terrible it would feel as the days stretched into weeks, then months, and eventually years where she didn't know what her favorite person was doing or whether

there were any new foods she'd tried or if she'd finally gotten that handbag she'd been saving for.

"I'm sorry but I can't," she says. "I have commitments here."

"You can't? You mean you won't." There's a disappointed sureness in Kavitha's voice now, and Simran's heart sinks thinking of how little affection her cousin has left for her. Both are true—she can't and she won't go back to that house. She cannot be around her aunt, not after the way she acted following Simran's parents' death, not after the way she's acted ever since.

At first, it was okay that no one in Iyer House talked about her parents. After nearly a full month of condolences in Chennai, it was almost nice to move through this strange house in New Jersey with only her own grief on her shoulders, not having to endure the laments and sorrow of distant relatives. She could even, in her most desperate moments, pretend it hadn't happened, as if she were living with Kavitha for the school year before she'd go back to Chennai and her parents and the only life she'd ever known.

But then another month passed. Two. More. And it began to set in that nothing was ever going to be the same. She wasn't going back. Her parents were gone. And the only thing more painful than talking about them became not talking about them.

So no, she will not be going back to Iyer House.

"Listen, what if you come up to Toronto after the wedding? Stay with me and we can play tourist. You can finally meet Liv in person. And Leo too." She knows she's jumping the gun but she can't help it. Kavitha called her.

"Simran. Either you come to this wedding or we're through." Simran has heard Kavitha speak in this tone only once: the last time they talked to each other, five years ago.

An ambulance careens down the street, siren wailing, but it's the finality in Kavitha's voice that pierces Simran somewhere deep beneath her ribs. The slimmest chance of reconnecting with her cousin in the last eighteen hours has felt better than all the years of silence. She can't cut the lone, tremulous thread she has to her cousin, can't abandon all hope of spinning it back into something like the tight-knit sisterhood they shared years ago.

"Come home," Kavitha repeats.

Her house in Chennai pops into Simran's head—more than a memory. It's fundamental to who she is. *That's* the home she needs to find her way

back to. Not Iyer House in New Jersey. She's been thinking about it for months now, every time she dreams of her house in fitful nights of sleep. She needs to see it again, for the first time since she left at fifteen, to feel the cool marble floor under her bare feet and sit on the verandah stairs where she ate breakfast every morning. The house, tangible and standing instead of hazy in her memory, will be proof that a world with her parents existed. Their things are still inside, packed up in boxes stacked against the walls. She can sort through it all, like she should have done years ago, and maybe even bring some of it back. If Iyer House's highest crime is that it features scant traces of her parents, Simran's Toronto life is no better.

Going back to Chennai has to be the next trip she makes. Then it occurs to her: Her aunt has the only key, taken when they moved Simran to New Jersey.

If she wants to go back to her home in Chennai, she first *has* to go to Iyer House.

And this way, there's a chance to have Kavitha back in her life too. "Okay," Simran says finally. She'll go for the weekend—she can handle that much for her cousin's sake.

"Really?" Kavitha says, and Simran thinks she hears a tremor of excitement.

"I can come in time for the sangeet next week."

There's a minute of silence on the other end before: "No."

"No?" Simran repeats.

"No. You'll come tomorrow." Kavitha lets the words hang in the air, so reminiscent of her mother that Simran gets *déjà vu*. This brand of short, nonnegotiable directives is a Veena Iyer specialty, no extra words to bargain with or argue against. "You'll come tomorrow to attend all the pre-wedding events and help us prep for everything."

"Kavitha, I can't. I'm so behind at work—"

"You can work remotely."

She gives it one last shot. "Getting a flight for tomorrow is going to be crazy expensive."

"That's fine. I have lots of credit card points. I'll buy your ticket," Kavitha replies. "You can fly out tomorrow morning."

"Kavitha—"

"I'm serious, señorita."

Simran's protest dies on her lips. *Señorita*. With that one word Kavitha has invoked a code that's been sacred since they were kids. If she backs out now, it really will be over. "Okay. I'll come tomorrow."



Simran spends the rest of her day making arrangements—getting set up to work remotely for the next two weeks (though Paulie's very vocally reluctant approval makes her uneasy) and asking a neighbor to water her plants, since Liv has already left for Europe. She gives her birthday bouquet of red tulips to the same neighbor but not before pressing them to her nose for one last inhale. She's going to have to delay plans with Leo. But she delays the delaying—she'll text him once she's back in New Jersey, to bask in the warmth of the last two nights just a little longer.

That evening, she unearths her Indian outfits, complete with coordinating jewelry and shoes, from the deepest recesses of her closet. She stares at the bright colors and the garments she hasn't touched in years. If it weren't for the venue, she might almost be excited to wear them again.

4.

Thirteen days until the wedding

In the Bollywood movies Simran loves so much, there is no shortage of what she thinks of as heroine songs, where the female lead and her hopes and dreams are introduced to the audience. There are anthems for plucky dreamers, bangers by self-assured sirens, and hymns from purehearted ingenues. But there are no songs for the world-weary survivalist returning to the site of her deepest grievances. All these tunes dedicated to women eager to take on the world and not a single catchy bop for a woman who has to do something she really doesn't want to.

The taxi she caught at Newark pulled up to her aunt and uncle's house in Addison, New Jersey, a few minutes ago. The driver clears his throat twice before finally saying, "Miss, are you going to get out?" It's on the tip of her tongue to ask if she can stay in the back of his car with its cloying pineapple-scented air freshener that is giving her a light headache.

"I have a mission," she mutters to herself. As she opens the car door and gets out, the driver says in a cheery voice, "Good luck!"

She looks up at Iyer House, a two-story construction with a half-gable roof, sloping down to its best feature—the huge backyard and deck. The front porch wraps across the house, and the scent of the freshly mowed lawn prickles at her nose. She walks up the wide steps and stops outside the front door, pulling out the house key she's not sure she has the right to use but does anyway. Except—it doesn't fit. She tries the other side up but the key still doesn't slide in. When did they change the locks? The front door is new, she realizes as she takes a step back—the same maroon color as its predecessor, but sleeker, no scuffs from all the times Kavitha's tuba case banged against it. The handle is smooth brushed metal and gone is the ancient, mildly phallic door knocker that they used to giggle over.

Before she can ring the bell, the door flies open. Standing in the doorway is her uncle, Ashok, tall, lanky, and silent.

“Simran,” he says, his hushed voice lifting in surprise. “You’re here.”

She bends down to touch his feet and he pats the top of her head. As she straightens, she says in Tamil, words rusty like a gate opening after a long time, “Neenga eppadi irukkeengey, Peripa?”

“Yelaa sowkyam, ma.” *Everything is good, dear.* When she was younger, Ashok peripa would always gently pinch her cheek between his index and middle fingers and she’d be put out by it, the way growing kids are when adults do something that reminds them that they’re still children. Now, as he steps back to let her in, she feels the phantom motion on her cheek.

Up close, she’s startled to see how time has pulled her uncle down. His skin sags, more wan than in her memories, and his hair is all salt, no pepper left. He moves slow and stooped, like a great tree. She knew the triple bypass he’d had five years ago was major, but medical factoids hadn’t painted the living, breathing—effortful and audible—picture she has now.

Simran looks around the living room. “It’s still the same,” she says. It is just as she knew it would be: the plastic coverings on the large leather sectional that squelch and squeak with the smallest of movements; her uncle’s rocking chair in the corner next to his record collection and player; and, in another alcove, the three-foot-high bronze Nataraj statue that doesn’t quite cover the Dyson vacuum docking station behind it. The house has always overflowed with objects, almost choked by the sheer quantity, with shelves and display cases holding not just too many books squeezed in like Tetris pieces but tangles of wires, mementos cluttered together, and paraphernalia shoved into every free nook and cranny. Everywhere the eye looked, things on top of more things.

“Ashok, challo! We’re going to be late!” Veena perima calls. She comes thumping down the stairs before stopping at the sight of Simran, catching her balance on the banister. “Simi? You’ve come!”

“Hello, Perima,” Simran says, stepping forward and touching her aunt’s feet before bringing her hand to her chest. She knows what will come first: a single-sentence assessment of her looks that is actually a dismissal of her lifestyle. Instead, when she straightens, her aunt cups her face. Simran has not been touched this way in years, the way no one except family can touch you, wholly familiar and without needing permission.

Her aunt’s eyes—large, round, and perfectly in the middle of her large, round face—scan her and she whispers, almost to herself, “You’ve grown up so much.”

And then, brusquely, “Yenna, yelachu poittai! You’re too thin! Toronto mein good food nahin mila, kya? Why didn’t you use the recipes I taught you?”

Simran smiles, vindicated even as the familiar braid of English and Tamil and Hindi, so interchangeable in this house, tugs at her unexpectedly. There’s nowhere else she’s ever heard it. “Where is everyone? Geeta, Rishi ... Kavi?”

Her aunt, short but powerful, like a cannonball, goes to sit on the couch. “They’ve already gone to the temple for the engagement ceremony along with Manjula and Ravi. We’ll take you with us—po, quickly quickly and change. We are already late.”

Going upstairs to leave her bags triggers a vivid memory: the day Simran got accepted to college and made it known she would live on campus, instead of at home like Veena perima had wanted. They had clashed a thousand and one times in the two years Simran had been living at Iyer House, ranging from asides and eye rolls to skirmishes to full-on battles—and this was the biggest one yet.

To Veena Iyer, daughters lived in their parents’ house until they married and moved to their husband’s house—unless the daughter was Geeta and got into an Ivy League in another state. To Simran, this was that frustratingly outdated, often contradictory thinking her aunt embraced. This woman believed deeply in educating her daughters and giving them autonomy and confidence to pursue careers, but also that they should be married at a young age to have children in order to fulfill her idea of true success. Her aunt felt that to be a loving, close family meant to constantly be in everyone’s business, flinging her opinions and pressing her wants upon them but never, ever talking about actual feelings or emotions. But most egregiously, her aunt treated Simran exactly like she treated her children. Which Simran wasn’t. The first time Simran had thrown “You’re not my mother!” into the heated air between them, her aunt’s mouth had become small, like an animal curling in on itself. This time, it bounced like a rubber bullet off her armored skin. In the end, Simran won, using the trump card of her inheritance to pay for college. She accepted Rutgers’s offer of enrollment the very next day and, four months later, moved into the dorms where Olivia had been assigned as her freshman-year roommate.

Fifteen minutes later, Simran finds herself in the middle row of the family minivan with her uncle driving and her aunt in the passenger seat,

demonstrating her astonishing ability to multitask as she talks on speakerphone to someone at the venue, texts Geeta that they're on their way, and yells at the driver who just cut them off. She twists around to look at Simran at one point and asks, "I only saw one suitcase in the hall. That's barely enough for a few weeks, no?"

It takes a moment for Simran to understand what her aunt means. "Perima, it is only for two weeks."

Her aunt frowns before holding up a hand. "It's okay, we'll ship the rest home from Toronto after the wedding."

"Perima—" Simran says, needing her aunt to understand that in no way is she back for good. But she's cut off because they've arrived at the temple compound, an impressive space smack in the middle of suburban New Jersey. In the center is the main worship area made of white marble carved like a traditional South Indian temple; several small cement buildings, not nearly as grand, dot the verdant grounds, including a function hall with a wall of panoramic windows that overlook a babbling brook. Outside it, a letter board surrounded by shoes proclaims IYER-CHOPRA ENGAGEMENT.

As they head in, Simran scans the crowd, determinedly avoiding any eye contact to discourage anyone from coming up to talk to her. She doesn't need to worry—no one is talking to her. They're talking *about* her. Her reemergence has sent the guests into a frenzy of whispers and texts. *Gossip Girl* has nothing on Indian gatherings and, to her annoyance, she knows her aunt will be attuned to every word, caring too much about what her community thinks. More and more people crowd into the room, making it harder to find Kavitha.

On a dais at the front of the space is the betrothed couple with their parents on either side of them. Geeta is resplendent, as always, in a black Mysore silk sari with a filigree-gold blouse underneath. Next to her, Rishi looks sharp in his dark purple sherwani set. The priest begins the prayers to bless the union and the long set of rituals commences. It's been years since Simran has attended a religious or cultural event—though she has Indian friends in Toronto, they're tightly woven into their own families and communities and she's a bit of a lone duck. She breathes in the scent of sandalwood agarbathi, golden and warm, as her ear recognizes a familiar rhythm in the hypnotic intonations of the priest, ending each stanza with a declarative "Svaha!" A stream of commentary and movement from the guests create constant murmuring white noise, even as these sacred rituals

—the ones everyone has gathered here for—continue on. No one onstage is bothered by it, because that’s how it always is. Simran is comforted and amused in equal parts.

Finally, towards the end of the ceremony, everyone pays attention long enough to cheer for Geeta and Rishi as they exchange rings. As Simran saw on Instagram, Rishi proposed down on one knee under the northern lights in Iceland months ago, but this is the engagement that legitimizes it for the families and the community. The guests line up, waiting for their turn to step on the stage and congratulate the couple and their parents before snapping poorly angled selfies they’ll later post on social media with captions like “AT GEETA AND RISHI’S NICHYATHARTHAM. HE IS PUNJABI SO THEY CALL IT ROKA. NICE CEREMONY. UPMA TASTED GOOD. ASHOK IS MY BUSINESS PARTNER.”

Simran hangs back in line, keeping her chin down, but she scans the room. Still no sign of Kavitha. Someone tugs at her elbow—it’s Rishi’s brother, Rahul, younger than him by a decade, bringing her to the front. Geeta beams at her, perfect white teeth rivaling a movie star’s.

“You don’t have to wait in line, Akka! You’re family,” she says. Simran smiles. Maybe things will be different between her and Geeta now. They hug and Geeta says, “Even if you didn’t RSVP.”

Maybe they’ll be the same.

Geeta waves to someone behind them, her bangles tinkling, before she turns back to Simran. “It’s fine. Of course, we’ll have to call the planner and get everything figured out: how we’re seated, make sure you’re color coordinated, who you’ll walk into the ceremony with—because you *and* Kavi can’t walk with Rahul, you’re too tall for either of them.”

“Speaking of, where is Kav—” But Geeta has hit the time limit on talking to Simran and gets firmly instructed by the event coordinator to move on to the next guest.

Simran takes a step over, grinning as Rishi pulls her into a bear hug. As they separate, Veena perima’s voice, demanding and commanding, reaches them from a few feet away, declaring to the semicircle of guests standing around her, “It’s so important to marry your daughters into families who share your values. You know, five years ago, Rishi asked for my permission to date Geeta.”

Simran looks back at Rishi, amused. “Nice of you to ask permission to date Geeta six years after you started dating Geeta.”

“It’s been a long, treacherous road,” he says. He looks different than when she last saw him—back then, he used to gel his hair like a skyscraper. Now he has close-cropped sides with artfully curated stubble—he no longer looks like the boy next door. “There were a couple of times I thought we may not survive. Like every time I got on that ladder to sneak into Geeta’s room.”

“Dating one of Veena Iyer’s daughters should count as an extreme sport,” she says.

“But in the end, I got the girl and I got the gold,” he says, grinning as he holds up his left hand, where a thick signet ring with a chunky sapphire in its center sits comfortably on his fourth finger. “Women have been gatekeeping how awesome engagement rings are.”

They chat until Rishi is pulled away and Veena perma puts Simran to work, handing her a steel plate with coconuts, betel leaves, small containers of kumkum, and a bunch of bananas, and instructs her to take it to the priest waiting at the back of the room. Simran does as she’s told, opening the side door for the priest to exit when she hears someone else approach. She stays there, holding it so they can come in.

And a few seconds later, in through the door walks Kavitha.

5.

When Simran was ten and Kavitha was eight, they fell instantaneously and simultaneously in love with the same person. Simran can recall exactly where she was when they first saw him—sprawled on the drawing room floor, watching a movie. The Chennai heat was stifling but the tile floor was cool beneath her stomach, and above, a ceiling fan spun so furiously that it seemed like it might fly right off its mount. Kavitha, on one of her summer visits from New Jersey, was lying next to her, chin propped on her stacked fists. Simran knew the moment Kavi fell too: Her head lifted and her neck straightened and she was rapt.

Shah Rukh Khan was the most magnetic person they'd ever seen, with dimples like canyons and big, expressive brown eyes. He had imprinted on them through his character in the classic romantic drama *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, the way people in other parts of the world might have fallen for Disney princes or Mr. Darcy. They watched all three hours and nine minutes of *DDLJ* every day that summer and for many summers after. Kavitha would, in equal parts envy and reverence, point out Simran's luck in sharing a name with the female main character. They referred to each other as "señorita" like SRK does to Kajol, the actress in the movie, and later that became their code word.

When Simran had first moved to Iyer House after her parents' death, she barely spoke. For the first few weeks she would lie awake at night in what had been the guest room until then, on the uncomfortable futon since there hadn't been time to purchase a proper bed yet. That's when her sleeplessness had originated, her mind unable to quiet. One night, Kavitha snuck into her room when everyone else was already in bed. They'd watched *DDLJ* together on her laptop, a headphone in each ear, Kavi holding on tight to Simran as she broke down. Kavitha would do that every night for the next year—the sneaking in, the movie, and the comforting.

Swallowing the memory, Simran says, "Hi, Kavi."

Kavitha gives her a tight-lipped smile. "Hi. You came."

Simran balls her hands into fists to resist flinging her arms around her cousin. “Well, you did buy my ticket.”

“I had to; I can’t count on you to show up just by asking,” Kavitha says.

“There you two are!” Veena perima bustles up to them as if she’s *finally* found them, though she’s known where they both were this whole time.

“Come on, time to go back to the house and get everything ready.” The family will have a small head start before the guests will follow in droves for an outdoor celebration of the engagement in the backyard, which is the size of a small park. This casual lunch includes ten entrees, several appetizer stations, and enough booze to power a midsize company’s holiday party. It will be the most low-key event of this wedding.

Simran is excited to have more time with Kavitha, even if it’s in the dreaded back row of the minivan, which is fine for the uniformly short Iyers but not for Simran, whose extra five inches mean that her knees are in her face for the duration of the ride. But her cousin barely says a word to her—in fact, Kavitha doesn’t even look in her direction, despite them jostling against each other as the car drives over potholes on the highway.

From the legroom-blessed middle row, Geeta twists around. “What color should I wear for the afternoon event?” She holds up her phone and scrolls through so many outfits in different shades that Simran feels like she’s looking at a kaleidoscope.

Simran clears her throat, surprised and a little pleased to be asked. “The —”

“I always choose blues and purples because I look so good in them, but I wonder if I should mix it up,” Geeta says.

“I—”

“But then again, is my engagement party really the time to experiment?” Geeta continues.

Simran remains silent this time and Kavitha speaks up. “I think you should do the baby pink pavada melakku.”

Geeta turns expectantly to Simran, who sardonically points to herself. “Oh. You want to know what *I* think?”

Geeta nods twice, face scrunched. “Who else would I be asking, Akka?”

“I thought you were talking to yourself,” she says, glancing at Kavitha. They had always been so in sync when it came to GNN, aka the Geeta News Network, the nickname they’d given her because she had been such an insufferable tattletale when they were younger. But all Simran gets is a

blank look. Sighing, she turns back to Geeta and says, “I think the red-and-yellow lengha.”

“Hmmm,” Geeta says, tapping a perfectly manicured finger against her chin. “I’ll think I’ll do the baby pink. Great choice, Kavitha. I might wear the red-and-yellow lengha later. Maybe to one of the smaller events.”

Simran wants to say that she doesn’t care if her cousin wears Saran Wrap to her ceremony but instead bites her tongue and looks out the window. Growing up, it had always felt like Kavitha and Simran were the sisters with Geeta as the odd one out. Then one summer, Geeta stopped coming to Chennai and instead was shuttled off to academic summer programs that paved the path for her to go to a prestigious private school an hour away, and then MIT and Harvard, all far from Iyer House. Geeta missed out on the closeness that Kavi and Simran shared—but she also missed out on Veena perima’s tyrannical rule.

“Anyway,” Geeta says as they get out of the car, “it’s not like I have a bad color.” More annoying than Geeta herself is that she is correct. She could show up to the ceremony in the drab blue scrubs—the ones she wears in her post-shift Insta stories where she reminds everyone daily that she is doing amazing, groundbreaking work in her extremely prestigious ob-gyn fellowship in New Haven—and still be the most dazzling woman in the room.

Geeta has and always will be the star, no matter whose wedding it is. All three of them have played a version of these roles to outsiders since they were girls: Geeta is the golden child, Ivy League educated but not so busy she couldn’t join Veena perima at the temple every weekend; Kavitha, the oddball middleman with her goofy jokes, still living at home and working at a middling suburban law firm, matte compared to her sparkling younger sister; and Simran, beautiful but tragic, so damaged that she ran away from her own family.

Within half an hour, all the guests from the engagement ceremony have arrived and the celebration is in full swing out back. The latest Bollywood, Tamil, and other South Indian movie tunes blast out from overworked speakers. Children screech as they play tag in and around a group of adults who yell out that they’re going to hurt someone but do nothing to stop them. A confederacy of uncles sit in a loose half circle of plastic white chairs and talk so enthusiastically about the movie *Sholay* that it sounds like arguing.

At the edge of all this activity, Simran stands by herself, unable to remember what she used to do with her hands during family events. The midday summer sun beating down on the thick, parrot-green material of her blouse makes her feel a little like she's being cooked.

Veena perima comes out, bearing a huge platter teeming with food, and commands, "Simi, take this from me." Simran sets down the heavy dish of rice the color of a ripe lemon, dotted with ghee-fried peanuts and golden specks of urad dal and vibrant green curry leaves next to another giant platter of rice, this one white but with chopped peas and carrots, finished with toasted cashews.

Veena perima peers down, head pivoting from one platter to the other. "Aiyo, who made this? I made more than enough of my lemon rice. We don't need two rice dishes!" The tang of the lemon, subtle and savory, hits Simran's nose and her mouth waters in an almost Pavlovian way. No restaurant in Toronto, possibly the world, can match the magic of her aunt's cooking.

"Oh, Veena, I had some requests for my pulao," Manjula aunty, Rishi's mom, says in a clear, fully American accent compared to Veena perima's hybrid one, even though they've both lived in this country for the same amount of time. She saunters over in her caftan and loose dress pants, a contrast to the sharp folds of Veena perima's traditional sari. Earlier, Simran had overheard her aunt tell a family friend, Neeta aunty: "What is she wearing? Is this her son's engagement or an interview with Oprah?"

Veena perima's shoulders go back as the mothers greet each guest who comes up to the table and unknowingly casts a vote by taking either the pulao or the lemon rice. Occasionally, one woman shoots a slit-eyed look in the other's direction before both break into simpering, terse smiles.

Simran is not here to watch them duel; she's eager to find Kavitha. Her cousin may be determined to avoid her, but Simran is determined not to let her. Looking around, she finally spots her at the other end of the table, at the vada station.

"Perima," Simran says, "should I go help Kavi with the food?"

Her aunt nods at Simran. "Haan. Make sure everyone gets some chutney."

"I have a mission," Simran mutters to herself as she goes to stand next to her cousin, who is handing out the golden-fried lentil fritters.

"Guess what I got for my birthday?" Simran says casually.

Her cousin shrugs, looking like the apathetic teenager she never was. “What?”

“A poster of *DDLJ*.” She pauses for dramatic effect. “Signed by Shah Rukh Khan.”

Kavitha forgets her indifference and her face lights up. “No way! How’d you get that?”

“My friends tracked it down on eBay,” she says, heart rising at her cousin’s animated expression. She briefly smiles at the memory of Leo’s and Liv’s huge grins as they handed her the cylindrical tube the day before her actual birthday to circumvent her wish-me-only-once mandate. Simran hurries to build on this common ground. “Remember when we almost got to see Shah Rukh in New York, but then your mom caught us sneaking out and we got grounded instead? Can’t believe she kept us from meeting him.” That night, stewing in their room instead of meeting their favorite actor, Simran and Kavitha had made a pact: Before they were thirty—an age that seemed ludicrously far away at the time—they would move to New York City together and go wherever they wanted and never have a curfew. Kavitha’s mouth flattens and Simran senses she has said the wrong thing. She clears her throat. “We should watch *DDLJ* later, once the party is done.”

Kavitha pulls at the neck of her gray-and-pink ghagra and places two vadas onto a guest’s plate. “No thanks.”

She can tell Kavitha doesn’t enjoy being this cold from the way the edges of her mouth droop down—or at least she hopes that’s true. “Ouch.”

“Did you expect that you would come back here, and it would be like the old days again?” Kavitha asks. “It won’t.”

Simran’s first instinct is to walk away from the conversation. She doesn’t like pleading. But she fights the impulse. She wants phone calls and visits and for them to know the inner workings of each other’s lives. She wants Kavi’s opinions on all the movies that have come out since they stopped talking and all the ones that will come out from now on. She wants her to meet Leo and Liv, for them to love her the way Simran does. “What can I do to make you not hate me anymore, Kavi?” Simran asks quietly.

“I don’t hate you.”

“You’re acting like it.”

“No, I’m acting like you have for the last seven years. I’m going about my life as if you don’t exist. How does it feel?” With that, Kavitha hands

her the tongs and walks away. The words sting. Kavi's hurt, and Simran wishes she were angry instead. Anger has rungs you can hold on to, but hurt is liquid, impossible to grasp as it seeps into every space.

Simran pushes away the feeling that she deserves her cousin's anger as she crunches down furiously on a vada and checks her phone. Three missed calls from Leo since she'd texted him earlier about being in Addison for the next two weeks. As if on cue, her phone buzzes in her hand:

Leo Bridgers [12:37 p.m.]: Of course we can raincheck on our date. Have a great time at the wedding! I bet everyone's so excited you're back.

Leo Bridgers [12:38 p.m.]: Unless you have some downtime today? Maybe a minidate? I could stop by on my way to Newark since I don't leave till the evening.

Oh god. No matter how much she already misses Leo, the last thing she needs is having him here, around her family, around *her* around her family. There's no way this thing between them would survive even five minutes at Iyer House.

Simran Gopal [12:40 p.m.]: Tempting but a minidate is like funsize candy at Halloween. Fullsize dating is so much better, don't you think? Besides, it's my cousin's engagement ceremony so I literally won't have a minute to myself all day.

Leo Bridgers [12:41 p.m.]: Bummer. I'm just hanging out till my flight, if anything changes.

He was so comforting and understanding the other night, but she can't keep crying in his arms. It isn't his burden; it's hers. That terrible day cleaved her life into before and after, into there and here, into with and without. But if she can go back to her house in Chennai, that grief might not feel so acute, so complicated anymore. Maybe, she fantasizes, he could even come with her.

"Mere saath ao." Appearing from nowhere like a pocket-size Houdini, her aunt tugs her arm and pulls them towards the house. "I need to talk to you about an important thing in private." Simran trails her aunt through the kitchen and into the living room, and then Veena perma stops so suddenly that Simran walks into her.

Her aunt is staring daggers at three men clustered around a phone, watching, from the sounds of it, a soccer game. "Why are they all standing here, together, instead of where I told them?" her aunt mutters to herself. "Eh, you boys! Come here!" she calls to them, as if they were delinquents.

The trio of men could ostensibly be the same man: early to midthirties, not much taller than Simran, one bearded, the other goateed, and the last with—Simran suppresses a shudder—a soul patch. They look up, eyes wide in alarm. Almost in unison, they spring into action, lining up in front of her aunt, and Simran now understands that she has been set up—for a setup.

“Perima ...” she says, her tone weary and warning. How could her aunt have possibly arranged this in the three hours that Simran has been back?

“I know, I know,” Veena perima says, holding her hand up to placate Simran. “You don’t want an arranged match, nah? What to do, they were supposed to be in the house and you were supposed to meet them naturally. But as usual: If a woman has planned it, a man will mess it up.” She barks at them now: “Chalo, introduce yourselves.”

“Hi, I’m Rahul Chinappa,” the guy on the left says, holding out a hand. Veena perima gives it such a withering stare that Simran is surprised the limb doesn’t shrivel. He drops it.

Simran turns back to her aunt. “This is still a setup.”

“What do you expect, Simi?” her aunt asks. “You’re thirty-one, it’s time to settle down now. Stop this roaming abroad and get married. The older you get, the more set in your ways you are. If you don’t get married, how are you going to have children before it’s too late?” She flicks a finger to the left of her. “You, next.”

The second guy is smart enough to keep his hands in his pockets. “Hi, I’m Pramod Prasanna.”

Simran breathes in deeply, nostrils flaring, to keep her temper at bay but god—she and her aunt are right back in it. She squares her shoulders. “I don’t have a problem with marriage! I have a problem with you setting me up.”

The last guy leans forward. “I’m Mi—”

“What, you think I would choose someone bad for you? Don’t you think that I would only let you marry someone from a good family who shares our values?” Veena perima tells Simran. Bachelor number three shrinks back. “Compatibility is the most important thing, of course!”

It is baffling that her aunt, who had lived in America for well over a decade by the time Simran moved here, holds on to more conservative ideas than Simran’s parents did. They had been open in how they raised her, treating her like she had agency and valuing her opinions. All her friends loved to hang out at her house because her parents never eavesdropped on

their conversations and let them stay as long as they wanted. Her aunt had always been stern, but the kind of control she exerted over Simran by checking up on her constantly or keeping strict curfews or grounding her was smothering—and enraging. Not even her own parents had questioned her so much; how dare her aunt?

Flinging an arm towards the men, Simran says, “You don’t know that we’re compatible!”

“Of course you are!” Her aunt scoffs. “They are all from our community with decent jobs—if I don’t know their parents, I know someone who does. That’s what I’m here for, Simi!”

“I mean our personalities, Perima,” Simran says. All three of the men’s heads are going back and forth, like they’re watching a tennis match. “You don’t know if they’ll even like me.”

“Why shouldn’t they?” Her aunt’s tone is fierce and almost outraged, as if it were an insult to even consider someone not liking her niece. “You’re well educated and you’re much better looking than any of them. They would be blessed to get a bride like you, even if you are over thirty.”

Simran groans, covering the side of her face with her hand as she turns away from the men her aunt has just slighted, alongside slighting her.

“Perima, we’ve been over this. I’m not going to marry someone just because you tell me to. Marriage is a *choice* you make with a person you *love*—”

“So you could *choose* to fall in *love* with any of these three, nah?” At Simran’s exasperated look, her aunt holds up both hands, palms out, head wagging from side to side, as if she were conceding, before looking at the men. “Okay, okay. What are you waiting for? She doesn’t want any of you. You can leave.”

They dutifully file out of the living room.

Simran crosses her arms and looks down at her aunt, who nods. “I know, I know. I wasn’t too excited about them either. You don’t know, it’s been so hard to find a boy worthy of my girls. But I’m sure there’s a nice Tamil boy with a good job who lives close by somewhere out there.” Veena perima pauses and gives Simran a sweet smile, which puts all her senses on high alert. “Or maybe you’ll find someone at the kalyaanam,” she says almost musically. “Chalo chodo, that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

This could be a great moment for Simran to be the person she’s grown into over the last seven years and talk to her aunt honestly and calmly. To

tell her that one of the reasons she left was because her aunt was setting up Kavitha to be married to someone who was all wrong for her—as proven by their engagement breaking a few months later—and that Simran didn't want the same.

But their confrontations were always so explosive that after a while, Simran learned to strategically pick only the most important battles. For everything else, it was easier to skirt around Veena perma's orders and enforcements. Like when they were in high school and Simran made up a friend who was an honor-roll student whose house they'd pretend they were studying at while actually going to the mall on the other side of town. It slips off her tongue easily when she says, "Okay. I just need to go to the bathroom first."

"Okay. I'll make us some chai and meet you in the study."

Simran releases a giant breath after her aunt walks back to the kitchen. Through the years, this place has housed the most painful versions of herself: the heartbroken, newly orphaned child; the resentful, displaced teen; the college graduate who fled to Toronto with grief still in her veins. She's afraid that coming here again is forcing her back into being those Simrans, when all she wants is to be able to move forward. Pulling out her phone, she texts Leo, wanting him to make her laugh, the way he always seems to know when she needs to the most.

Simran Gopal [1:12 p.m.]: This place is a madhouse. I wish you were here.

"Simran!" Her aunt's voice pierces its way up through the house and she recoils, fumbling her phone and pressing randomly over the screen before she catches it safely and places it on the table. Then she dashes upstairs, ducking down the long hallway and slipping out the window to the tiny, mostly forgotten side balcony to hide. She's not proud of ghosting her aunt, but she's not ready to bring up the key yet.

First, she's got to get Kavitha to speak to her.

6.

Leo stands on the front porch of Iyer House, his left foot tapping wildly. He cranes his neck towards the music and voices coming from the backyard, but there's no one out front.

He could tell his interview went well from the way they kept bringing in more of the higher-ups to meet him. But today, with nothing to do, his brain had started overthinking. Simran had texted that she'd be gone for two weeks and then hadn't picked up any of his calls. She hated talking on the phone, so maybe that didn't mean anything. But she'd also blown off his offer to come see her. If their situations were reversed, he'd have wanted her to stop by, even if it was just for five minutes. He didn't think he was being ghosted, but things between them were still so new. Then, out of the blue, right as he was leaving for the airport, that text: *I wish you were here*. A few seconds later, she'd shared her location. He was in a cab within minutes.

But now he is here and she's not answering her phone. He doesn't want to show up to a family occasion he wasn't officially invited to without at least talking to her first. But maybe Indian families have the same approach to wedding functions as his mother does for their Sunday dinners: the more the merrier. He glances at his phone again, willing her to pick up. He doesn't have much time before he has to leave for his flight.

"Can I help you?"

Leo whips around at the sound to find a guy his age, dressed in a deep purple velvet tunic-type thing over tailored pants, with his arms crossed, dark eyebrows raised.

"Hey, sorry," Leo says, unsure. "My name is Leo. I'm a ... um, friend of Simran Gopal. She's attending a family wedding here."

The guy chuckles. "Yeah. My wedding."

Leo's eyebrows go up. "No shit?"

"I'm Rishi, I'm marrying her cousin Geeta," he says, walking up the porch steps and extending his hand. Leo shakes it and congratulates him.

"So you're Simi's um-friend?"

Leo grins. "Something like that." Realizing he's just been caught doing what can be, at best, interpreted as loitering, and, at worst, stalking, he grows serious. "I was in New York for work and I wanted to see her before I went back to Toronto. Just to make sure she's okay."

Rishi frowns. "Why wouldn't she be okay? She's with her family."

"Oh. Yeah, no," Leo says, backtracking. "I didn't mean it like that. I just —"

Rishi holds his palms up as he laughs again. "Relax, dude. I know the family history. I'm *marrying* the family history. I get it. Simi's back for the first time in seven years, of course there's going to be drama."

Leo hadn't realized that's how long it had been. Even he sees his absentee father more often than that. "Listen, can you help me find her? I don't want to crash the party or anything, I just want to talk to her."

"You know, the thing in your hand is pretty good for that," Rishi suggests, gesturing at Leo's phone. "It would be, if she answered it."

"I can go get her," Rishi says. "But it would be irresponsible for me not to verify that you are who you say you are."

"Are you going to show me nine squares and have me pick which ones have motorcycles in them?" Leo asks.

Rishi laughs but lifts his chin in interrogation. "What's Simran's middle name?"

Leo narrows his eyes. "Trick question, she doesn't have one."

Rishi nods in approval. "Listen, if you do turn out to be a burglar, can you please leave the record player in the study? It's an antique and I'm hoping to inherit it through marriage."

Leo smiles. "For my accomplice? You got it."

"That's exactly what the police are going to call me, isn't it?" Rishi mutters. He opens the front door, poking his head inside. Stepping through the threshold, he motions for Leo to follow him.

"I've got to tell you, that is a really dope look," Leo says.

Rishi looks down at his outfit as they make their way through the living room. "Yeah? I didn't know if it was too over-the-top."

"Dude, I'm a total stranger giving you a compliment. There's no reason for you not to believe it," Leo tells him.

"I guess," Rishi says, a hitch in his voice.

"I listen to this podcast and the host says, 'Until we can receive with an open heart, we're never really giving with an open heart,'" Leo replies.

Then he stops short, cringing. He's lost his ability to have casual conversation thanks to his therapist mother and guidance-counsellor sister.

But Rishi stops too and turns around, his eyes wide. "You listen to *Unlocking Us* with Brene Brown?"

Leo can hardly believe it. "Hell yes I do!"

"All the guys I work with make fun of me for listening to girly shit," Rishi says.

"Oh, you work at Incels 'R' Us?" Leo asks.

Rishi laughs as they make their way through the dining room into an awkward annex at the rear of the house. The bass of whatever song is playing in the party out back thumps and someone sings lyrics in a language he doesn't understand, except for the intermittent English words: "sup" and "party all night" and—he's sure he's mishearing this phrase—"yo-yo honey sing." But he feels very far from all the action in this mazelike hallway.

"I'll go find Simran," Rishi says. "Why don't you go wait in the room on the left? There's never anyone in there."

Leo stops outside a door. "This one?" he asks Rishi's retreating back.

"No," Rishi calls over his shoulder. "The next room. The study."



Leo finds himself in a square room with a large oak desk in the middle. It's stuffy and outdated, from the tufted leather executive chair and the fax machine in the corner to the dark damask wallpaper, but Leo's not looking at any of that. At the back of the room is a gallery wall crowded with photos, most in black and white, of what look like family members. But the two larger portraits in the center stand out. They are somewhere in their forties, younger than any of the others by decades. The photo on the right is of a woman with high cheekbones and a braided rope of dark hair pulled over one shoulder, her face made incandescent by the red of her sari. The man in the second portrait has deep, flawless skin and wears metal frame glasses, grooves on either side of his mouth like bookends. Leo smiles at that smile, recognizing the dimple—not a pair but a lone one—as the same one that pops into Simran's cheek.

Standing here in the house of the family Simran never talks about, staring at the photos of the two most important people to her who she also never

talks about, people he'll never get a chance to know, a realization hits him with full force. There is a whole part of herself she keeps buried that, if he wants to be with her, he has to find a way to reach.

And then, for the second time today, he gets caught.

"Aiyo! Who are you?"

Leo whirls around to see a woman in a blue sari slam a tray onto the desk, making the cups and a teapot rattle. She advances on him. Leo swallows audibly, spine going even straighter. All six-foot-two of him towers over this woman, who can't be more than five feet tall. And yet, he feels cornered.

It dawns on him: This is Simran's aunt, Veena, whom she has mentioned in passing, mostly to tell stories of how strict she was when Sim was growing up.

"Hi! I'm sorry to intrude, I'm Leo. Leo Bridgers," he replies. She looks him up and down and it's the same feeling he got when he had the MRI for his shoulder: trapped and seen right through.

"What are you doing here?" She's wearing a maroon bindi the size of a thumbnail on her forehead and her mouth twists in horror when she looks down. "And why are you wearing shoes inside the house?"

Shit. He knows better than this. This was a rookie mistake.

"I'm so sorry," he says, toeing off his sneakers but the woman's expression doesn't change. He feels his face heat up and can tell that he's going plotchy.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" she repeats, a bark more than a question.

"I'm Leo," he attempts again. He presses his lips together because he has a feeling that anything he says will be the wrong thing. But he is, even under far more favorable circumstances, a chronic silence-filler. "I'm a friend of S—"

At that moment, the door slams open and both their heads swing in unison to see Simran with Rishi. She's got a hand clamped on each side of the doorway, and she surveys the scene, chest heaving as if she ran here. He's never seen her in Indian clothes before; she looks gorgeous in a green outfit. Her gaze pivots from Leo to the portraits of her parents behind him before landing on her aunt. From over her shoulder, Rishi peers into the room.

“Simi, Rishi! Look at this! Some strange white boy has gotten into our house,” Veena says. “Maybe he’s one of those thieves everyone keeps sending WhatsApp forwards about.” She whips her head towards him. “Are you a thief?”

He shakes his head back and forth, a few too many times but he can’t stop. “No, I work in translation.” God, he sounds like an idiot. This woman’s laser stare has disintegrated some of his brain cells. Her face scrunches in distaste, like she can hear his inner monologue.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Leo,” he repeats, eyes flicking to Simran. She has that same shuttered look on her face as the night of her birthday.

Veena crosses her arms. “What are you doing in my house, Leonardo?”

“It’s just Leo, actually.”

“What?” The word comes out like a gunshot.

“You said Leonardo. That’s ... not my name.” He trails off.

Veena simply stares at him. Leo gulps. He shouldn’t have corrected her. He doesn’t quite know what’s happening, but he knows it’s all going horribly wrong. And Simran keeps standing there, not saying anything.

Veena squints. “Where did you come from?”

He’s not sure how to answer so he just says, “Toronto.”

“Toronto?” Veena’s shoulders stiffen. “Simran lives in Toronto.” Her voice is tinged with suspicion. A little ping goes off in Leo’s head: Simran hasn’t told her family about him. Not even as a friend. He’s about to explain that they know each other through his sister but something, maybe the way Simran remains wordless, makes him snap his mouth shut.

Veena’s voice is minimally gentler as she turns back to Simran and asks, “Do you know this boy?”

Simran swallows, blinking fast as she answers: “No, Perima, I don’t.” She bites her lips immediately.

She lied.

What the hell? Leo tries catching Simran’s eye, but she is determinedly looking at anything but him. He feels embarrassed—but also a little betrayed. He shouldn’t have come here without an actual invitation, but it cuts deep that she’s pretending she doesn’t know him at all. It doesn’t matter that he’s had a thing for her for more than a decade. Doesn’t matter that she is his dream girl. He deserves more than this.

Veena, hands on her hips, has turned back to Leo. “So who are you? What are you doing here?”

“Veena aunty, this is my friend,” Rishi says, stepping around Simran in the doorway to let himself into the room. He stands next to Leo and slaps his shoulder as if they’ve not seen each other in months. “Good to see you, man! I didn’t realize you were coming to the engagement party.”

Leo is infinitely thankful. “Oh, yeah. Sorry. I should have called.” He glances at Veena. “And taken off my shoes.”

“But why are you in this room?” she asks.

“I was looking for Rishi,” Leo explains. Simran is staring at her feet, her expression stony and unreadable.

“This part of the house is not open to strangers!” Veena says.

Rishi tries to pave over the awkwardness, slinging an arm over Leo’s shoulder and tugging him in the direction of the door. “Sorry about that, Aunty. Come on, buddy, let’s go out back and get some food.”

But Leo doesn’t move. He looks at Simran again, raking a hand through his hair. He thought they were on the same page—that this was real and so good. Whatever is happening here, she doesn’t want him to be a part of it. And he doesn’t want to stay where he’s not wanted.

“Actually, I just wanted to swing by and say congratulations,” he says, clearing his throat, looking at Rishi. “I can’t stay for the party, I have to go catch my flight back to Toronto.” At this, her head jerks up.

“Oh.” Rishi’s gaze darts around, as if he wants to look at Simran to intervene, but then realizes Veena is watching all of them closely. “... Okay.”

Leo bends down to pick up his sneakers and murmurs a final congratulations to Rishi. He walks past Simran, deliberately not looking at her and leaving a wide berth between them, as if they really were strangers.

7.

For the first time in sixteen years, Simran is looking at the portraits of her parents. There are garlands of dried flowers draped around each photo of family members they've lost over the years. Only her parents, in the center of the wall with pictures double the size of the others, are wreathed with fresh white jasmine buds. The reverent fragrance wafts over her.

Her aunt and Rishi leave the room after Leo, but Simran stays rooted to the spot right in front of the portraits. Their faces are so familiar, but what she's forgotten, what has faded against her will with the passing of time, is the motion of them, the expressions that brought them to life. This is what going back to her house in Chennai can do that being here can't—she can be in the presence of their memories, not flat facsimiles of who they were.

She once heard a metaphor about grief: that it was like a ball inside a ring. When the terrible thing first happens, the ring and the ball are the same size and everywhere they touch is deeply painful. As you go on, with time and healing, the ring expands. Whenever the ball touches the ring, it still hurts as much as it ever did—but it happens less frequently.

For Simran, that never happened. Instead, the ball has grown spikes.

And because being in this house makes that ring feel tighter than ever, she's hurt Leo.

She can't stop picturing the look on his face when she said she didn't know him, his hazel eyes pinched, that vertical line between his eyebrows deeper than she'd ever seen it. It's unforgivable that she made him feel like that. But she had to lie. She couldn't tell her aunt that she was dating the "strange white boy." Veena perima would have never let it go and it would have smothered everything between them.

Though—there may not be anything between them anymore. Not after what she's done. Something unravels inside her. What made Leo come here? Couldn't he have just replied "miss you too" to her message and waited a couple of weeks? Of course not. He doesn't do things halfway. It's one of the reasons she likes him so much. She is barely aware of it but her

feet have taken her to the front porch. Her aunt is standing in the front yard, arms crossed, like a watchdog. Across the street, Leo is walking towards a black car that will take him to the airport and away from her. His shoulders are hunched and a million jagged feelings spiral within her.

Look at me. Just once, Simran thinks. Turn around.

She can't quite articulate what she'll know if he turns, only that he must, only that if he doesn't—and it seems like he won't, as he opens the back seat door and tosses his duffel bag inside—she will know that they are over before they even had a chance to begin.

Turn.

She stares at the proud spire of his neck, the neat, square hedge of his hairline.

Turn.

And then, just before he slides into the car, Leo does.

When their eyes meet, he gives her the ghost of a smile. He's always been easy to read and she suspects it's by his own choosing.

This is a goodbye.

But still: He turned.

The door slams with a finality that jolts her. As the car drives away and she tells her aunt she'll be right in, panic clangs inside of her. She can't let it end like this. The only thing that matters now is that she makes sure Leo knows how sorry she is, how much she cares about him, how much she wants him if he'll still have her.

And he needs to know now.

She rushes back into the house, taking the stairs two at a time. Grabbing her phone, she sees all the earlier missed calls and messages from Leo and dials his number over and over again, increasingly frantic each time he doesn't answer. Simran runs back downstairs and out to the backyard, slowing down to not rouse her aunt's attention, arms stiff at her sides as she speed walks with intent. She has to find Leo before he gets on his flight, and given that she doesn't drive, she is going to need help. And there's only one person she can turn to.

"Kavitha," she says, her voice a rushed whisper. Her cousin is standing by herself at one of the small high tables sprinkled across the vast backyard, quite literally twiddling her thumbs. "I need you to drive me to the airport."

Kavitha narrows her eyes, a smidge too far apart in a way that will always make her look young. "I figured you'd leave again, but on the same

day you arrived?”

Simran sighs. “Kavitha, can we do this some other time? Right now, I—”

Her cousin crosses her arms and cocks her head. “Forgive me if I don’t hold my breath.”

“I had no other choice!” Simran flings her arms up. “And it’s not like you ever came to see me once I left.”

Kavitha’s shoulders drop. “You’re right; I didn’t come to see you once you left. How could I visit the person who literally ran away from our home? Who broke my mother’s heart?”

If Simran had any effect on her aunt’s heart, she never saw it. It was more likely that her ego rankled against Simran’s leaving. She glances down at her phone. No call back from Leo but the clock edges up a minute, a reminder that she doesn’t have time for this. “I can’t argue about this now.”

“I don’t want to argue about it at all,” Kavitha says. That is true—Kavitha was never as prone to arguing as Simran was.

“I’ll listen to whatever you have to say, I promise,” Simran says, frenzy zooming through her bloodstream. “But first, I have to get to Newark. He’s not answering his phone and if he gets on his flight, I’ll miss him and it will be too late.”

“He? Who’s he?” Her cousin’s face lights up with curiosity. “Does this have anything to do with Amma claiming she caught one of Rishi’s white friends trying to rob us?”

“I can—I will—explain everything,” Simran says, breathless with urgency. “But we have to go right now.”

Kavitha’s expression is so much like her mother’s as she scans Simran’s face. When they used to spend their summers together, they shared everything, even their seat, each balanced precariously on half a chair, their parents calling them silly as they insisted they were comfortable. That’s how Simran thinks sisters should take care of each other: give each other things whenever they can. It’s just that, under Veena Iyer’s roof, Simran hadn’t had much to give.

“Please, señorita,” Simran says. She hopes invoking the code still works both ways.

Kavitha takes a beat and then her shoulders straighten, all business. “Okay, we have to split up so Amma doesn’t get suspicious. You go through the house and meet me outside the Brindavans’ house, that’s where my car is parked.”

Simran takes off as Veena perima calls to her from fifteen feet away. “Just going to change my shoes!” she lies again and ducks into the house. As she’s leaving, she sees someone grab Kavitha’s arm and ask for something.

“Oh no!” Kavitha says in a too-loud, stilted tone. “I think we’re completely out of coconut chutney! I will go to the store and get some! Right now!” Simran groans as she dashes through the kitchen. Her cousin is a notoriously terrible liar.

But somehow, it goes off without a hitch and a few minutes later, she and Kavitha are driving to the airport, only about twenty minutes away with a blessedly clear highway.

“So, what’s going on?” Kavitha asks, taking in Simran’s hands as she picks at her cuticles anxiously.

“I—” But Simran can’t say it. Not yet. Not when she doesn’t know if she will catch Leo, if he will forgive her, or if this will end with her heart broken. “I will tell you. I promise.” Kavitha snorts in response. They pull up to a traffic light and Simran braces herself for a perfectly placed retort, the kind only someone who has known you from your childhood can give.

But maybe she sees the desperation on Simran’s face because after a long moment, all Kavitha says is “Okay.”

And then Kavi is winding her way through the cars outside the departures area, sliding into an open spot so smoothly that she could easily consider a career as an F1 driver. Simran is out of the car and sprinting into the terminal before it’s even come to a full stop.

8.

Leo!" she calls, when she finally spots him in the winding security check line.

Almost always a head taller than everyone around him, he turns, broad shoulders swinging like an open door, gaze landing right on Simran in her bright outfit. He's too far away for her to see his expression, to tell if his easy smile might be in the wings, waiting to emerge at the sight of her.

Or if his face will say this is all over. That this is not the happy ending of that movie she is acting out, but an ending of a different kind, of them, after they have barely even started.

If she can't read the look on his face, she doubts he can read the one on hers. There's only one thing she can do.

"I'm sorry," she calls.

He blinks a few times, frowning, and then holds a finger to his ear. "I'm sorry!" She shouts this time, hands cupped around her mouth, and about fifty heads swing in her direction, including several near Leo. Squaring her shoulders and taking a deep breath, she says, at that same cringingly loud volume, "I'm so sorry. Please—*please*—you have to know—I'm crazy about you. You have to know that, Leo."

To her embarrassment, the crowd reacts. A handful of people let out an "awwww," while a few others—not many but not none—snicker at her. She holds both of those reactions inside herself, mortified at her earnestness yet freed by saying exactly how she feels.

Leo has started the awkward process of making his way through the line, saying "Excuse me" over and over like a mantra, ducking underneath the barricades and swerving around strollers. Seconds go by like hours until he's finally out of the line but he stops before he reaches her, leaving a wide gap between them. His usually open-book face is unreadable and the ground beneath her feet feels shaky.

He crosses his arms over his chest. "You really hurt me."

"I know. I hate that I did," she says. "I'm sorry."

His frown sinks deeper into his features. “What was all that, back at your aunt’s house?”

She forces herself to stop fidgeting and looks him in the eye. “I didn’t know what else to do—you have no idea how complicated things are with my family, what it’s like being here again,” she says. A lump forms in her throat. People are still watching them, not bothering to hide their curious gazes. A few have pulled out their phones and are filming.

“Then talk to me about it, instead of avoiding my calls and barely replying to my texts,” he says.

“Okay,” she replies, her heart hooking on his use of present tense. It’s been so long since she’s let someone be this close to her; she’s scared what his proximity will do to the things she’s hidden deep within herself. But it’s *Leo*. She’ll try her hardest for him, even if she’s not quite sure how. She takes a step forward.

“If you want this, you can’t shut me out. We’re in this together and we’re *in it*,” he says. His forearms are still taut, hands in fists, but his arms are by his side now and the trenched line between his eyebrows has softened.

“I’m in it. I want this, Leo. Us. Just tell me what I can do to show you that,” she says, taking another step closer. “You are the first thing that’s felt right to me in sixteen years.”

Leo stares at her for a long moment.

And then he unfurls as he opens his arms and her feet move forward like a magnet to his charge. When she reaches him, she grabs the fabric of his Henley and pulls his face to hers. It’s a soft kiss that scorches with promise, and his hand steals up the side of her neck.

She’s vaguely aware of a few people—no doubt in the “awwww” faction—applauding, and she knows what a sight they must make, her still in Indian formal wear, him casual and old-Hollywood handsome, all of this taking place in an airport, a movie cliché and very much a real-life love story. A tour group of septuagenarians in matching emerald-and-gold visors and T-shirts that read “Vaxxed and Waxed: Class of ’73 Reunion” moves towards the security line, breaking around the two of them so they’re surrounded by yellow and green, as if she were in a windswept field of mustard flowers.

They pull away and he smiles down at her. “You ran through the airport to find me?”

She blushes at the spectacle she's made. "I couldn't let you leave like that."

"I'm not going to pretend I don't love the grand gesture. Or that what you did wasn't kind of messed up. But I don't need all this. You just have to talk to me. That's all I'm asking for," he says. The crinkles around his eyes are little rivers of emotion. "Well, one more thing. Can you fix your family thinking I'm some white looter? That's my forefathers, not me."

Simran laughs. "I can work on that." She kisses him again because she can, because he's here, because he's hers, and she came too close to not being his.

"Not to interrupt the moment," a voice drawls from behind Simran. She startles, turning with her arms still around Leo, to see Kavitha a few feet behind them, hair frizzy from the humidity. "But I'll take that explanation now, Akka."

Simran nods at her cousin. "Okay, let's talk." She turns back to Leo and pulls their joined hands to her lips. "Text me when you land?"

"No, no," Kavitha replies. "He's not going anywhere. He's part of the explanation."

"Come on, Kavi! He'll miss his flight," Simran says, turning to face her. "You can't expect everyone to drop everything whenever you want!"

They square off, silently radiating years of unspoken frustration. Kavitha crosses her arms.

From behind her, Leo pipes up. "Whoa, it's okay. I can stay." When Simran turns, the look he gives her is plain to understand: This is what being in it means to him.

And as the three of them walk back to Kavitha's car, Simran realizes that despite her heroine dramatics and grand gestures and big speeches, her life isn't at all like a Bollywood movie.

This isn't happily ever after; this is just the beginning.

9.

Simran sits on one side of a booth at Dosa House, Leo next to her, their hands clasped under the table. Kavitha sits across from them. No one is speaking; only the cacophonous clank of dishes and cooks calling out orders fills the silence.

Leo's gaze flicks between her cousin and her, but both remain silent, just like in the awkward car ride over. "Listen, I know you and I just met," he says, leaning his elbows on the table. "But Simran's told me a lot of stories about you. It's great to meet the legendary Kavitha."

"I wish I could say the same, Leo," Kavitha replies. She catches herself and adds, "I mean, I'm sure you're nice."

"I am nice." He leans back against the booth, giving Kavitha his full attention. "And you can ask me anything. I'm an open book."

Oh god, he *is* an open book. And he's here with Simran's family, where she most wants to be closed off.

Kavi's gaze pings between the two and she sits back, arms crossed. "Are you together?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Depends on how you want to define it but anywhere from a few days to"—he checks his watch—"an hour." Simran watches her cousin's jaw loosen as she puts the pieces together: This is something new, trying to find its footing, not a secret Simran has kept from her family for years.

"So why are you here?" Kavitha asks.

Leo takes a sip of water. "Sim took off and then I got the vibe she was avoiding me."

Simran squeezes the hand that's tucked into his. She *was* avoiding him, and though she knows he means it when he said he forgave her, she feels the prickle of guilt anyway. A giant masala dosa is set down in the center of the table and Kavitha tears off a quarter of it with both hands before nudging the plate towards Leo.

"She does love avoiding things," Kavitha says to him.

Leo grins. "She sure does."

Simran huffs. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Exhibit A," Leo tells Kavitha around a mouthful of potatoes. Simran rolls her eyes.

"And that! She loves rolling her eyes!" Kavitha says, and Simran would be more annoyed except that there's a smile on her cousin's face aimed in her direction for the first time since she's been back.

"It's practically a hobby," Leo agrees.

"When we were kids, her dad teased her that they'd get stuck like that one day. She went a whole month extremely freaked out, until she realized everyone else knew that wasn't possible. Oooh, she was so mad."

Simran is mid-eye roll before she realizes both Leo and Kavitha are peering at her, waiting for this exact reaction. She purses her lips instead. Leo smiles at her cousin and says, "Thank you for telling me that, Kavitha. You might be my new favorite person."

She giggles. "You can call me Kavi. That's what people I like call me."

Leo's smile grows at the same rate as Simran's frown; these two are more than getting along. They're dangerously close to being in cahoots—and yet she is still being iced out. Her scowl deepens when Kavitha directs the next question to Leo and not her. "So why'd she run through an airport to apologize to you? What'd she do?"

Leo tells Kavitha, in all its disastrous glory, how he showed up unannounced with Veena finding him, and Simran's subsequent lie.

"I really am sorry, Leo," Simran says, rubbing his forearm. "But Veena perima would have freaked out if I had told her who you really were."

He puts his hand over hers. To Simran's surprise, Kavitha chimes in. "She's right. We're not the type of family who sits down at the breakfast table and talks freely about who we're dating."

"My mother is a therapist. I get it: boundaries," Leo says.

"It's more than that. This is like a cultural-generational wall," Kavitha says. "In my mother's head, she's actually deeply permissive. The idea that we'd want to marry anyone outside of the community has never even occurred to her. So if she vets and chooses someone—and even lets us spend time together before we get married—she can't fathom that we'd want anything more. Who needs passion or chemistry?"

Simran chuckles but shakes her head. "It's not always like that. My parents wouldn't have cared."

“Fair enough. Some Indian parents are chill. Yours were,” Kavitha says. She turns back to Leo and gives him a pointed look. “Mine are not.”

“I get it,” Leo says. “I mean, I’m obviously not South Asian—”

“Hot tip,” Kavitha interrupts. “That’s a real white person term. I get that it’s there so everyone doesn’t get called Indian when there’s like ten other countries they could be from. But us *South Asians*? We’re specific—to the region. Like, we’re Tamil. Rishi’s family is Punjabi. There’s a whole North-South divide thing and a bunch of other stuff you’ll have to learn at some point.”

Leo cringes as he says, “I was also wearing shoes in the house.”

“Ahh, that’s a big no-no,” Kavitha says, gentle pity etched on her face.

“Oh, what’s that?” Leo says, watching Simran dip her idli in a crumbly brown powder.

He does the same with his, taking a bite just as she says, “Wait!” Immediately, he begins to tear up. He frantically grabs for a glass of water.

“Dude, we call it gunpowder,” Kavitha says.

“Eating it is a skill,” Simran says. She hands him a plain idli and he shoves it in his mouth. As Leo recovers, she tells Kavitha, “Not just that. Leo also corrected her when she said his name wrong.”

Kavitha groans. “Maybe your worst mistake yet,” she says. “You do not correct Veena Iyer. You merely operate your life around her misinformation.”

“Noted,” Leo says glumly.

Simran rubs his back. “It’s okay. Perima will forget about you with all the wedding stuff happening.”

“Wait, he’s not coming?” Kavitha asks. She leans back against the booth and crosses her arms. “He has to come to the wedding. I won’t let you lie to our family.”

“We just talked about how we don’t tell them who we’re dating,” Simran says.

“Not casually, no! But if it’s someone important, you should. And there’s a difference between outright lying and telling them at the right time,” Kavitha says. Leo is quiet, watching them bicker, but Simran knows he heard Kavitha say “if it’s someone important.” She meant what she said in the airport. But that doesn’t mean her aunt needs to know about them right now.

“You asked me what I wanted from you,” Kavitha says calmly. “This is what I want. Leo comes to the wedding and you tell the family you’re together.”

“Kavitha, ni yenna solren? Yosi.” She doesn’t realize she’s slipped into Tamil until she sees the confusion on Leo’s face. “Think about what you’re asking for. You heard what a terrible impression Leo made. That’s why I said I didn’t know him—”

“Wait a minute,” Kavi says. Her head lifts, a smile stealing over her face. Simran has seen that look before. “My mother thinks you two are strangers.”

“Yeah ...” Simran says, wary of her cousin’s tone.

“That’s it!”

“What’s it?” Simran asks. This change in Kavitha from sullen to plotting is startling. “Why do you look like the Brain when he’s cooking up a scheme to try to take over the world?”

“Because, Pinky ...” Kavi’s gaze locks onto Simran’s. “I have a scheme.”

“To try to take over the world?”

“To win over Veena Iyer.”

Simran scoffs. “It would be easier to take over the world.”



Simran glances around the darkened room, everyone’s faces lit by the glow of the huge, clunky TV in Rishi’s childhood bedroom. It’s been a few hours since they left Dosa House. Once the engagement party ended and Geeta had gone back to Connecticut because she had a shift in the morning, Kavitha, radiating maniacal glee, had dragged Rishi, Simran, and Leo into Rishi’s childhood bedroom and, without any explanation, put *DDLJ* on.

The familiar strings of the mandolin play and it feels so right, her cousin sitting cross-legged on the floor below her, Rishi sprawled to the right, and Leo’s arm pressed against hers. This is her favorite movie, yes, but it’s also a favorite experience, layered with the memories of the hundreds of times she’s watched it before, most of which were with her cousin. Years ago, Rishi had even driven her, Kavi, and Geeta to a special screening and the theater had felt more like a party, with everyone singing along, hooting and cheering during the most iconic moments. She hasn’t seen it even once

since she moved to Toronto—now she realizes why. Watching this movie without Kavitha would be like watching it on mute, a key part missing.

She turns her attention back to the movie as the two main characters, Simran and Raj, traipse through misadventures in Europe, annoying each other until they fall in love. They separate at the end of the trip because movie-Simran has to go to India to marry the man her father has chosen for her, the son of his best friend, whom she's never met.

"So not cool of her dad," Rishi observes.

Kavitha elbows him. "Shhhhh."

On-screen, Raj follows movie-Simran to India, where they come up with a plan to pretend to be strangers so he can win over her family and convince her father that he's the right man for her. Even though it's been nearly a decade since the last time she watched it, Simran still knows every intonation in the dialogue, every expression on the actors' faces, every note in all the songs, as Raj slowly worms his way into everyone's hearts at the wedding, even cracking movie-Simran's stoic and stern father. But then, he finds out that Raj and his daughter have been sneaking around behind everyone's backs. Raj is dramatically kicked out of the house, which leads to a highly unnecessary fight sequence, and movie-Simran begs her father to let her get on the train that Raj is on, as it slowly leaves the station. Realizing that the best person for his daughter is the man who makes her happy, he lets her go, with possibly the most famous, most quoted line in the movie: "Jaa, Simran, jaa. Jee le apni zindagi." *Go, Simran, go. Live your life.* And in slow motion, she runs to the train, towards Raj's outstretched hand, towards the life she wants with her father's blessings, in a mirror of the scene where she and Raj first met. He pulls her into the carriage and, parental approval secured, they go off into their happily ever after.

Kavitha stands and switches off the movie as the credits run. Turning to the group, she says expectantly, "Well?"

"Oh, we're allowed to speak now?" Rishi asks, neck cracking noisily as he sits up.

"Not you, Rishi. You can take a vow of silence." She faces Leo. "What do you think?"

"Me? Two thumbs up." He looks at Simran, stretched out next to him. "I can see why it's your favorite movie. I liked all the family stuff."

“Family stuff?” Simran says, shaking her head as she straightens. “It’s a romance.”

“Sure,” Leo says. “But more than anything, it’s about how their love is not more important than Simran’s relationship with her family. They could have left it all behind at any point, but like Raj says: If he doesn’t get the family’s approval, they won’t ever be truly happy.”

Simran sits up on her knees, hands moving animatedly as she speaks. “It’s about how their love is strong enough that it can take anything, including Simran’s incredibly difficult family. Her father is kind of terrible. You’re cute when you’re wrong, though.”

“It’s not okay that he expects his wife and daughters to do whatever he says. But he’s also homesick and trying to return to the only life he knows. He pushes Simran into that life because he’s scared he’ll lose her otherwise. And it’s you who is wrong—twice, because I’m cute all the time.”

“But he’s so bent on making her do what he says that he doesn’t realize he’s losing her anyway!” Simran replies.

Leo shrugs. “Hurt people hurt people.”

“Okay, lovebirds, save the rest of this for when you’re alone,” Rishi interrupts.

“Yeah, this subtext is quickly becoming text,” Kavitha says. “Clearly, you grasped the plot, Leo. So I ask again: What do you think?”

“Think of what?” he asks.

Kavitha turns to Simran, who holds her hands up in question. “Isn’t this all sounding a little familiar to you, señorita?” her cousin asks. “Girl meets boy. Girl has prickly family who won’t approve of boy. Girl and boy pretend to be strangers so he can win over the family and they can be together.”

Simran slides off the bed to stand next to her cousin, mouth agape. It is infinitely familiar. “Oh my god. You want to ... *DDLJ* our family?”

Kavitha puts her hands on her hips. “Why not?”

Because it’s ridiculous. Because it will never work. Because—

“Life is not a Bollywood movie!”

“Says the girl who just ran through an airport!” Kavitha shoots back.

“Let me get this straight. You want me to pretend not to know Simran and win over your family as a stranger?” Leo says, moving to the edge of the bed to put his feet on the floor.

“Helped by us, of course,” she adds.

“While your family hosts a multiday wedding.”

“With at least six separate events.”

“None of which I’m invited to,” Leo says.

Kavitha thwacks Rishi on the shoulder and he jumps in. “Consider yourself invited, man.”

“A wedding where you’ll have at least a hundred relatives and friends show up, all of whom I’ll need to impress,” Leo says.

“Psssh,” Kavitha says. “Try four hundred.”

Leo swallows audibly. “Four hundred people ... one of whom is your aunt, who already hates me.”

“That’s the whole point,” Kavitha says. “If everyone else loves you—”

“Veena might love me too?” Leo asks.

Kavitha snorts. “No. But she might tolerate you. So ... you in?”

“I don’t know. This feels like some high-level hijinks to me,” Leo says, free hand rubbing the back of his neck.

“Well, they’re not called low-jinks!” Kavi replies.

“With that ironclad logic, how could I say no?” Leo mutters.

“Kavitha, you’re being ridiculous,” Simran says. She puts a hand on Leo’s arm. “We don’t have to do any of this. You can go back to Toronto. I’ll stay for the wedding and we’ll figure the rest out when the timing is right.”

“I know all about your timing, Simran.” Kavitha’s words are like an arrow. “Seven years of it.”

Simran falls silent. Then, changing tactics, she asks, “What about Leo’s job? And where will he stay?”

“I could work remotely for a couple weeks,” Leo offers tentatively.

“And he can stay with me at my parents’ house!” Rishi jumps in.

“Geeta’s going back and forth to the hospital right up till the wedding, but I’m here the whole time. It’ll be good to have someone else around, my parents are already driving me crazy.”

“Rishi! You support this?” Simran says. “I thought you’d hate these types of shenanigans.”

Rishi shakes his head. “No, that’s my future wife. I am very proshenanigan.”

“Damn straight,” Kavitha says, and they high-five. “Simran, remember when Prem uncle kept telling us we were too ‘filmi’?” Simran does. Bollywood movies were commercial and for the masses, therefore not

nearly erudite enough for two young girls who should have been exposing themselves to things with artistic value, according to their mothers' cousin. Never mind that anything he considered to have artistic value was unfailingly written or directed by a white British man. "He was correct: I am too 'filmi' and so are you. We were made for this."

Leo runs a hand through his hair. "Keeping stuff from each other pushes people apart, not together. Can't we just tell everyone the truth and deal with it like mature adults?"

"Wrong crowd, buddy." Kavitha jerks a thumb at Rishi. "My mom and his mom fought about rice today."

"Even Geeta and I hid that we were dating for years," Rishi says to Leo. "There's a time and place for coming clean, but after this afternoon, it's not right now."

Kavitha walks towards the bed. Raising a single arched eyebrow, a skill Simran's always been envious of, she says, "C'mon, Leo. Are you really okay with your girl's family thinking you're some shoe-wearing klepto?"

That seems to be his reluctant tipping point. He glances at Simran and smiles. "I want it on the record that I find this objectively absurd. But, if you're insisting this is the best way, then ... I'm in."

Simran had been hoping he would be her out. She came back for the key to her house—how'd they end up here?

Kavitha grins. "This is going to work, you'll see."

Simran remembers her saying that exact thing before they climbed the mango tree in the neighbor's backyard one summer. She almost broke her leg that day. She's about to argue more but then it hits her: She doesn't just want the key. This scheme makes her and Kavitha teammates, united in the same goal, rather than Simran chasing her around like they're in a game of tag. Even if Simran knows there's not a snowball's chance in hell that Leo is actually going to get Veena's approval.

"Okay, Kavi," Simran says, sighing. "We'll do it your way."

"Excellent," Kavitha says, rubbing her hands as her plotting comes together. "Operation DDLJ is a go."

"Why does it have a name?" Simran asks.

"All capers need a code name. Duh," Kavitha replies, but Simran notices it's with less warmth than when she was speaking to Rishi and Leo. "Crap, it's getting late. Akka, we better get back."

"You have a curfew?" Leo asks.

“Not a curfew per se. But I can tell when Amma is about to deploy her digital smothering tactic,” Kavitha says. “She texts a couple of times, all within five minutes, and then if I’m still not back at home, she’ll start calling me, over and over again.” Simran shudders, remembering this vividly from her teenage days. “One time, one of the senior partners made the whole firm go to his kid’s middle school production of *The Sound of Music*. My phone buzzed so much, they asked me to leave! I never did find out how they solved a problem like Maria.”

“They got her married,” Simran says dryly.

“Ah, the universal solution, according to both Amma and Austrian nuns,” Kavitha replies as she walks out of the room. Rishi follows her, mumbling that he’s going downstairs to get some water, which Simran realizes is to give her and Leo a moment alone. She moves to where he sits on the bed, standing between his legs and brushing the hair away from his forehead. His eyes flutter shut.

“So. This is a lot,” she says as she looks down at him. They’ve known each other for so long, but with this feathering heat between them, she’s learning to read him all over again: the twitch at the right side of his mouth when he’s amused, that brown- and gold-flecked gaze, always curious and moving, the hands that she can now hold, like a furnace around her always-freezing ones. Is he learning her too? Does he know that when she says it’s a lot, she means for her as much as for him—maybe more? “Kavitha is really set on this, but I want to warn you: My aunt is ... She’s not going to be won over. Not the way you’re imagining.”

“Of all the things I’m imagining,” he says, eyes still closed, “your aunt is not one of them.”

“Starting tomorrow, you and I are going to have to pretend to be complete strangers.” Leo Bridgers, always slightly oriented to Simran like she’s his cardinal north, outright ignoring her—she can’t picture it.

He opens his eyes to look at her. “I think it’ll be more difficult for you than for me.”

She angles her chin, giving him a circumspect look. “I have a lifetime of practice lying to Veena perima. I’ll do fine.”

His thumb gently presses into the hollow under her left hip bone, and she teeters on the brink of a shiver. “If you say so.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I don’t always see things the way you see them.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Just that we’re very different people.”

“Obviously—” She’s mid-sentence when he pulls her forward and kisses her, hand buried in her hair.

“What were you saying?” Leo murmurs.

She can’t remember. Her eyes flick down to his thumb as it brushes over her bottom lip. She wants that thumb in her mouth, she wants those lips back on hers, she wants things she shouldn’t want while half kneeling on her childhood friend’s bed. Completing the eye roll she knows he was waiting for, she pulls away and leaves the room.

Kavitha is waiting on the back steps of the Chopras’ house and they head through the backyard gate to Iyer House together.

“Kavi.” When her cousin looks at her, Simran says, “Can we be okay now?”

“It’s not that easy,” Kavitha says. There’s no trace of the excited, all-in-this-together girl she was upstairs. “Let’s see how this whole thing goes. You’re a flight risk.”

“It’s not like that,” Simran says. “I just needed ... space.”

“So much space that you had to cross a national border, apparently,” Kavitha says.

“Just because you’ve never taken space doesn’t mean the rest of us shouldn’t either,” Simran says. She’s annoyed that her cousin isn’t seeing it from her side at all.

Kavitha gapes at her. “Like I had the chance! My sister was prancing around the Northeast collecting every degree known to man, and then you ran away—what, was I supposed to make it three for three in leaving my mother and father by themselves?”

“It’s not your responsibility to manage them,” Simran says.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I get why you wouldn’t understand, but that’s not how family works. Family is doing things you don’t want to do, even when they’re not convenient for you,” Kavitha replies. “I can barely believe you’re here for the wedding.”

“But I am here. So are we just going to fight the whole time?” Simran asks. The Kavitha she knew could never hold a grudge too long, unlike Simran, who could stew in her displeasure for years. Back when they were kids, one of the neighborhood kids had pushed Kavitha off the swings on

the last day of summer break. Simran had refused to talk to him for the entire school year.

“We’re not even fighting now,” Kavitha says calmly. “But just because you’re here doesn’t mean I can forget all the times you stayed away.”

Simran is about to reply, but the back door opens and Veena perima’s stout form appears. “Eh! Where have you two been, roaming around in the middle of the night?” It’s nine p.m. The sun set an hour ago. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you go missing for half of the party today! Faffing around during your sister’s engagement party instead of helping. Shameless. Come inside!” she barks.

Kavi marches out in front of her and Simran follows. This is where Kavitha is wrong; Simran doesn’t expect her cousin to forget *or* forgive what she did—or didn’t do—five years ago. Simran hasn’t forgiven herself for it either.



That first year she moved to Toronto was better than the years she spent in Iyer House, but barely. Every single time Kavitha and Simran texted or the rare occasions they talked, it would end in the same stalemate, a painful and dwindling holding pattern: Simran begging Kavitha to come to Toronto, Kavitha begging Simran to come back to Iyer House. Then, five years ago, they stopped talking altogether. Not without reason.

Simran had been at work and all through the day, her phone kept flashing with calls from Veena perima that she declined. It was nearing the anniversary of her parents’ death, and Simran knew her aunt would try that as an excuse to get her to return to Iyer House. Simran couldn’t do it. Toronto had allowed her to breathe for the first time in years. She couldn’t go back. Later that evening, as she was walking home, her phone rang again. But this time, it was Kavitha calling.

Simran stopped short on the sidewalk, the rain like percussion against her umbrella. Just to have the chance to talk to her cousin, she picked up the call.

“Kavi, I’m glad you called, but I’m not—”

“Dad had a heart attack this morning.” Her voice was flat, but Simran could hear the tremor in it. “They took him in for a triple bypass procedure.

He just got out. He's going to be okay. Thought you'd want to know."

Simran dropped her umbrella and was soaked within seconds. That's why her aunt had called so many times. "Oh god. I—"

"I have to go. Bye." And then her cousin hung up. Simran walked the rest of the way home in a daze, knowing she should book a ticket and go down to see her uncle. She was too familiar with the ways a brush with mortality—whether realized or not—stained the edges of your every thought, infiltrated every space and weighed it down. But the longer she waited, the less she could convince herself to go back. One week turned into a month, which turned into five years.

She still has so much further to go with her cousin. But she's here and at least now Kavitha can't ignore her.

Let the games begin.

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10.

Twelve days until the wedding

When Leo opens his eyes, he doesn't remember where he is. He'd been dreaming that he was in a three-legged race, except that his partner was an enormous and impatient bull. He sits up, shoulder clicking as the springs underneath him groan in a way his carefully selected memory foam mattress does not. Then he remembers he's on the pullout sofa in the Chopras' study, feet hanging off the edge.

It is going to be a long two weeks.

He checks his phone. He had shot off an email to his boss, Amerie, last night about working remotely, gently telling her he was going to do it rather than asking. There's a nonstop group chat between him, Rishi, Kavitha, and Sim with all the things he must and mustn't do, and a text message from Liv ([3:24 a.m.]: call me, wedding crasher), but nothing in his work inbox.

The clank and clink of dishes from somewhere beyond the wall to his left alert him that he is not the first one up. It's been years since Leo woke to a busy household. Once Liv went off to college, it was just Leo with a front-row seat to his parents' excruciatingly slow slide into separation, their lives scheduled so they never had to be in the same room as each other: his dad taking on all things related to Leo's burgeoning hockey future, his mom there for the rest. When they'd announced they were getting a divorce, Leo was almost relieved. A loud clanging is followed by a muffled swear from Ravi and then Manjula laughing. It's the sound of family. It's nice.

Shit. He corrects his inner monologue: Ravi *uncle* and Manjula *aunty*. Per the text thread, the most basic of all rules is that any person a generation or more older than you becomes an uncle or an aunty, regardless of the actual relationship. He scrubs a hand over his face as a knock sounds at the door.

Rishi steps into the room. "Hey, good morning."

“Good morning,” Leo replies, a little sheepish as he tries to comb his flopping hair into submission with his fingers. He’s invited himself to their wedding, though the way Rishi explained it the night before, that’s not a huge faux pas. Uninvited distant relatives are known to just show up. But he’s not a relative. He’s not anyone to any of these people except Simran. Rishi’s parents were welcoming but it is two weeks till their son’s wedding; the last thing they need is a houseguest. “Look, I have to say it again, thank —”

“My mom already thinks you’re great because you loaded the dishwasher last night,” Rishi says with a laugh. “It’s cool, man. Simran has always been like a sister.”

“She told me you and Geeta have been together since high school?” Leo asks.

Rishi turns the desk chair around and sits in it, smile fond with remembering. “Neighbors since we were kids, started dating my junior year. She was so smart, she was in all my classes, even though she was two years younger. We’ve been together eleven years, can you believe that?” He sounds a bit like *he* can’t believe it.

“Your relationship is a sixth grader,” Leo replies. “That’s incredible.”

“If it makes you feel better, Veena aunty really didn’t like me when we were younger.”

“Why not?” Maybe whatever Veena aunty didn’t like about Rishi is something Leo can sidestep and get ahead of a little bit.

“Well, she was deeply suspicious that I was into one of her daughters,” Rishi says.

Leo’s phone pings and he purses his lips as he scans the email. “My boss doesn’t sound thrilled. But she’s given me the okay.”

“Sometimes, that’s the most you can hope for with a boss,” Rishi says.

Leo shakes his head, even as a low-grade anxiety settles into him. “It’s not like that with Amerie. I work at a translation company for film and TV streaming services and production houses. We do subtitling, dubbing, all of it. I came to New York for an internal interview that she helped set up for me. If I get it, I’d head up the entire French team in Toronto.”

“So you’re worried about being here while they’re making the decision,” Rishi says.

Leo waves it away. “It is what it is. What about you?”

“I’m a data scientist at a tech company.” Leo waits for more details. “But more importantly, I’m out of the office for a month for the wedding and honeymoon and I’ve been pretending like I don’t have a job at all, and it’s freaking great. So listen—”

He produces a sleek laptop from under his arm and comes over to sit next to Leo with palpable excitement. As he opens it, the whole screen is taken over by a colorful slide with the heading: OPERATION DDLJ.

“You made a PowerPoint?” Leo says, laughing.

Rishi grins back. “It’s my love language.” He FaceTimes Kavitha, who answers with Simran sitting next to her on the bed in one of their rooms. “Did you get the file?” he asks. It reminds Leo of his sister: No greetings needed.

“You look so normal. I’d never guess you were a recreational PowerPoint,” Kavitha says.

Leo’s gaze catches Simran’s. If he’s still a little in disbelief that he’s agreed to this ... scheme, here’s his anchor to it all. Once he’d moved back to Toronto after being away for a few years, things had started blooming between them. That first night he’d shown up at her and Liv’s doorstep, she stared at him for a full minute, mouth open, before catching herself. And that was all he’d needed to flirt with her relentlessly from that moment forward. Who they were to each other completely changed: He stopped being her best friend’s little brother and she was no longer this untouchable goddess he couldn’t form sentences around.

Yesterday, watching the movie, sparring with her cousin—she was alive in a way he’s never really seen. She’s already a fuller version of herself here than she was in Toronto.

“Hey,” he says softly, and though the words get lost under Kavitha and Rishi arguing about using Comic Sans ironically, she hears it and smiles, the warmth in those big brown eyes making him feel about ten feet tall.

“I thought we could look at the pain points of Operation DDLJ, maybe blue-sky some solutions,” Rishi says.

Kavitha guffaws loudly. “Bro, tell me you don’t think it’s okay to talk like that outside of a work email.”

Rishi ignores her and presses the space bar. The slide breaks into pieces as the next one moves in its place with a swooshing sound.

The slide features a bulleted list:

- I: Veena Iyer
- II: Ashok Iyer
- III: The Community

“Basically, there are three key stakeholders you must win over to execute a successful Operation DDLJ,” Rishi says. “Veena aunty, Ashok uncle, and every single person they know.”

“Is that how he’s going to move the needle?” Kavitha asks.

Simran chimes in, “Maybe we can circle back to close the loop.”

Kavitha’s mouth twitches with the effort to not smile.

“Shut up, both of you,” Rishi says. “Number one and the most difficult: Veena aunty herself.” He presses the space bar and the image on the screen compresses into a tornado that funnels into itself.

“These transitions are taking me back to the sixth grade,” Kavitha mutters.

The new slide features a sepia-toned picture of a younger Veena aunty. Her face is smooth with youth as she stands next to a sign that reads THERESA ROAD, PONDICHERRY. Underneath the picture of Veena aunty, there are two columns, “Likes” and “Dislikes.” There is only one item in the Likes section: “telling people what to do.” Underneath the Dislikes, written in tiny font, there are at least forty things listed.

“So I should avoid”—Leo squints as he reads off the list—“talking to, breathing near, or even knowing Veena Iyer’s daughters without her explicit permission.”

Rishi presses the space bar. “Let’s go to number two.”

The next slide has a picture of Ashok uncle on it and the same two columns underneath. Under Likes: cricket, Golden Age Hindi music, walking slowly, silence. Under Dislikes: unknown.

All four of them are silent for a few seconds.

Kavitha asks, “Leo, do any of these—”

“No,” he replies. “I don’t even know what age of Hindi music we are in now.”

“What about silence?” Kavitha asks hopefully.

Simran stifles a laugh. “Leo is many things but silent is not one of them.”

“Okay, let’s try door number three,” Rishi says, clicking to the final slide.

Leo’s face scrunches in confusion. “The Community? Sounds like a cult.”

“You’re not far off,” Simran says. “The Community is all of Veena perima and Ashok peripa’s closest friends, whose opinions they care about.”

“The Community is also every single person they’ve ever talked to who is Indian, whose opinions they also care about,” Kavitha adds.

Next to Leo, Rishi looks apologetic. “I can’t help you here because I was born into The Community.”

“He got grandfathered in. Literally,” Kavitha says.

“So basically, we’ve got nothing,” Leo says.

“Less than nothing,” Kavitha replies. “You’re already on the outs with Veena perima. It’s going to take something big to get to neutral with her. What about your job? Are you a lawyer, engineer, or doctor?” Leo confirms he is none of those. “And you’re too tall, Amma doesn’t like tall people.”

“I can’t control my height!” Leo says.

She gives him a look through the screen. “A fact that makes you weak in Veena Iyer’s eyes.”

“This is achievable, guys,” Rishi says. “We just need to break it down into small tasks to get some wins.”

“Sure, let’s try that!” Kavitha says. “By day five, Leo should have at least three members of The Community on his side. By day seven, seventy-five percent of my father’s daily words spoken should be with Leo. By day nine, you should be drilling down for a deep dive that achieves synergy.”

“Now you’re just saying things that don’t mean anything,” Rishi complains.

“Isn’t that the point of corporate jargon?” Kavitha shoots back. “Maybe we get you some facial prosthetics, Leo, like you’re in an Oscar-bait movie. You’re not allowed to be handsome if you’re not Indian—Amma will just be more suspicious of you.”

“That’s it!” Rishi says. “I know of a way we can get Leo an in with The Community.”

“How?” Kavitha asks.

“Give me a couple of days.” Rishi turns to him. “Leo, you’ll have to trust me on this one.”

Leo stares at him warily. “I’m staying in your house so I don’t think I’ve got a choice. But just so you know, you’re giving more mad scientist vibes than data scientist right now.”

“What are you planning, Rishi?” Simran asks.

He steeples his fingers and grins over them. “Let’s just say I’ve found some low-hanging fruit.”

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11.

Eleven days until the wedding

Simran slams her laptop shut and lets out a little growl of frustration. She has spent the last forty-five minutes of her workday trying to get files a co-worker insisted he had sent her, only to find out that the person had instead emailed them to Tarana, the other Indian girl on her team. Her official role is to manage housing on and off campus but she's slowly expanded her scope over the years to provide more support to these students coming to study and start a life far from home.

She's done it twice herself—moving to the U.S. meant adding culture shock to her heartbreak. Her accent was different than her cousins' and it made her conspicuous when all she wanted was to fade into nothingness. She'd learned to survive in a strange place with weather she'd only ever seen in movies, a place where the syllables of her name were stretched and stuttered over, a place where she could no longer walk to her favorite movie theater or bookstore and couldn't discover new ones because she had to get everywhere by driving.

And then she did it all over again when she fled to Toronto. It had been a little better—not nearly as jarring after living in the U.S. for all those years, and some of the cracks were paved over by being back in a big city once more. But Liv aside, she'd been a sole, anonymous sliver. Simran knows what it feels like to be alone even in a crowd, silence in every space without the throng of people who used to surround you, without the people who call you by your childhood nickname. Sometimes, her darkest thoughts tell her that she's no longer the child her parents knew; instead, she's been rearranged, not just by their loss but by everywhere she's had to fit into since. Working with these students to make their transitions easier helps soothe the remnants of that ache within her.

The Wi-Fi in her bedroom is terrible so she's been working at the dining table, which is a bit like plopping down in the eye of a tornado and

expecting to be productive. Glancing at her phone, she sees fifty-six new messages in the Operation DDLJ group chat. She flips the phone face down, overwhelmed.

There are two dozen people gathered in the Iyer House living room, which serves as wedding HQ for the bride's side—packages get delivered around the clock, people stroll in through the front door without knocking, and there's always a full meal and chai available, no matter the hour. Simran hasn't seen her aunt sit down once, not that Veena perima appears fatigued in the least. This afternoon, the tailor is here to alter everyone's outfits since Geeta has come down from Connecticut. Turn by turn, groups of people go upstairs laden down with garment bags and return a little while later.

Rishi walks in through the front door, Leo behind him. "Aunty, you remember my friend Leo, right?" Rishi says, putting his arm around Leo's shoulders and pulling them both forward. Leo trips.

Veena perima crosses her arms. "I thought you were leaving?"

Rishi laughs to pave over the awkwardness, but it only exacerbates it. "He's going to be staying with us until the wedding and helping out. Isn't that nice of him?"

"Hmmm" is all she replies, looking pointedly at his feet. He's not wearing shoes this time. Behind her, Kavitha points down to her own feet, a cue. They'd explained, on the text thread, that another important act in the many (many, many) ways to show reverence to an elder is touching their feet to be imbued with their knowledge and strength. Veena perima turns, eyes slitted in suspicion, as Kavitha quickly flattens her hand, pretending to scratch her stomach as she offers her mother an awkward smile with too many teeth.

Leo's caught on. He steps forward and bends down, touching his hand to the older woman's feet before bringing it to his chest. Simran watches as her aunt, mouth in a flat line, returns the gesture with a reluctant tap to the back of Leo's head.

But Leo doesn't straighten up like he should. He remains bent over in front of her, nearly as tall folded in half as Veena perima is standing straight. Kavitha elbows Simran, and she thrills at the voluntary communication before she realizes: Have they told him when he can get up? Possibly not.

“Is that a gift basket from Williams Sonoma?” Rishi asks, pointing to the back of the living room. Everyone turns and he quickly yanks Leo back up. Leo’s face has turned red from the blood rushing to it.

“Simi akka, Kavi akka! Can you come here please? I need help with my outfits—and you can get yours altered too,” Geeta calls from upstairs. Simran’s youngest cousin’s voice has always reminded her of aspartame—mimicking sweetness without being the actual thing. She walks into the primary bedroom, where she finds Geeta being measured by their aunt’s cousin’s neighbor’s wife’s uncle, Ramnath anna, the longtime family tailor. Every visible surface is piled at least two layers high with clothing. Between the multiple events of the wedding and the five main women in it—Geeta, Kavi, Simran, and the two mothers—there’s at least twenty outfits that need to be fitted and pinned and hemmed to perfection. In Tamil, the tailor says that he has to get something from his car and leaves the room.

“Rishi told me last night,” Geeta says to Simran. “About Operation DDLJ. And Kavi filled me in on the rest. It’s not ideal to have all this happening during my wedding.” She presses her lips into a tight line. “But we’ll do it for you, Simi akka.”

Simran has to admit that if this were her wedding, she would also not want some nutty scheme happening on the side, further complicating an already hectic time. “I appreciate that, Geeta.” Still, there’s a small part of her that enjoys that this whole thing is annoying her cousin a little.

Geeta walks to the other side of the room when the tailor comes back in. “The things we do for family, right? Besides, I won’t be around that much. It’s not like my career stops being incredibly demanding and rewarding, just because I’m getting married.”

Kavitha comes up and places a hand on Simran’s shoulder. In a low voice, she says, “I don’t know if you know this but: *Geeta is a doctor.*”

Simran’s jaw drops. “Oh my god, really? No one has ever said that sentence to me before.” They laugh together and for a second, the air in the room shifts, transporting Simran to a bygone time.

“Kavi, I need your help,” Geeta calls from the other side of the room, eyeing the two of them. Kavitha walks over and Simran trails behind her, annoyed that Geeta has interrupted them just when they were getting along.

“You know what?” Geeta says, looking past Simran to her sister. “You should wear those jhumkas I got you for your birthday two years ago.”

Kavitha lights up. “Oh yeah! I love those!”

“I knew you would.” Geeta’s eyes are on Simran as she speaks, which Simran takes as a declaration of tug-of-war over Kavitha.

Right then, Manjula aunty walks into the room.

“Hi, girls, how’s it going? I just wanted to get a preview of my gorgeous bahu,” she says, her mom-bob swaying with excitement.

That gorgeous daughter-in-law is distracted, frowning as she holds the heavy, embroidered skirt of her lengha at the waist. Geeta startles when she sees her mother-in-law there.

“Gits, what’s wrong?” Kavitha asks but Simran can already tell from the way her youngest cousin’s hands are clutching the waistband.

“It’s not zipping up,” Geeta says. Simran is surprised to hear a tone of worry in her voice. She’s never known Geeta to be anything other than unshakably confident.

“Oh, Geeta, have you not been doing your workouts?” Manjula aunty says in what Simran is sure the older woman thinks is a nurturing tone.

“You’ve always looked so slim and lovely. Don’t let that go now, so close to the most important occasion of your life, okay?” She waggles her head from side to side and then turns on her heel and leaves, apparently having dispensed enough wisdom for the day. Simran sees, for the first time, the strain at the end of her youngest cousin’s smile and a fierce protectiveness comes over her. Their subterranean battles are fine but no outsider, even if that person is a member of the family Geeta is marrying into, gets to put her down.

“Funny, I thought graduating from the best university in the world was the most important occasion of your life,” Kavi says, moving to her sister and holding up the heavy skirt for her.

Geeta’s smile rebounds. “The problem with setting the bar so high is that they just keep raising it.”

“It’s only a quarter inch,” the tailor says in Tamil with a pencil in his mouth. “Don’t worry, it’ll fix easily.”

After all of their outfits have been measured and adjusted, they head downstairs, Simran trailing behind the other two. In her absence, these sisters have bonded and now she’s the one left out. She knew things would be different, but in a theoretical way. It’s jarring to be confronted with the actuality of it. It stings but the truth is, Simran is happy for Kavitha. She deserves to have as many people as she wants in her life who care for her.

Simran just hopes she'll be one of them again—and if they're ranked, that she's ahead of Geeta.

Downstairs, people are gathered around the dining table with cups of chai and some snacks. Even though she knows she shouldn't, she stands next to Leo, pretending to join his and Rishi's conversation.

"I can't believe four hundred people are coming to your wedding," Leo is telling him. "I don't think I *know* four hundred people."

"My mother has invited people she hasn't seen in years. Veena aunty has people flying in from India for this thing." He shakes his head. "And I'm going to have to pretend to recognize all of them."

She's not really listening, half her mind busy with admiring the perfect angle at the edge of Leo's jaw and the other half on things she needs to do: answer work emails, send a note to her mailing list with her fall dance class schedule, text Liv back, and—

Leo trails the tip of his pinky over the length of hers and all thoughts leave her brain.

It's a slow but deliberate stroke while he carries on chatting with Rishi as if nothing were happening.

Barely a touch. The light dusting of hair on his arms brushes against hers and his low, sure voice trickles through her.

He repeats the motion.

What is he thinking? Her aunt is right there and so are the Chopras and they're not even supposed to know each other. But he does it again and she sucks her lips inwards to keep from sighing, her pulse drumming just underneath her skin. Each skim of the rough-soft pad of his finger undoes her, too much and not enough, until she's concocting scenarios of how they might sneak away to—

"Simran!" Veena perima calls and her hand flies away from Leo's with such a sudden jerk that she knocks the cup of chai in Rishi's hand. He yelps, taking a step back, and all the conversations around them halt. Everyone stares.

She clears her throat and lifts her chin to reclaim her dignity, even as she feels like the steam wafting from the tea: hot and dissolving. Mumbling an apology to Rishi and determinedly avoiding the bewildered expressions of the people in the kitchen—and Leo's sloped, too-knowing smile—she moves towards her aunt, who assigns her the task of finding the streamers

they'll use to decorate the backyard for the mehndi ceremony taking place the following week.

Walking to the far side of the living room, she opens and pushes aside box after box in her search, jumping when Ashok peripa, who she hadn't even realized had been sitting in his favorite chair, comes up behind her. Simran never had the same kind of strife with her uncle that she did with her aunt, though his silence felt like a condoning of Veena perima's ways. But he'd taught her how to play chess on the antique set and they'd listened to classic Bollywood music together. Sometimes, his taciturn presence airing out a room was just what Simran needed.

"Sorry, Peripa, you scared me," she says, and he wiggles his head from side to side. As she continues searching for the streamers, she hears shuffling behind her. A few moments later, Kishore Kumar's voice fills the room, singing in Hindi that this is life, the colors and shape of it, that it's part sadness and part happiness, with sunshine and shadows in it. Simran goes still, blocking out everything but the guitar chords that lead the song from its chorus into the verse. In her mind, she's ten years old doing homework in the living room, like every Sunday, and this song is one of the many her father would play through the course of the morning. The Chennai air is balmy, and when her mother passes her, she runs a hand over Simran's head lovingly before going to sit next to her father. They smile at each other and talk—about getting groceries, about their upcoming workweek, the new movie her mother wants to see. It's the idle chatter of people who expect to have the rest of their lives to say things to each other.

The music stops abruptly with a ripping noise and Simran is yanked back into the present. She looks behind her to see her uncle frowning down at the vintage record player on the sideboard. The needle has jumped and he moves it, lifting the record in the air to examine it. Simran stands and walks over.

"What's wrong, Peripa?" she asks.

"The record has a scratch on it," he replies, and she's surprised to see his droopy frown deepen.

"That's okay. I bet we can find a replacement online. Want me to look?" she asks, pulling her phone out.

He touches her hand to stop her. "This was your father's record," he says in that gentle voice. Simran's head turns to him as her hand drops to her

side. “This was his player too. We brought it here to New Jersey after ...” He blinks twice. “After.”

“Oh,” Simran says, the air in her lungs dissipating. Underneath her own flood of feelings, she’s touched by his rare display of emotion.

“I thought you knew. I have all of his records here.” He points to the shelf to the left, albums she saw and listened to hundreds of times when she lived here. She’d never known that they belonged to her father—and that Ashok peripa had played them for the same reason that she listened to them: not just because he loved the songs but because her dad loved them too. Simran moves on shaky legs to the player, running her hand over the stark squareness of it. Why didn’t her uncle tell her earlier? But then again, she had never talked to him, content to let the music be the only noise between them.

She looks up to find Ashok peripa observing her. He doesn’t say anything and she’s never been more thankful for his quiet understanding. Voice hitching, she asks, “Do you—did Appa have ‘O Mere Dil Ke Chain’?”

Her uncle locates the album, pulling out the slim square from the shelf and handing it to her before sitting back in his chair. Simran listens to that song and then the next few, unmoored in time. Here is this artifact of her heart from the life she lived long ago, the one that included her parents. Until now, it felt like there were no other physical traces of them left except two portraits in a room on the other side of the house. She can touch something her parents touched, she can listen to it the way they used to listen to it.

And for once, she’s not being pulled down by grief, she’s not suffocated by it; the music, the memories—they’re airy and bright. She didn’t know it could feel like this. When she’s called back to the present by her aunt, asking for the streamers she’d been tasked with looking for, it occurs to her: If a record player and some music can make her feel like this, imagine how going back to her house in Chennai will feel. The thought lifts her heart like a kite.

12.

Ten days until the wedding

After spending most of the afternoon getting Leo the outfits he'll need to wear to the wedding, he and Rishi head over to Iyer House.

"Listen, it's great you're helping around our house," Rishi says as they cross through the backyard gate into the Iyers'. "But if they're in the same room, you need to show allegiance to Veena aunty over my mom."

Leo frowns. "Do they not like each other?"

"No, they do," Rishi says. "But that doesn't negate the competition. No one will ever acknowledge it but it's always on. Whose house is biggest? Who has the best job? Whose kid went to the best college? It's all one big pissing contest." He grimaces. "Metaphorically."

"Even with the wedding?" Leo asks.

"Especially with the wedding. Geeta's been the entire community's example of a perfect kid since elementary school. I think that's why my parents are extra neurotic these days. They can't win the whose-kid-is-better contest, so they want to win the wedding. You'll see."

"That's not ominous," Leo mutters as they step in through the back door of Iyer House. The living room is packed with a seemingly infinite number of boxes and packages, along with garment bags and crates of water bottles stacked on top of each other. On the far side of the living room, sitting in the bay window bench, Simran is putting together party favors, placing tea light holders in the shape of an elephant into a small bag, and cinching it. Their eyes meet, and it feels like a tether urging him towards her.

"Yennadi paninduruke? Why is that book on the floor?" Veena aunty's screeching brings him out of his haze as Kavitha scrambles to place the book on the coffee table.

Out of the corner of his mouth, Rishi explains, "If something is sacred, you can't put it on the ground. And watch your feet."

"My feet?" Leo says, curling his toes inwards.

Rishi chuckles. “Just don’t kick or step on sacred things, even accidentally. Books, money, other people. And whatever you do, don’t—” Someone calls Rishi over to them.

“Don’t what? Whatever I do, don’t what?” Leo whispers frantically but Rishi’s already walked away.

“Aiyo!” Veena aunty exclaims. At first, Leo startles, but then he realizes it’s not directed to him—this time. “After all I did to arrange it with the wedding planner, these lights are not working. I invited everybody to come and see us turn them on. Tsch, how will we mark that these are now two wedding houses if we can’t turn the lights on? Ashok! Zara dekh lo!” She holds out the remote to the other corner of the living room where Ashok uncle is seated in a brown leather wingback, so silent that Leo hadn’t even noticed him. He stands with creaks from both him and the chair and takes the remote from his wife. He presses the button a couple of times and then frowns.

“Must not be connected properly,” he says, and hands it back to Veena aunty before retreating to his chair.

Veena aunty smacks a hand to her forehead. “Now who is going to climb onto our roof to make sure everything is plugged in correctly?” Just thinking of being on a roof makes the soles of Leo’s feet tingle with vertigo.

“Leo can do it!” Rishi chimes in.

He looks at Rishi, who gives him a surreptitious thumbs-up. His mouth has gone dry. Of all the years Leo played hockey, he’s never been hit as hard as the terror that slams into him now. He sees his fear reflected back in Simran’s expression. But he can’t say no, not now, not when he has to make up for the way he and Veena aunty first met. Plastering on a smile and curling his hands into fists to stop them from trembling, he says, voice a little too loud, “Sure!”

“This is good! We can get you back to neutral with Veena aunty,” Rishi tells him as they go to the garage to get the ladder.

“What the hell, man! I’m scared of heights!” he hisses, and Rishi’s face drains of color.

“Shit. Okay. Why don’t I climb up and fix the connection and we’ll say you did it when we go back inside—”

But Rishi’s solution is thwarted when everyone from the living room empties out into the backyard, and more people from around the neighborhood join. Simran is biting her nail and she must have told Kavitha

because her cousin is swaying with nervous energy. He quickly stares at the grass, needing to focus on something steady.

“I’ll hold the ladder at the bottom,” Rishi says, voice falling away at the edges. “Sorry, man. I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay.” Leo has noticed that he has a voice of reason that pops up whenever he’s about to do something risky. It’s soothing, a bit like his mother during one of her sessions, and it will advise him to state calmly why he’s uncomfortable and walk away from the situation. He ignores it now because there’s another, more aggressive voice that’s telling him he can’t lose more points with Veena aunty. Gingerly, he makes his way higher and higher. Slightly hysterically, he thinks of that Eminem song: His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy. If he can just take it one step at a time, nice and slow—

“Arrey, hurry up! If we turn them on after sunset, it will be a bad omen!” Veena aunty shouts. He can do this. For Veena aunty. For Simran. His shallow, uneven breaths are roaring in his ears as he climbs higher. Once he reaches the top, he almost stumbles onto the sloped roof. If the gutter doesn’t support his weight, he’ll plummet to the ground—no, no, don’t think about that now. He shuffles sideways over to the large power strip and all he has to do is press two of the plugs in fully. Easy. Except that means he will have to lift his hands from where they cling to the shingles.

Leo whispers a prayer to the universe at large because there’s no particular god he believes in and lifts one hand. It takes a slam of pressure for him to get the first plug into the socket and the force of the motion nearly makes him lose his balance. The house blinks into glorious life to the right of him, strings of lights hanging from the roof all the way down, like a shimmering veil. For a few moments, he forgets where he is and admires how much it changes the home into a place of celebration and joy. Muttering “Let there be light” under his breath, he plugs the second connection in and it illuminates the house below him.

He’s done it, somehow. He allows himself a moment of congratulations before descending for his moment of glory with both feet firmly on the ground. But when he gets down, the crowd has moved next door and only Rishi, Kavitha, and Sim remain, looking grim.

“What?” he asks, twisting back to look at the houses. His hands are still shaking.

“You lit up the Chopras’ house first,” Kavitha says, sounding apologetic.

They walk over to the Chopras' backyard, where everyone is oohing and aahing. Manjula aunty loudly proclaims how wonderful he is, excitedly introducing him to everyone as her houseguest and "a very nice boy," which he quickly realizes is high praise. Standing just outside the circle of friends who tell Rishi's mom how stunning her home looks, Veena aunty gives him a stony glance that makes him wish he'd stayed up on the roof. With a jerk, she turns away and leaves, heading back into Iyer House.

"Sorry," Simran mouths before heading out when Veena aunty calls for her, Kavitha, and Ashok uncle to follow as Rishi introduces him to a few more people around the backyard, all part of the inner circle of The Community.

Later that night, Leo tosses and turns before giving up. He swings around, places his feet on the ground, and braces his right hand against his left shoulder, wincing as he rotates the joint. It's not the noisy crack that sounded when he got his injury, the one he hears in his nightmares sometimes, but it still lets out a dull click with each roll.

He knows that if he can't win over Veena aunty, then none of the rest of it matters. And no matter what Simran says, he does think he can win Veena aunty over. Though he's at a considerable disadvantage by not being able to lead with the most salient point: how much he cares about her niece.

He pulls out his phone and opens the group chat where he, his sister, and his mother have been texting in place of their usual Sunday night dinners.

Leo [11:23 p.m.]: How's Switzerland?

Olivia [11:26 p.m.]: Cheesy. Chocolatey. Perfect.

Olivia [11:27 p.m.]: Tell Simran to stop answering my 7-minute long voice notes with two-line texts, and just call me back.

Leo [11:28 p.m.]: Tell her yourself.

Olivia [11:29 p.m.]: What do you think the voice notes are about?

Dr. Mom [11:30 p.m.]: Leo, did you reply to your dad's email about the baseball game?

Leo swipes over to his email and sure enough, his father has asked if he wants to go to a baseball game in two weeks, the most common way they spend time together. Baseball in the summer, basketball in the fall and spring. Never hockey. They haven't been to a hockey game, or even

watched one together, since Leo's injury in his senior year of high school. It only adds another layer of awkwardness that his father always cc's his mother, even years after their divorce, as well as Liv, who is technically his stepdaughter. One time, he even invited Félix, his mother's husband, which was so awkward. Luckily, Félix turned it down politely and his mother therapized his father as trying to prove how okay he is with everyone. Which, if he ever spent time with his son outside of sports stadiums, he would realize he does not need to do. Leo rolls his eyes and shoots off a quick reply to his dad confirming he can make it and that his mother and Liv will not be joining.

And even with all of that, Leo is, somehow, deeply knotted into another family's drama. His shoulder clicks again.

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13.

Nine days until the wedding

Simran is good at sharing. She always leaves extra packs of Maggi instant noodles in the communal lunchroom at work.

She never takes the last bite of anything because she loves seeing the satisfaction on the face of the person who gets it. Her local bookstore stocks extra copies of her favorite titles because she'll buy them just to give away to her friends. She genuinely would rather share things, even when it means less for herself.

The operative word being "things." People, not so much.

A few minutes ago, her phone buzzed with a text from Rishi, telling her to come outside at eight thirty a.m. to see Leo's progress in Operation DDLJ. She trudges through the house, chugging her coffee, body heavy and sluggish. Putting her insomnia to use, she had crept down to the living room last night and pulled out her father's records, humming the songs quietly and transporting herself to her childhood until she'd finally slipped back into bed for a few hours of bone-tired sleep. By some stroke of luck, Veena perima is tending to her garden out back this morning and Simran makes her way to the front of the house without any interference.

Rishi Chopra [8:37 a.m.]: Wait for it.

Simran waits for this supposed grand unveiling and peers into the Shahs' front yard two houses to the left, where Neeta aunty has emerged dressed in a nice top, jeans, and strappy sandals, an oddly formal outfit for someone with a weed whacker in their hands. She attends to her shrubbery but mostly keeps craning her neck to the street. Three houses down, Nirmala Brindavan comes outside with a full face of makeup and a blowout, inspecting a patch of lawn and stamping at it with her foot. Neeta aunty and Nirmala aunty wave at each other but instead of talking like Simran would expect, they hover in their respective yards. At the house across the street from the Chopras', Jennifer Briganza steps out in her Lululemons and a

workout top with a small area rug in her arms. She lays it on the railing of her front porch and begins beating it. These are mundane activities that people in the suburbs do, but there's a prickle in the back of Simran's neck. Something is up.

A few minutes later, it all begins to make sense. Coming around the bend of the cul-de-sac at a graceful clip, hair bouncing with every step like a stallion's mane, is Leo. He isn't wearing a shirt and his shorts end just above mid-thigh, a perfect frame for his ass and long, strong legs. Drops of sweat slip obscenely down the ridged planes of his chest. It's impossible, she knows, but she swears he's moving in slow motion.

As he runs, Leo raises a hand. "Good morning, Nirmala aunty!"

"Oh, good morning, Leo!" Nirmala aunty pretends to have just noticed his existence, despite the fact that her head has followed him as if on a track since he came into sight. "Another run! So nice to see how dedicated you are to your fitness."

He waves to Mrs. Briganza, and Simran is sure she beats the carpet with a little extra vigor as he jogs by. He slows to a walk, two indecently long fingers pressed to the pulse in his neck as he passes the Shahs' front yard. "Good morning, Neeta aunty."

She smiles coyly at him. "Morning! Make sure you're wearing sunscreen, haan? This New Jersey sun will burn all that skin."

He grins, white teeth and bright eyes—not his most sincere smile but possibly his most charming one. "I did, Aunty! Two coats. I remembered from when you told me yesterday."

"Achcha bachcha," she says, calling him a good kid in Hindi even if the way she looks at him is decidedly adult.

Simran's phone buzzes—she knows it's Rishi—but she ignores it. This approach to growing Leo's popularity is annoying but she can't deny it's effective, which only annoys her more. She's very resentful that she has to thirst over him from afar, like everyone else.

Leo's face goes from smile to smirk when he sees Simran standing on the porch, stormily sipping her coffee. Once all the other aunties have gone inside their respective houses after the morning floor show, and after looking around for Veena perima and finding no sign of her, he saunters into the Iyers' front yard.

"Good morning, Sim." Her gaze roves his body, getting stuck on the flat puzzle of interlocking muscles on his abdomen. "My eyes are up here," he

says, and then chuckles, an action that makes the lines between those muscles deepen and firm.

“Good morning.” She means to sound annoyed, but instead her words come out breathy, swooning. She finishes the dregs of her cup of coffee and clears her throat. “How was your run?”

His eyes dance, golden in the morning sun. “Scorching.”

“Maybe you should put a shirt on,” she suggests.

One side of his mouth lifts. “Wouldn’t that just make me hotter?”

She doesn’t think he can get hotter, but she can’t give his already unshakable confidence the satisfaction of saying that. She changes the subject. “How did you two even come up with this?”

“To quote Rishi quoting Sun Tzu, ‘The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.’”

Simran scowls. “Rishi listens to too many podcasts.”

“Might I remind you that I am doing this for you and only you?” Leo says, putting a leg up on the step to stretch, only too happy to remain on display.

“Getting ogled by every woman in the neighborhood is for me?” she asks, raising her eyebrows.

“Everyone else is a bonus. You’re my number-one ogler.”

“Number one on a long list,” she mutters, staring at her empty coffee cup, wishing for a refill.

“Oh,” he says to himself with a smile as he straightens. “She’s possessive.”

“She—I am not.” She is. But she doesn’t like being called out on it. “I just can’t believe your solution to the problem is to take your clothes off.”

“You should try it.” He lowers his voice. “And let me watch.” He pushes an arm behind his head so his full torso is taut and tensed and aimed right at her. Warmth spreads, behind her ears, at the base of her neck, low in her belly. She wants to devour him.

Simran clears her throat. “There’s a small balcony on the second floor at the back of the house. We could meet there tonight?”

He gives her a wolfish smile. “I’m in. We can solve some problems, take some clothes off. Not necessarily in that order.”

“Kya ho raha hain yahan mein?” Veena perima has stepped out onto the porch in default inquisition mode. It wouldn’t do anyone good to answer her question honestly and say that what’s happening here is that Simran is

experiencing mortifyingly teenage levels of inconvenient sexual frustration over the man she is secretly dating. A man whom the whole neighborhood has seen closer to naked in public than she has in private.

“Hi, Auntie. Sorry,” Leo says, pale where he’d been golden a moment ago.

“Sorry for what, hmm?” Veena perima asks as she takes the empty coffee cup from Simran’s hands and replaces it with a fresh one. Her tone is sure and damning, as if she already knows what he should be sorry for (existing). “What are you doing here anyway?”

There’s no trace of the slick serial neighborhood seducer from a few moments before. “I run, Auntie. Every morning. Around the neighborhood. I run all the time. I mean, for exercise. I’m not, like, Forrest Gump.” Simran wishes he could run away from this conversation. “I used to play hockey but then I injured my shoulder, and I wanted to stay in shape so I started running, and—”

Veena perima pinches the bridge of her nose. “Aiyo, I mean what are you doing here, in front of my house?”

“Um ...”

“Perima, Leo stopped by to see if there’s anything he can help us with for the wedding,” Simran says, swooping in. She keeps her tone neutral as she adds, “Isn’t that nice of him?”

Veena perima slurps her own coffee loudly as she considers Leo. He keeps crossing and uncrossing his arms, finally settling with one diagonally across his chest and the other clutching his waist, like he’s trying to protect his modesty. “How do you run?”

Leo blinks twice. “Sorry?”

“Tell me, nah,” she says, impatient. “How does someone run?”

Leo and Simran exchange a brief, confused glance. “What do you mean, Perima?”

“After the bypass, the doctor told Ashok to watch his diet and get into shape. But the only shape your peripa has is the imprint of his behind on the couch.” Leo chuckles and Simran doesn’t miss that her aunt preens, even if it’s Public Enemy Number One doing the laughing. “So I want to tell him how to start jogging.”

“Leo can help him!” Simran blurts out, before catching herself. Well, she’s part of Operation DDLJ now. “They can run together.”

Veena perima frowns, contemplating this. “Okay. Tomorrow morning, I will send Ashok out here at seven to run with you.”

“Could we do eight?” Leo asks.

“Nothing doing,” Veena perima replies. Leo frowns, not understanding but Simran knows the phrase well. They’ll meet at seven with no room for negotiation. “And please put some clothes on.” Turning back towards the house, she mutters, “We used to only have to worry about the girls. Nowadays, even the boys are naked. Chee!”

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14.

Simran tiptoes down the hallway. The house is silent except for the appliances sighing into the night and the nearly symphonic, unchanged pattern of Ashok peripa's snores. She waits for a crescendo before sliding the window up and then climbs outside into the enveloping dark, where the cicadas are giving her uncle a run for his money. This tiny balcony is Simran's favorite place in Iyer House because no one else seems to remember it exists. When she lived here, it was the only place she could be alone.

She paces in a circle, waiting. She'd texted Leo only to have him call her, which she declined—his preference for talking on the phone is bewildering. They did that three times till he finally gave up and texted her back. The ladder is resting against the ledge and Leo's head pops up as he climbs into the balcony. He takes a deep breath when both feet are firmly on the ground before his mouth sways up into a smile. She smiles back, slightly disappointed he's wearing a shirt.

"Namaste, Simran." He pronounces it the way a native speaker would—*nuh-muhs-thay*—rather than the Anglicized way that's thrown around in yoga classes and wellness retreats.

"Namaste, Leo," she replies, walking to him. "Kaise ho?"

"My Hindi skills don't go that far yet."

"How far do they go?"

"Namaste, Simran," he repeats, and she laughs as he sits with his back against the wall. "But I'm going to learn!" He holds up his phone and shows her the language app he has access to through his work.

"You want to learn Hindi? That's a lot of effort for two weeks with my family."

He puts the phone down next to him. "Well, it wouldn't be just for two weeks with your family."

She understands what he's saying: It's for her. It's for longer. There it is, that warmth coursing through her, welcome even in the hot summer night.

“Am I your girlfriend?” The question tumbles right out of her mouth. She doesn’t really know what she’s doing. Leo’s had way more serious relationships than her; she’s even met a couple of his girlfriends over the years. Clearly, he’s doing all this because this thing between them is important, but she wants a name for that thing.

He cranes his neck up at her. “Yeah.”

Simran tilts her head. “That’s it? No discussion?”

“I’ve known you for thirteen years. I’ve had a crush on you for pretty much that whole time, since the day we met in my sister’s dorm room and you barely looked at me—which, fair. I was wearing my *Goofy Movie* T-shirt and all that orthodontia made my mouth look like a broken-down roller coaster. But I’ve been flirting with you for the last two years straight. And in the past three days, I’ve climbed up a ladder twice for you. So no, there’s not going to be a discussion. Now please sit your ass down and tell me how to say ‘girlfriend’ in Hindi,” he says, leaning forward to take her hand and tug her towards him.

She sits down next to him and nudges his leg with her knee. “I liked the *Goofy Movie* T-shirt, actually.”

“You’ve always had good taste.”

“Want some feedback, though?” she asks.

His mouth twists. “Am I customer service or your boyfriend?” Even as he says “boyfriend,” the word feels so inadequate to Simran. How can the same word that middle schoolers use be what they call this thrilling precipice they’re on, toes tipping over the edge? He waves his hand. “All right, lay it on me.”

“You’re doing great,” she tells him, and he looks at her skeptically. “But you’d be doing it better if you were shirtless.”

Surprise, then delight, overtakes his face, eye crinkles out in droves. He reaches behind to tug on the back of his T-shirt and pulls it off in one swift motion. A laugh spills out of her, a clear bell in the quiet night, and she covers her mouth, remembering her family on the other side of the wall.

“There isn’t a word for ‘boyfriend’ or ‘girlfriend’ in Hindi,” she says. “But if you really want to impress Veena perima, you should learn Tamil. Our family speaks both languages because she and my mother grew up in Mumbai.” She watches his dark eyebrows knit together. “Sorry. My family is a lot of work.”

Leo breaks out into that seesaw smile. “The fact that you are trilingual is an insane turn-on.” He looks something up on his phone and reads from the screen. “Tamil is considered the oldest classical language in the world still in use today. Cool!”

He says it so sincerely, unguarded and nerdy, that it makes her laugh. He is very good at liking things with his whole heart. Her eyes take in his side profile, the corded angles of his collarbone. She wants to kiss him again, quite desperately. She wants to do more than just kiss him, more than just quite desperately.

“I could help you,” she offers. “Learn Tamil.”

“That’d be great,” Leo says.

“Lesson one: ‘Hello’ is ‘vannakam.’”

“Vuh-nuh-kum,” he parrots, getting the hard “v” sound right but the emphasis slightly wrong. She corrects him and he gets it on the second try. As they move quickly through some basic vocabulary, something tugs insistently within Simran. Leo learning the language of her heritage is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for her. Tamil is the language of her parents and of her grandparents before them, the language of all the generations through time that led directly to her sitting here. With each word she says and he repeats back to her, it’s like invisible threads are binding the different pieces of her into one. She didn’t know being with someone could make her feel that.

“How do you say ‘goodbye’?” he asks.

Simran realizes something. “There’s no word for ‘goodbye’ in Tamil. Instead, you say ‘poitu varen.’”

“Poy-too vah-reh. What does it mean?” he asks.

“‘Poitu varen’ means ‘I’ll leave and I’ll come back.’ You say it because goodbye is too final.”

He tightens the arm he has around her. “I like that. There’s always hope for another meeting.”

She smiles, leaning into him, into his optimism. “It’s never the last time.”

Except, a voice in the back of her head tells her, that sometimes it is. Did she call out “Poitu varen!” to her mother and father when she left for school on the day they died? Did they say it to her, a promise unfulfilled? Sometimes there is no return. What’s most precious to you is lost forever.

As if he senses the shift in her mood, Leo curves his arms around her. “I’m fine,” she says, but she slings her legs across his lap and flattens her

cheek to the warm skin of his bare chest.

“Okay. The hug’s for me,” he says into the top of her hair. After a long stretch of quiet, he asks, “Did your parents have a nickname for you?”

“My mother used to call me ‘chellum.’ It kind of translates to ‘darling.’”

She feels Leo nod. “Good to know.”

Simran lifts her head to look at him. “You’re not going to call me that, are you?” She couldn’t bear anyone else calling her that. Even saying it now makes her feel like she is disintegrating. It’s gone from this world, just like her mother.

“No, the opposite. Making a list in my head of things never to call you in bed,” Leo replies, and the laugh that bursts out of her dissipates the fog of melancholy in one shot.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to get so ...” She shakes her head.

Leo pulls a strand of hair away from her face. “It’s okay. Sometimes, in very small balconies, very big feelings just come out.”

She smiles and moves closer to him, cupping his cheek, running her thumb over his soft, full lower lip. He leans in to kiss her and she’s present once more, flesh and bone, instead of a body made of negative space, so full of wanting what she’ll never get back. Leo’s fingers find that place she’s learning he likes, splayed over the side of her neck. She presses into him and runs a hand from his shoulder all the way down to the hard muscle of his stomach, skin she’s been aching to touch. Of all the ways their new togetherness needs to find a rhythm, this is not one of them.

Suddenly, Leo pulls away. “Do you hear that?” he whispers.

She’s immediately snapped out of her haze. She hears the creaking of a floorboard inside the house. They stare at each other, frozen. Then, in a flurry of action, Simran springs out of his lap and Leo scrambles up, grabbing his shirt and crossing the balcony in one long stride before vaulting himself over the low wall, his fear of Veena perima surpassing his fear of heights. She goes to the ledge, watching as he scampers down the ladder.

“Simi?” Simran whips around at the sound of Veena perima’s voice. Her aunt is leaning out of the hallway window and Simran instinctively crosses her arms, hoping she can blame the flush of her skin on the warm night. “I went to go check on you and saw you weren’t in your bed.” Simran stops herself from protesting—she’s thirty-one but she’s still getting bedtime check-ins. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Simran replies, which isn’t entirely untrue.

Veena perima makes a noncommittal noise and ambles through the window onto the balcony. Simran glances at the backyard. No sign of Leo, thank goodness.

“I know. Sometimes, you’re so tired all you want is sleep. But it won’t come. Instead, your brain replays every bad and good thing that’s ever happened over the years.”

Simran is surprised by her aunt’s extremely accurate description of insomnia. She didn’t expect to have that in common. “You can’t sleep either, Perima?”

“Naan yepidi tunga muddiyum? I’m a mother,” her aunt says, walking to the other side of the balcony. “I worry about you girls too much. You’ll see one day.”

Simran rolls her eyes and sits on the ledge. “Geeta is literally getting married next week. Everyone is fine.”

“My foot, everyone is fine,” her aunt says, pacing across the small space. “There is so much I need to do.”

Silence fills the space between them until Simran realizes she’s unlikely to get another opportunity as perfect as this with her aunt. “Perima, I’ve been meaning to ask you: I need you to give me the key to the Chennai house.”

Her aunt turns sharply towards her. “The key to the Chennai house?”

“Yes. I want to go back,” she says. “I’d like to sort through my parents’ things. I didn’t even know the record player was Appa’s.”

She stands and takes a step closer, looking over her aunt, silently willing her to say something about her parents. Anything. There are so many ways Veena perima could have helped her keep their memories alive. Simran could have brought in their family traditions for Diwali, gone through her mother and father’s wedding album with her aunt, who is prominent in all the photos. Months after her parents passed, she tried to talk about them. Veena perima was her mother’s older sister—she’d even lived with them when Simran was a baby, before she’d married Ashok peripa and moved to the U.S. She was the only one who knew them as well as Simran had. But whenever Simran tried, her aunt would tell her that now was not the time or that she was very busy. And so she shoved her feelings back inside her, where they churned like a raging sea. Every day that her aunt went without mentioning them was another day Simran had to be the only one to carry

their memories in this world, and every one of those days became another grievance. Death is deeper than kin, longer than memory, stronger than forgiveness.

Veena perima looks up at her, that vein in her forehead prominent, as it always is when she is stressed about something. “Are you going to take the record player with you? Your Peripa really enjoys them.”

Simran steps back, deflated. The pattern stays in place: her aunt’s silence, and Simran’s resentment. But though Simran would like the records and the player, the fact that Ashok peripa loves them softens her. At least there’s some remembrance of them in this house. “No. Peripa can keep them.”

“Thank you,” she says. Simran blinks, surprised. She’s not sure she’s ever heard Veena perima thank anyone. Her aunt has walked to the other end of the balcony and is looking out into the backyard. “I always thought we’d get you married at that house,” she says, almost to herself. It comes out soft as a secret, so unlike her usual bristling declarations. Simran watches as she resumes pacing, nudging at the dirt gathered in the corners of the balcony with her slipper-covered toes. When Veena perima turns back to her, her mouth is pursed and her words are still in that hushed tone. “Simi, I need to talk to you about something—”

Simran fakes a huge yawn, cutting her off. This contemplative woman with worry etched across her face and words she’s holding in—Simran doesn’t know her. She doesn’t know how to act around her and she doesn’t want to hear whatever it is she wants to talk about—probably getting Simran married, *again*. “Perima, I’m feeling sleepy now. Why don’t we talk about this later? I’ll take the key from you then.” Simran walks to the window and turns to say good night.

Her aunt is still staring at her, brow furrowed, lips almost quivering, an expression Simran can’t read. Then her chin goes up. Something has just happened, though Simran is not sure what. But when Veena perima finally speaks, she sounds like her brisk and bossy self again. “Yes. We’ll talk after the wedding. Too much going on until then.”

As Simran climbs through the window back into the house, she hears her aunt say, “Oh! The ladder is still here. That Leo boy must have forgotten to put it away. I’ll make him take it down and put it in the garage tomorrow.”

The hope of any future balcony dates with Leo has just been snuffed out.

15.

Eight days until the wedding

The next day, Leo and Ashok meet in the Chopras' front yard at seven a.m. Back when Leo played hockey, he and his father would go on ten-kilometer runs in the off-season so he could stay in shape. After Leo hurt his shoulder, hockey was off the table, as there was no way he could play without doing permanent damage. It was tough, especially since Leo had been pretty good. To have to willingly give up on something went against his nature. It didn't help that his dad seemed more devastated than he was. But he kept up the running, even after his dad would no longer come with him. It's been a while since he's done this with someone, and he's looking forward to it.

He grins when he spies Ashok uncle, tall and jowly, like a beagle on its hind legs, walking over to the Chopras' front yard.

"It'll be nice to have a good run!" he says as he stretches. "How are you feeling?"

Ashok tries to mimic Leo's stretch, pulling his foot up behind him, but it keeps slipping out of his hand. When he manages to hold on to it, he loses his balance and has to put his foot back on the ground. "Okay."

Leo waits for Ashok uncle to say more. But he doesn't, so Leo barrels forward. "Great! Let's start easy. We'll take breaks whenever we need. How does that sound?"

"Okay."

It's not okay. Even in the morning, the sun is high in the sky, beating down on them. After thirty seconds of light jogging, Ashok uncle is bright red. Leo tells him it's fine—the first push is always the most difficult, but once you're through it, it gets easier, if only because of the knowledge that you got through it once. But after sixty seconds, a rattling wheeze emanates from the older man's chest, sweat pours down his forehead, darkening the back and armpits of his blue T-shirt. Leo knows he can't continue

subjecting him to this. He slows beyond the already glacial pace they were keeping, bending forward and putting his hands on his knees. He pretends to pant as he says, “Actually, I think I’d rather walk. Is that okay?”

“Okay.” If Ashok uncle has noticed that their run lasted approximately two minutes, he doesn’t say anything.

Running is Leo’s favorite form of self-care. The rhythm of his feet hitting the pavement, the regulated breaths, the tight stance—it quiets his noisy mind. But walks are for sharing ideas and ambling conversation. From when he was a kid to as recently as last month, Leo goes on walks with his mother, meandering through the various parks in Toronto as she tells him anonymized stories about her patients.

Ashok uncle is ambling, but not talking, his hands clasped behind his back. The awkward silence gnaws at Leo. He has to fill it.

“Where did you grow up?” Leo asks.

“India.”

This answer doesn’t help. He pushes on. “What part of India?”

“Bangalore.” Okay, that’s a little progress. The only things Leo knows about Bangalore are that it’s the tech capital of India, that his company has an office there, and that it’s reverted officially to its precolonial name, Bengaluru. But he can work with this.

“What was it like?” Leo asks.

“Nice.”

He pushes on. “Is it hot there?”

“No.”

“Do you like New Jersey or India more?”

“Same,” Ashok uncle replies.

Through the course of the next twenty minutes, Leo asks increasingly detailed questions and gets nothing but monosyllabic answers. He has sweat more on this walk trying to get this man to talk than he does on his runs. What does he do now? He exhales heavily.

When they loop back around to the front yard, Veena aunty is waiting there, hands on her hips. Leo’s spine immediately straightens as they walk forward and she gives Ashok uncle a once-over, inspecting her husband to ensure he has been brought back in one piece. Then she says, “Okay, see you, same time tomorrow.”

Leo has another chance.



The next day, a series of metallic clangs followed by a crash pulls Leo's attention away from his laptop. He goes to the kitchen to see if Manjula aunty needs help but finds Rishi instead, chasing dried lentils scattered all over the floor with a broom as he swears under his breath. A cookbook lays open on the counter.

Leo watches him from the doorway for a few moments before asking, "Dude, what are you doing?"

Rishi jumps so high that the lentils he's gathered leap out of the dustpan in his hand and go everywhere. Leo stops a few with his foot. "Shit," Rishi says.

"Sorry, man. Here, let me do that." Leo steps forward and takes the broom from him. "You handle ... whatever is happening over there." He gestures to the stove, where something foamy is bubbling over.

Rishi lets out a groan as he rushes over to turn the burner off. "I'm trying to learn how to cook Indian food."

"Why wouldn't you just ask your mom?" Leo asks.

Rishi shoots him a look over his shoulder. "I tried! But she refused to give me proper measurements or timing. It was all 'a handful of this' and 'don't add the potatoes till the oil looks right.' How am I supposed to know when it looks right?" The dish that was bubbling belches out some yellow gloop, as if to underscore his point.

Leo empties the dustpan into the garbage as Rishi finds a rag to wipe up the mess. "And you decided to teach yourself to cook a week before your wedding just because?"

Rishi is still scrubbing at the stove. "It's not the cooking specifically, I think it's more—I guess I'm thinking about what I want to pass on to our kids." He stops and faces Leo, shoulders dropping as he leans back against the counter. "And then I just ... spiraled."

"About the terrible cooking?" Leo asks, grinning. "Understandable."

"Oh, that's messed up. I let you, a Raptors fan, into my house and that's how you talk to me? You'd have jack without me."

"Yes, nothing. Except"—Leo holds up a finger—"a championship trophy in the last decade. When was the last time the Knicks could say that?"

Rishi flips him off and then goes quiet for a few moments before saying, "I think I'm a coconut."

"A coconut?"

"You know, brown on the outside, white on the inside," Rishi replies, chuckling at Leo's expression. "I figure if I learn how to cook, not only will it save Geeta and me from ordering in for the rest of our lives but maybe I can connect to that part of me too. I don't know anything about being Indian. I was born right after my parents moved here." He fills another pot with water and sets it on the stove to boil. "They only spoke English to me. They'd eat Indian food, but I'd get to have pizza and burgers and chicken tenders. And don't get me wrong, chicken tenders are elite. But back then, it wasn't cool to be Indian; kids used to do the Apu accent at me, that type of shit. So I happily rejected it. Now I look back and it's a huge red flag. Just a really healthy dose of internalized racism, right?" Rishi shrugs and shoves his hands in his pockets. "This probably sounds really lame to you. Like, you don't think about if you're American enough."

"I'm Canadian, so no, I *definitely* don't. But I'm assuming you mean because I'm white," Leo says.

Rishi's face registers surprise. "Oh shit! I forgot you're Canadian. But yeah, I meant because you're white." They both laugh.

"I haven't ever thought about it but it doesn't sound lame. It just sounds like you're trying to figure stuff out. Have you talked to Geeta about it?"

"Kind of. And what she said made sense: It's not like there's such a thing as being Indian enough. But ..." He shrugs. "Geeta speaks Tamil and Hindi fluently, and she knows things about our culture. Our culture. Her family is so different from mine. And Sim grew up in in India. This stuff seems to come so easily to them. I don't think Geeta's ever thought of her Indian side separate from her American one. To me, it feels like I'm split down the middle. I guess I just don't want my kid to one day feel like a coconut because I couldn't teach them anything about their culture."

Leo's surprised that Rishi is thinking about children so much, but he supposes that's the great thing about marriage: You get to make plans for as close or as far in the future as you want.

"So you decided to make dal."

"So I decided to make dal." Rishi straightens up, slapping Leo on the shoulder. "I'm going to start over."

"Can I help?" Leo asks.

Rishi gives him a skeptical look as he props *Vegetarian India* by Madhur Jaffrey up in the corner. “I don’t know, man. Your people aren’t exactly one with the spices.” Leo laughs and shoves him. “Who am I kidding, I can use all the help I can get.” They start over and move slowly, since they have to double-check the instructions every thirty seconds.

Leo’s thoughts, as they so often do, turn to Simran. She’s had such a different experience than her cousins, growing up in India for the first half of her life. Rishi said it seemed easy within her, but Leo doubts it’s that simple. But maybe that’s why, despite her claims to the contrary, she seems more herself in Iyer House; this place and these people know her history. She effortlessly slips in and out of the languages she speaks here in a way he’s never heard in Toronto.

Eventually they finish and look into the pot. The food has somehow taken on the texture of bad scrambled eggs; Leo, dal neophyte though he is, knows that it shouldn’t even have the texture of good scrambled eggs.

“Maybe we find another way for you to connect to your Indian side because I think the cooking is doing the opposite,” Leo says. He and Rishi glance at each other before looking back down at the food and cracking up. As they start cleaning, he asks, “Hey, how do I get Ashok uncle to talk? I’m never going to win him over if I can’t have a conversation.”

Rishi shrugs.

“What do you mean—” Leo mimics him, lifting his shoulders to his ears. “He’s going to be your father-in-law. You’ve lived next door to him since you were a kid!”

“I don’t know what to tell you, man. The rest of the family is so loud, he’s always just in the background. I think he might like it that way. I’ve never really spent time with him without the girls or Veena aunty there.” Rishi pauses, seeming to consider this as he passes Leo a dirty dish. “I probably should but it’d be too awkward now, after all these years.”

Was that it? Was Ashok Iyer just another silent man, “just built that way,” the same explanation Leo heard repeatedly about his father? Did he want to be quietly left alone, except that his lot in life was to be surrounded by a wife and children who were noisily over-involved?

That doesn’t sound right to Leo. He might be mistaking noise for affection but it doesn’t feel like it. There is so much warmth in the way this family runs towards and ricochets off each other.

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16.

Six days until the wedding

Simran, Kavitha, and Geeta head over to the Chopras' house like ducklings behind Veena perima, who knocks but doesn't wait for an answer. She walks right in, coming face-to-face with Leo, who had been reaching for the door and whose hand is now pressed against Veena perima's midsection. Leo snatches his hand back as his eyes go so wide that Simran thinks they might fall right out of his head, which would be a shame. He has lovely eyes.

Veena perima sits down with Manjula aunty at one end of the dining room table, covered by a complicated seating chart while the three cousins follow Leo outside to the Chopras' backyard, where Rishi is waiting. Simran scrapes her gaze down the back of Leo—they haven't seen each other since their interrupted rendezvous on the balcony three days ago and her skin thrums with the memory.

A banging on the window jolts her out of the moment. She twists around to see her aunt shouting, "Don't stand in the sun! You'll become dark!"

"Amma!" both Kavitha and Geeta yell back at her. Kavitha continues, "We talked about this!"

Veena perima looks confused for a second before she waggles her head from side to side. "Oh, haan, haan, girls these days don't care what color they are. Okay, carry on."

"That's not—" Kavitha stops. "You know what? Close enough."

Simran gets everyone's attention. "Kavitha helped me make the mix last night—it's going to be all the cousins and friends for 'Kajra Re,' '... Baby One More Time,' and 'Mehndi Laga Ke Rakhna,' where we'll do the little skit." She spent yesterday coming up with new choreography for the dances after Geeta rushed into her room the night before, wailing about how her friend Amu chose all the wrong songs. She could have asked Simran instead of telling her to do it, but Simran also knows Geeta's standards are very

high and she trusts Simran to meet them. That's the essence of family: annoying that they take you for granted, but comforting that they know you well enough to do so. She used her phone to record the moves earlier to send to everyone else in the dance, so they can learn it too. "Then Geeta, Kavi, and I stay onstage for 'Kajra Re.'" She turns to Geeta, a ribbon of fondness in her chest for her youngest cousin's demand to create a routine called "the sisters' dance," just for the three of them. "Great idea, by the way."

"I know," Geeta says. "Can we hurry? I've got to be on a call about obstetric ethics with the head of the Yale School of Medicine in thirty minutes."

Simran walks everyone through the moves without the music, counting out loud far slower than the actual tempo—it's still a mess. Rishi can't keep his lefts and rights straight and Kavitha keeps stepping on her own foot. Leo is perpetually half a beat off, neck craned to see what the person next to him is doing. But most surprising is Geeta, who is out of breath and cannot seem to remember what step is next. It quickly devolves, Rishi checking his phone and Kavitha laughing hysterically as she and Leo do-si-do, arms linked.

"We've got less than a week till the sangeet, can we please focus?" she asks in her Miss Simran voice. They stop immediately. Kavitha sways in place, dizzy, and Leo puts his hands on her shoulders to steady her.

Simran sighs. She misses her preschoolers.

"How are you doing that?" Geeta asks as she resumes teaching.

"Like this—" Geeta huffs as Simran adjusts her hands. "You'll get it! Just hang in there!" Simran tamps down her smile. It is nice to be better than her youngest cousin at something, for the first time ever. Geeta clearly doesn't feel that way, glaring at her, so she calls for a water break.

"Can you show me that move again?" Leo asks, walking over to her.

"Sure! Which one?" she asks.

"That thing with your hips," he replies silkily.

She gasps in mock outrage. "Excuse me! I am your teacher."

"And I am very into this role-play," he says, leaning towards her.

She stops him with a hand on his chest, glancing back to make sure Veena perima can't see them. "Leo, you've got me. You can stop flirting with me."

"Pass."

“If I wasn’t supportive—if—I might say a secret plan is not something we should be doing during this already insane week,” Geeta chimes in from a few feet away.

“Gee,” Rishi says, tilting his head. “We’ve talked about this. It’s a wedding. Lots of things will not go according to plan. Nothing else matters except that you and I end up married.” She softens visibly as he reaches out and squeezes her hand. Turning to everyone else, she says, “Fine. Let’s just get this over with!”

At Kavitha and Geeta’s request, Simran demonstrates the dance by herself. Without needing to teach anyone, she loses herself in the music, whirling and unburdened, the only noise in her head a metronome she keeps time to, the only feeling in her body utter control as she hits every move perfectly. When she’s done, everyone bursts into applause, even Veena perima and Manjula aunty at the window. Her aunt holds both her hands up, palms out towards Simran, before pulling her fingers in and cracking the backs of her knuckles against her temples, a familiar gesture to remove the evil eye. The two women return to the table as Simran’s gaze wanders over to Leo. His grin is incandescent with pride, bordering on awe, and she glows within to match.

As Simran teaches the last few sets of moves, she looks at Kavitha. “Remember this?” She does the “Chaiyya Chaiyya” hook step, the one they used to do at their summer performances when they were kids. Kavitha’s face lights up.

“Yes! This dance is seared on my soul!” She steps forward and in sync, she and Simran run through the moves, laughing. Geeta sniffs, more than a few steps behind, and Simran feels slightly bad to leave her out—but she has a mission. If she has to use every last bit of nostalgia and childhood connection to win back Kavitha, she’s going to.

The clouds have been threatening to let loose all morning, and when they finally do, it’s a sudden downpour sending everyone rushing into the house. Geeta goes upstairs to take her call, Rishi trailing her. Simran glances around for Leo, who is suddenly nowhere to be found. Kavitha has sat down with the aunties and so she joins them too, watching Veena perima and Manjula aunty tussle over whose third cousin twice removed gets to sit at table thirty-two and which one will be given the insult of sitting at table thirty-three.

After a few minutes, Leo reappears, holding a tray with five steaming mugs on it. “I made chai,” he announces proudly, walking up to the table.

“Oh, such a nice boy,” Manjula aunty says. “But I can’t have chai in the afternoon or it’ll spoil my diet.”

Veena perima barely suppresses an eye roll. Simran wonders if that’s what she looks like when she does the same thing. Her aunt gestures roughly at Leo to give her a cup. “I’ll have one. Some of us don’t make everything about our looks.”

Leo walks up to the table, the cups rattling with each step, like they too are nervous about what’s to come. Simran exchanges a glance of alarm with Kavitha as she picks furiously at a cuticle. What is he doing? Each night, they’ve reviewed and recalibrated Operation DDLJ, based on what has—or, in most cases, hasn’t—happened. The new tactic for Veena perima is to avoid interaction at all costs. Leo is supposed to focus on Ashok peripa and all their friends, not go rogue, even with something as innocuous as a cup of tea. This is Leo’s competitive, optimistic streak coming out: He has always been liked by everyone.

But Veena Iyer is not everyone.

Simran looks on, helpless, as he places a cup in front of each person and stands back, grinning. It’s like one of those *National Geographic* wildlife specials where an oblivious bird croons while standing in the open jaws of a crocodile.

“Strange color,” Veena perima mutters.

Unfortunately, Simran has to agree as she stares at the muddy hue of the liquid in front of her. Even more worrying: There’s none of the usual fragrance. Chai is an individual calling card for each family. Wherever Leo got his recipe—she suspects he googled “how to make chai” and clicked on the first one he found without checking up on the source—it hasn’t accounted for the Iyer-Gopals’ preference for strong notes of ginger and clove. At least he knows better than to call it “chai tea.”

Eyeing it warily, Veena aunty takes a sip at the same time as Simran does. Her worst fears come true. It’s awful. Watery from the wrong proportion of milk, bitter from steeping the black tea in scalding water, and no trace of the crucial inji or lavangam. She quickly swallows the sip in her mouth and tries not to grimace. Veena perima is not as gracious, spitting it back into her cup like a child.

“Chee, this is terrible,” Veena perima says.

“Amma!” Kavitha says, though her own cup has been subtly pushed away.

Leo looks from woman to woman, and as he clocks each expression, his face drops. Kavitha looks apologetic but the damage has been done. Veena perima has always been tactless; it’s something she enjoys, declaring her opinion for other people to swallow. Simran is inured to it. But Leo is trying so hard—learning new languages, getting on that damn ladder when he’s afraid of heights, going on runs with her uncle, even this misbegotten chai. He deserves more.

“I like it,” she lies, and the words are barely out of her mouth before she’s met with three incredulous glances. Leo’s eyes crinkle at the corners, though she can tell that he doesn’t believe her either.

“How can you like this?” Veena perima asks. “It tastes like gutter water.”

Leo’s fair skin goes splotchy with embarrassment and it activates Simran’s protectiveness more. “Some people make chai too rich and sweet. This is, um ... easy to drink.” She takes another sip and forces her expression to not say the opposite of her words. Her aunt is looking at her like she’s been body-snatched and Simran can’t blame her.

Leo quickly collects all the cups—no one puts up a fight—and loads them back on the tray. “I’m sorry about that,” he says before disappearing into the kitchen. The aunties immediately dive back into the seat arrangements. Simran lasts exactly thirty seconds before excusing herself, muttering something about going to the bathroom. She goes down the hallway but turns into the Chopras’ kitchen instead. Leo is nowhere to be found.

“Simran!” Veena perima’s clamorous voice rings through the kitchen. “Bring me some Parle-G biscuits when you come back.”

“They’re in the pantry on the left side!” Manjula aunty adds.

Simran goes to the pitch-black alcove of the pantry, feeling along the wall for the light switch, when her fingers encounter soft fabric—and hard flesh. Before she can let out a scream, a hand covers her mouth and she is pulled inside, pressed right up against someone.

A familiar voice murmurs, words slipping down the shell of her ear, “It’s me.” The fear from a moment ago slips into something else entirely. She can just make out the straight line of Leo’s nose, the inky swoop of his lashes. For a few moments, they remain like that, bodies flush, his hand still over her mouth, staring at each other.

“Simran, did you find it?” Veena perima calls, snapping them out of their haze.

Leo releases his hand so she can reply. “Just looking now, Perima!” The risk of it all feels more like pleasure than she would have thought. She pulls the door closed, wedging them into the space. “What are you doing in here?”

“Hiding,” he admits. “That was embarrassing.”

“I’m sorry for how mean everyone was about your chai,” she says softly. Things sink into his skin where they would bounce off hers.

“I’m sorry for my chai.” They both laugh, and it presses her body further into his. “Can I blame it on a Haunted Mask moment?” He must sense her confusion because he adds, “The haunted mask episode of *Goosebumps*? Wildly popular kids’ scary book series turned into a TV show? I used to be obsessed with them. You didn’t have that in India?”

“No, I’ve never heard of it,” she says.

“I forget sometimes you didn’t grow up here with your cousins,” he says. “I mean, you don’t really talk about your childhood very much. Which is your choice, obviously, but I’d love to hear more ...” He trails off as she gently drags her nails over his forearm and looks up at him. “Or not. We don’t have to talk. Words are stupid.”

She presses more fully into him. “Yeah,” she says quietly. “Let’s make out instead.”

She raises her chin as his face lowers to her, lips just touching—

“Simran!” She jumps, her shoulder knocking Leo’s jaw. He winces. “Why is it taking so long? Do you want me to come and help?”

“No! No, I’ve found them,” she says with a frantic edge. She snatches the bag from a shelf to the left and steps out. Before she goes into the living room, she turns and presses a full kiss to Leo’s mouth before shutting the door on his still-puckered lips.

17.

Five days until the wedding

This morning, Ashok uncle is sporting nifty matching sweat-bands on his forehead and wrists as he and Leo set off on their walk without a word. After the last couple of days, Leo's decided to accept the silence. It's almost peaceful, listening to birds chirping and cars driving past and kids running around their yards and ... no, this is unbearable.

Still, Leo doesn't say anything. His attempts so far have fallen flat. This might be worse than climbing that ladder. This might be worse than yesterday's chai incident.

"Okay," Ashok uncle says out of nowhere.

It takes Leo so much by surprise that all he can reply with is "Huh?"

"It is okay," Ashok uncle says. Multiple syllables! But what is okay? "You asked about the pace."

He most certainly did not. But Leo's not going to push it. "Oh. Good." Now he's the monosyllabic one. Say something else, Leo. Keep it going. "What do you think about turning here and going down Hudson Street to walk by the pond instead of Sherbourne Path?"

"Okay."

The silence descends again. Then, after a few minutes, Ashok uncle says to him, "Put your hands like this."

Leo blinks twice. "What?"

"Put your hands"—Ashok uncle holds both of his hands up, as if Leo might not know what he's talking about—"like this." Exaggeratedly, he clasps them behind his back as they keep walking.

Leo, unsure how to reply, does as Ashok uncle has demonstrated. And after a few moments, he says, "Whoa."

Ashok uncle nods. "See?"

"I do! I see!" Leo says, feeling how his shoulders are pulled taut and how his hands joined at the small of his back force him to engage his core with

each step he takes.

“It’s good for thinking,” the older man adds. “Okay!” Leo says.

When the silence returns, Leo lets it. These aren’t the wordless runs with his father or the chatty, distracting walks with his mother; it’s something new, a stroll, punctuated with occasional conversation. Okay. He can live with that.

As they round the corner to the street where the Iyers and Chopras live, Ashok uncle speaks again. “After the surgery ... it is harder.”

Leo quickly understands. “Walking?”

“I used to play cricket in India. Then I came to America. There was no cricket here. So I stopped. I became slow. And slower now.”

“It happens to a lot of people,” Leo says.

Ashok uncle says, “So this pace is good.”

Leo smiles back at him. “This pace is great.”



Leo feels like he’s in a *Scooby-Doo* cartoon, tiptoeing through the back door of Iyer House into the kitchen, looking for Simran, hoping they might be able to pick up where they left off in the closet. A stern voice behind him says, “Eh, you! What are you doing here?”

He turns slowly, trying to buy some time as he scrambles for a reason. But it’s just Kavitha, sitting at the table, grinning at him over her laptop. “Gotcha.”

Leo’s laugh is a gust of relief. “You are too good at that.”

“Simran’s on a call in her bedroom upstairs,” Kavitha says, tilting her chair back on two legs.

Leo perks up. “Oh?”

“My mother is also upstairs.”

“Oh.” He notices the legal pad filled with scrawls next to her computer. “Are you working?”

“No, I have these two weeks off from mediating at the law offices of Mistery Fox, Farrow, and Porter so I can mediate my own family.” She angles her chin at the huge cardboard box on the chair across from her. “I’m supposed to be putting the rest of the party favors together.” He walks over and puts the box on the floor so he can sit. He glances around the kitchen,

the countertops crowded and cupboards so stuffed, some can't close fully. "And instead you're ..."

"Avoiding people like the consummate ambivert I am and catching up on my Letterboxd reviews," she tells him. "When this is all over, I cannot wait to update my *DDLJ* review."

"Are you going to mention that I'm basically a Bollywood hero IRL?"

"Oh, Leo." Kavitha's smile drops. "No." He laughs. "*DDLJ* is often imitated, sometimes iterated, but never, ever duplicated."

"Fair enough. You do that a lot? Reviewing movies like *DDLJ*?" he asks, gesturing to her computer.

"I like to provide my opinion in a snarky but respectful way. Like a public service. And not movies like *DDLJ*. There are so many movies from India other than Bollywood that people don't talk about enough, all these amazing directors and films in other languages."

"Right. Because there are twenty-two official languages in India, per the constitution," Leo says.

Kavitha raises an eyebrow at his fun fact. "Okay, Wikipedia."

Leo, still on alert for Veena aunty, keeps looking towards the living room. "I'm learning Tamil and Hindi, actually."

"Oh yeah? I'll make you a list—some of my favorite movies are Tamil ones directed by this guy." She points to her T-shirt that reads "Show Me the Mani (Ratnam)."

"I'm up for it but the person you should be talking to is my sister," he says.

"Is that Olivia? Simran's roommate?" Kavitha asks.

"Of course, you must know her. You guys have probably met, right?"

Kavitha clears her throat. "No, actually. Obviously, I know who she is but we've never talked."

He pulls out his phone as he walks around the table and takes the seat next to her. "She's movie-obsessed. Let's see if she's around."

His sister picks up on the second ring. "Leonardo, good timing! I am currently in possibly one of the most idyllic spots I've ever seen in my life and I was hoping to rub it in someone's face," Liv says. She pans the phone across a pristine vista of mountains and a small stream with a wooden bridge over it.

"Wait!" Kavitha says, bouncing in her chair. "I know that bridge! You're in Interlaken!"

Liv turns the camera so it's on her face again. "I am! How did you know that? Wait, are you Kavitha? Like *the* Kavitha?"

"Oh, I'm definitely going to make more people call me that. Yes, I am *the* Kavitha. And that's the bridge in my favorite movie," Kavitha says.

"In *DDLJ*! Simran got me to watch it and made me promise I'd come here and take pictures!" Liv says. "Which, duh, of course I would because it immediately became one of my favorite rom-com-fam-drams."

"What?" Leo says at the same time Kavitha says, "How do you know that term?"

"Rom-com-fam-dram?" Liv asks. "There's this movie blogger, Nava Rasa, who came up with it to describe the subgenre of Indian movies that have some romance and a little comedy and family drama in them. She's brilliant."

Kavitha jabs a finger into her own chest. "She is me! I am she!" Leo laughs and hands her the phone.

"Oh my god!" The video shakes with Liv's excitement. "I quote your *Slumdog Millionaire* review all the time: 'I have to thank the makers of this movie for improving the way I see the world. Because I hated this movie so much, it actually made me hate other things less.' Okay, I'm so sorry but I have to go on the *DDLJ* tour now—"

"Record every second of it!" Kavitha screeches. Next to her, Leo puts a finger in his ear and winces, hoping the noise doesn't reach Veena prima's sonar hearing upstairs.

"I will!" Liv says, matching her pitch. "When I'm back and your sister's wedding is done, we are going to talk because I need to know your opinion about every single movie that's ever existed, okay, thanks, byeeee!"

Kavitha grins at him after they've hung up. "You've got a very cool sister."

"So everyone keeps telling me," he says. "I like yours too."

Kavitha's face falls, just a fraction. Leo fights against the urge to come out and plainly ask why they've fallen out; it's not his place.

"How much has Simran told you about us and what happened?" she asks.

He sits up a little straighter. "Not much, honestly. But she will when she's ready." Kavitha scoffs under her breath, but Leo doesn't say anything. He keeps getting reminded they're so different. Simran would rather push everything down, when he wants it all out in the open. You don't learn

things about people to file under good or bad, or right or wrong; they're just ways to get to know them better, to love them more wholly.

"Look, it's not my place to speak for her," he says. But Kavitha is leaning towards him. She's clearly as hungry to know about the years Simran was away from her as Leo is about the years before that. "But I could always tell there was something missing for her. She told so many stories about you."

"What about my mother?"

Leo raises his eyebrows. "Your mother?"

"Or my father. Or my sister, anyone from my family."

Leo stays silent. Simran mentioned her aunt a bit, but mostly how strict she was, and far less than Kavitha. She slumps back in her chair. "I missed her too, you know. But it's not actually about her and me."

It doesn't feel right to keep talking *about* Simran and not *to* her. His mother would tell him that he was engaging in unhealthy indirect communication. Suddenly, both their heads turn at a noise coming from the living room and they go rigid. Leo half stands but he doesn't have the advantage of making a quick getaway. The kitchen door swings open and he braces himself.

It's just Rishi.

"Oh thank god," Kavitha says, melting back into her chair.

"I was going to sneak in," Rishi says. "But then I realized—I'm marrying into this family this weekend. I can see my fiancée when I want! Where is Gee?"

"Your fiancée is upstairs with her mother," Kavitha says. "Ahh. Maybe I'll stay here, then."

To herself, Kavitha mutters, "God, I've become an administrative assistant for my sisters' love lives. I really need to get a life."

Leo's laugh is mostly relief. "Can you imagine if Veena aunty had caught me here—with the wrong sister?"

"If I got reamed out for a relationship I'm not even in, I would scream," Kavitha says, pulling a face that makes her look like Ashok uncle.

"Hey, Kavitha. What could I talk to your dad about that would make him open up?"

Kavitha drums her fingers on the table, thinking. "What about trees?"

His eyebrows knit together. "Trees?"

"Appa likes trees," Kavitha says.

"What about trees?" Leo says.

“Yes, that’s what I asked you,” Kavitha says. “No, I mean, what about trees does he like?”

Kavitha looks out the window before she lights up. “They’ve got leaves!”

“Leaves?” Leo follows her gaze. “Did you just look at a tree and say the first thing that came to your mind?”

“Empirical findings are part of the scientific method,” she replies. He goes to bed that night with no success at getting alone time with Simran and no progress on Operation DDLJ either. The days are slipping by quickly and he’s trying not to worry.

As his head hits the pillow, Kavitha’s words come back to him: “It’s not actually about her and me.” He’s beginning to get that feeling too. For Simran to be okay, Kavitha’s only a piece of it. She’s got to figure things out with all of them. It’s not just Leo who has to find his way into this family.

18.

The closer they get to the wedding, the less time Simran has to do any work, thanks to the ever-increasing number of tasks from Veena perima. But it's given her time with Kavitha. Last night, it was pulling down and washing every single curtain because in a few days, a steady stream of relatives will walk through and judge every inch of this house like they're experts on an HGTV show. There's nothing like doing manual labor while whispering about secret plans to make it feel like they're co-conspirators again. But Kavitha still won't talk about anything that's not directly related to the wedding or Operation DDLJ.

"Simi!" Veena perima's voice drags Simran back to the present, where she and Kavi are helping her out in the kitchen. "You need to go to Patel Brothers to get kadipatha."

Kavitha snickers. "She can't go to the store, she doesn't drive."

Veena perima's mouth turns down in distaste that a flaw has been found in one of her instructions. "Okay, so Simran, you wash the dishes, Kavitha, ni store po."

"We should both go," Simran says quickly. Anything that gets her out of this house is welcome.

"Why?" Veena perima asks.

"Because sometimes it's really hard to find parking, so she might need to go inside while I stay in the car," Kavitha jumps in.

"Seri, seri," Veena perima says. "Come back fast."

"Poitu varen, Amma," Kavitha says.

As expected, the parking lot is chaotic with cars, shopping carts, strollers, and people everywhere. Not helping are the two grandmas standing in a parking spot, chatting away, oblivious to the cars piling up behind them.

As soon as Simran and Kavitha walk in, they're faced with the fresh coconut counter, where one of the store workers is using a small machete to hack off the tops and shear the green outsides to reveal the hairy brown rounds used in cooking and prayer ceremonies. A prepared foods counter in the back doubles as a snack bar with a man assembling pani puri for a mass

of hungry mouths. The other side of the store houses the fresh market with piles of vegetables Simran doesn't even know the English names for. And somewhere amid all this is a full-blown supermarket, the towering aisles packed with so many items that it practically defies gravity. Simran and Kavitha work their way through the crowd, knowing that they're here for one thing but will leave with at least fifteen. Simran peruses through the snack aisle and picks up two bags of murruku, Kavitha's favorite.

"Hey, can you grab some Eno? It's over there," Kavitha asks.

Simran locates it on a shelf that is too high for her pocket-size cousin to reach. She smirks as she pulls it off the shelf, pretending to stoop as she hands it to Kavitha. "Here you go."

"Not a word, you sentient redwood tree," Kavitha says.

Simran laughs. "Who needs antacids?"

"Appa. Since the surgery, he will sneakily eat spicy and fried food and then be in all this pain after and have to hide it from Amma," she says.

Simran doesn't say anything, the guilt gnawing at her. She sees how the surgery cleaved this family into two eras of their own: Before, Ashok peripa, so tall and strong that any kid lucky enough to sit on his shoulders—quite often Simran—felt like they were a giant. And now, after that heart attack, him almost always sitting, his daughters and wife fussing over him. It was that first sign of mortality, the reminder that the family unit that made up your whole life could be broken.

Simran and Kavitha round the aisle and nearly run into someone else's cart. "Sorry—" The words freeze on Kavitha's lips.

"Hello, you!" Ajay Pillai, Kavi's former fiancé, says before seeing Simran there. "Simran, hey! It's been a long time."

"Hi, Ajay," she says. She had forgotten all about Ajay—and that the grocery store is ground zero for The Community.

"How are things?" Kavitha asks. Ajay is nice-looking in a bland, parent-pleasing way, just like his personality. How could Veena perima have ever thought he'd be a good fit for her live wire of a cousin?

"Things are good. How are *you*?" he asks Kavitha with a genuineness that catches Simran off guard. "Sorry, it's been a minute since we caught up."

Kavitha smiles back warmly. "That's okay," she says. "I'm good." He tilts his head. "Still at home?"

There's something wistful in her eyes as she says, "You know how it is."

Simran watches them closely, but she's missing something. Is it affection?

"I'm glad we ran into each other, actually. Meet my wife, Priya," he says, gesturing to the woman standing next to him. Priya is petite and light-skinned with big eyes artfully lined with kajal and wearing a casual raw silk salwar set that is unfairly stunning on someone doing a grocery run, a picture of the perfect South Indian wife. Simran and Kavitha are both in ratty old t-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. She watches her cousin closely but Kavi doesn't seem to be bothered by meeting this woman. There's something else on her mind. When Ajay's parents come to stand on either side of Priya, both his and Kavitha's smiles drop immediately. "And, of course, you know my parents."

"Hi, Auntie, Uncle," Kavitha replies. She manages to plaster a tight, thin smile on her face. Simran greets them too.

Neither of the Pillais smile back. Mrs. Pillai scans Kavitha from head to toe with such intense disapproval that Kavitha seems to shrink down beyond her already small five feet and three inches. Mr. Pillai simply stares blankly and then they both walk away without a word. Ajay shoots Kavi an apologetic look, shrugging his shoulders, before slipping his arm around his wife and guiding her away. That Simran wasn't here when Kavitha and Ajay's engagement broke is one of the biggest sore spots in the litany of bruises between her cousin and her. Kavitha had called Simran and had a real heart-to-heart for the first time in the months since she'd left, telling Simran she needed her. So Simran sent Kavitha a plane ticket to Toronto—she'd been sure that it was the right time for Kavi to make the same escape she had. She'd been dead wrong and, instead, they'd fought, each wanting the other to come to her. A year later, Ashok peripa's heart attack sealed the distance that had already crept in between them.

"You okay?" Simran asks now.

"Huh?" Kavitha blinks twice before looking at Simran. "Let's get out of here, please?"

The entire time they're standing in the checkout line that's so long it wraps around the perimeter of the store, Kavi is ashen and silent. The idea of going right back to Iyer House and Kavitha having to put on a happy face makes Simran feel terrible for her. Though it won't make up for all the times she missed, she can be here now for her cousin.

Once they're in the car, she pulls out her phone, dials her aunt's number, and puts it on speaker. "Hello, Perima," Simran says. Kavitha frowns at her, confused.

"Solu, Simi," Veena perima answers.

"Do you remember our friend Laurel Lee? From high school?" Simran hopes it's not overkill when she adds, "She was on the honor roll."

"Haan, I remember. Nice girl. Chinese. Went to Princeton," Veena perima says.

Laurel Lee did not go to Princeton. Primarily because Laurel Lee does not exist—she was the friend whose academic achievements were legendary and whom Simran totally made up. She and Kavi would pretend they were studying at Laurel Lee's house so some of those good grades could rub off on them. In reality, they remained solid B students spending those few precious hours at the crappy strip mall nearby.

"Yes, her! We just ran into her and she's only in town till tomorrow. We're going to get a coffee with her, okay? We'll come home after that."

"How long?" Veena perima asks.

"A while! Okay, bye!" She hangs up before her aunt can ask for any more details. "I figure that'll buy us an hour. Let's grab a coffee?"

Kavitha snorts. "Screw coffee. Let's get a drink."



A little while later, Simran and Kavitha sit on the patio of a dive bar nearby, overlooking the grand view of the parking lot of the strip mall.

It's hot and sticky and kind of sketchy, but Simran still feels more at ease here than in Iyer House.

"I wonder why parents always mention people's ethnicity," Kavitha says. "Rihanna was on the radio the other day and Amma goes 'Did you know she's from Barbados?' Anyone we talk about, she's 23andMeing them. I quit playing Queen in the car because she would keep mentioning, at *every song*, that Freddie Mercury—"

"Is actually Indian," Simran jumps in, remembering this clearly.

"Not just Indian." Kavitha adopts her mother's accent and says, "'He was a Parsi, you know? His real name was Farrokh Bulsara.'"

Simran laughs. “Maybe it’s a first-gen immigrant thing. They say where other people are from because they still identify as where they are from.”

Kavitha picks at the label on her bottle, tearing off strips and rolling them into little balls. With the wedding events starting in the next couple of days, Simran knows this might be her one chance to truly talk to her cousin. She sits up straight and leans forward, elbows on the table.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Kavitha takes a sip of beer and puts the bottle on the table. “Sure.” Simran takes a breath. “Do you ever want to move out of Iyer House?”

Kavitha blinks and then laughs heartily, her cheeks rounding. “Of course I want to move out of Iyer House! I love our family but it would be great not to have to make up a person just to have some free time.”

“Then—” Simran stops herself.

“Then why haven’t I?” Kavitha finishes it for her anyway. “Remember how when we were younger, it was always you and me and then everybody else?”

“It was the best,” Simran says.

“It was. We were a team in shenanigans, and we were a team against all the other kids, even against our parents too when they were unfair or too strict.”

“Mostly your mom,” Simran says.

“Mostly. But sometimes yours. They were both raised by our patti, after all,” Kavitha replies and then pauses. “I used to wish you’d come to New Jersey and live with us. And then ...” Simran’s throat constricts. “Then it happened and I was so upset at myself for ever wishing that.”

But all Simran can think of is how her cousin held her together when she was in pieces. Kavitha ushering a grief-torn Simran around her new school. Kavitha introducing her to American fast food. Kavitha agreeing to watch *DDLJ* for the eighteenth night in a row, simply because it was the only thing that brought Simran a modicum of comfort. She sits forward. “You didn’t mean it like that. You’re the reason I survived moving here.”

“It was okay when you were still living here and Amma was pushing us around. It was still the two of us, dreaming of one day living somewhere else together, away from her rules.”

Simran swallows a lump in her throat. Kavitha hasn’t forgotten their pact. “I remember.”

Kavitha looks directly at her. “And then you left.”

“I asked you to come with me!” Simran bursts out. Someone at a table a few feet away adjusts their chair with a metallic scrape, reminding her that they’re in public.

“How could I have come with you? You ran away!” Kavitha says. She slouches back in her chair, deflated.

The sun has come out in full force and beads of sweat are gathering in the middle of Simran’s back. “Kavitha, your mom kept talking about getting me married off; I didn’t want that. I barely understood how you were okay with it.”

“I asked her to do it,” Kavitha says, and Simran stills. “What?”

“I asked her to set me up with someone. I mean, she was already always introducing me to guys but I told her I would get engaged if we found someone I liked. I chose Ajay—well, after my mother found him.”

Simran’s jaw is on the ground. “Why would you do that?”

Kavitha laughs, but it’s brittle. “You see that as, like, the ultimate insult, don’t you? That my mother would dare make that choice for you. That every time she tries, she’s trying to, what, pin your wings? That’s not how it felt for me.” She shrugs. “I didn’t know what my life was going to look like. She had strong ideas and I didn’t hate them.”

“Of course you didn’t know what your life was going to look like!” Simran says. “You were twenty-two.”

“I was lonely,” Kavitha replies. Simran’s mouth snaps shut. “My younger sister was off being brilliant and building her life with Rishi. My older sister was less than half an hour away but never came home and never had time for me. I didn’t—” She cuts herself off. “I didn’t want to live in Iyer House for the rest of my life. Guess that kind of happened anyway.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Simran asks. The condensation from her glass of too-acidic house white wine drips through the holes in the metal table onto Simran’s leg. “Back then? We could have figured it out together.”

“You were long gone,” Kavitha says. “If you think moving to Toronto was the first time you ran away, then you’re lying to yourself. You’ve been running from us since the minute you moved here.”

“Never from you,” Simran says.

Kavitha shakes her head. “I know you don’t believe me but my mother was really upset when you left. And then my dad had the heart attack. I stayed because they needed me, and maybe after calling off the whole Ajay thing, I needed them too. Eventually, I stopped thinking about moving out.”

She looks off into the distance, away from Simran. “After a while, I couldn’t even keep being angry. I tried, but it’s just not me. I wasn’t mad at you, I was just ... sad at you, I guess.”

Simran absorbs this. At some point, it became clear to her that she had to leave Iyer House. Being surrounded by people who knew her parents but acted like they had never existed was destroying her. But now she sees it from the other side: that every time she left—to live on campus, to stay for two extra years and get her master’s degree, to move to Toronto—she was also leaving Kavitha behind. That asking her to come to Toronto was not actually something her cousin felt like she could do and she’d never bothered to ask why. They’re silent for a long time before Simran says, “I am sorry.”

Simran can’t tell if Kavitha’s small nod is an acceptance of her apology or just her shifting in her chair. “I took the bar exam in New York,” Kavitha says. “And I passed—”

“Kavi! Congratulations!”

“—three years ago,” Kavitha says. “My results expire at the end of this year. So to answer your question, yes, I do want to move out of Iyer House. But I’ll stay until I can leave in a way that feels right.”

“What will make it feel right?”

“I don’t know.” But that doesn’t sound wholly true.

Kavitha stands. “Come on,” she says, leaving a twenty on the table. “We should go home before Amma calls Middlesex County police and puts out a missing person’s report.”

The entire ride home, Simran is buoyed. She and Kavitha finally talked—really and truly. It felt like clearing the air. There’s hope for them yet.

“Oh good,” her aunt says when they walk in and drop the groceries on the kitchen counter. “You’re back, I was starting to worry.” Simran and Kavitha exchange a glance as Veena perima continues, “Where were you?”

“We told you, Perima. We got coffee with Laurel,” Simran says, knowing this is a test.

“Where?”

“The Dunkin’ Donuts on Bailey Street,” she replies, smooth as silk.

“America runs on it,” Kavitha adds unhelpfully.

Veena ignores this. “It’s very hot for coffee.”

“We got iced coffees, Perima.” It feels like playing a sport after a long time; Simran’s a little rusty but the muscle memory of avoiding her aunt’s

attempts to suss out a lie remains strong as ever. It's almost fun.

"The Patels came over, that Gujarati family who lives in Bergen County. Their daughter Janvi is having a baby, did you know?" Her aunt switching topics so swiftly gives Simran whiplash.

"I did," Kavitha says. "And she's thirty-eight. See, Amma? Women's lives aren't over if they're not married by thirty."

Veena perima gives her a withering stare. "Kavitha, naan patikadu illai. But she is thirty-eight *now*. She got married when she was thirty-four. So she has been working to this. I don't see either of you doing that."

Simran never ceases to be amazed that no matter how long Veena perima lives in America, she holds on to her conservative Indian values. Simran's maternal grandmother had been so much like Veena perima, strict, demanding, raising her daughters with an iron fist till she'd passed away young, when they were still both in high school. Simran's mother, Vidya, had broken away from that idea, telling Simran that she should marry someone only when she met the right person, and only if she wanted to get married. Simran held on to that way of thinking fiercely. Not for the first time, she wonders how the two sisters could be so different.

"Having a husband is not necessary to have a child," Kavitha replies.

Veena perima's head bobbles from side to side. "Haan haan, I know. The Mehtas' daughter is going to be a single mom, she did artificial insemination, no marriage."

"That's one way." Kavitha smirks and on that baby face of hers, it only looks more devilish. "Or you know ... regular insemination, no marriage."

Veena perima's brow furrows as she comprehends what her daughter has just said. "Chee, Kavitha!" She busies herself with cutting long beans, shaking her head as Kavitha cackles.

Simran watches them volley back and forth. When she lived in Iyer House, every interaction between Simran and Veena perima was charged with her anger and resentment. Kavitha was more neutral, just another teenager chafing under her mother's rule—but their interactions now feel light. Maybe even fun.

A memory flashes in her head of Veena perima and Ashok peripa's faces when Simran talked to them right after she left Iyer House. As soon as the plane had touched down in Toronto and she had turned her phone back on, it had rung with a video call from her aunt and uncle. She'd expected her aunt to put up a huge fight, but instead, all Veena perima had asked was

“Are you okay?” When Simran had repeated what she’d written in her note—that she needed to leave, that Iyer House wasn’t her home but she was excited about her new job and living with her friend in Toronto—her aunt said nothing. She had tossed her raspberry-colored dupatta over her shoulder, the chiffon material falling almost mournfully as she turned away from the screen. Ashok peripa had put a hand on his wife’s shoulder, an extreme display of sympathy by his standards. In Tamil, he’d told her to be safe and hung up.

She’d left and they’d let her. For a split second, she had felt the weight of all she was pushing away, but there had been too much damage in close proximity; she needed space.

Of course, the next day, Veena perima had called again, absolutely riotous that she hadn’t come home yet. The woman was nothing if not reliably intransigent. As she watches Kavitha and Veena perima now and thinks about her cousins, Rishi, even her uncle, Simran wonders if maybe the only things that haven’t changed in seven years are her and her aunt.

19.

Three days until the wedding

When they meet in the front yard the next morning, Leo is surprised that Ashok uncle speaks almost immediately. “I think this will be our last walk.”

“Wedding events start tomorrow so I guess so,” Leo says, feeling a little disappointed. These mornings with this quiet, calm man are something he looks forward to.

“Too bad,” Ashok uncle says but he may as well have pulled Leo into a bear hug. Too bad, meaning Ashok uncle would have continued these walks if he could, too bad meaning he likes spending this time with Leo. To Leo, “too bad” is really great. But there’s someone else who should be a part of this. He pulls out his phone and quickly shoots off a text, keeping Ashok uncle in the front yard by pretending to tie his shoelaces.

“What’s up, why’d you ...” Rishi trails off as he comes out to the porch and sees Leo standing next to his father-in-law-to-be. “Hi, Uncle.”

Ashok uncle simply nods back.

“Hey! So glad you decided to come on our morning walk with us,” Leo says, over-enunciating so Rishi understands. “That’s okay, right, Uncle?”

“Okay,” Ashok uncle replies.

They set out on their walk and the usual silence permeates. As he’s learned to do, Leo lets it. Rishi keeps shooting him confused looks. “What am I doing here?” he whispers.

Leo holds a palm up, like a sage: Wait and see. At least, he hopes Rishi sees. His new approach of letting Ashok uncle speak first and when he wants has worked the last two days, but what if the equilibrium has been thrown off? For ten minutes, no one says a word and Leo feels anxiety creep into the silence between the three of them. The sun is brutal today and he realizes he forgot to put sunscreen on the back of his neck and it’s getting burnt. He needs to do something different. “You know, Rishi, I’ve

been thinking about—” He inhales, unable to believe the next word that he’s going to say. “Trees.”

“Trees?” Rishi parrots.

“Trees,” Leo repeats, sneaking a look at Ashok uncle. There’s no indication on his face that he’s even heard them. Leo really, really hopes Kavitha was correct about this. He tries to recall what facts came up when he searched “tree + Bengaluru” last night. “Have you ever seen the jacaranda tree?”

Rishi is staring at him like he has two heads. Like even a two-headed Leo would be less weird, unless one of those heads also started talking about trees. “Can’t say I have.”

“They’re the ones with the purple flowers,” Leo continues. “They’re native to the tropical regions of South America but they grow in parts of Australia, the U.S., and India.”

Behind Ashok uncle’s back, Rishi jerks his chin up at Leo, trying to figure out what’s going on. Leo waves him away. He needs Rishi to pick up his end of the conversation. He forges on. “There are also sandalwood trees and frangipani trees and rain trees and—”

“Stop saying the word ‘tree,’” Rishi hisses at him.

“And banyan trees,” Leo finishes lamely. They’re past the halfway point on their walk. Time is running out.

Then, out of nowhere: “My boarding school had beautiful banyan trees,” Ashok uncle says. Leo nearly fist pumps.

“I see,” he replies, playing it cool.

A few moments of silence pass and Rishi glances at his father-in-law before looking at Leo again. “I liked to read under them,” the older man continues.

“How was going to boarding school?” Leo asks. “Okay,” Ashok uncle says.

“Was it tough?”

“Not bad.”

Rishi opens his mouth but Leo reaches over and hits him to shut him up. He can feel it, there’s something coming, they just have to be patient—

“I didn’t have many friends in school. Because I was so quiet. Everyone always wanted me to talk,” Ashok uncle says, and out of the corner of his eye, Leo catches Rishi’s jaw dropping.

“You talk when you have something to say,” Leo offers.

“Haan, that only,” Ashok uncle says. “Then my parents matched me with Veena. She talked so much that I never needed to.”

Rishi’s eyebrows go up high. Ashok uncle may have spoken more this morning than he has in the entire time his son-in-law has known him. Leo elbows him and Rishi snaps out of it.

“It must be a genetic thing,” he says. “Geeta talks through every single movie and TV show we ever watch together. I miss half the stuff that’s happening because I’m listening to her so I started watching shows by myself first. That way, she can talk as much as she wants.”

Leo opens his mouth to share Simran’s habit—pausing every five minutes while she shares a fact she looked up—but realizes he can’t.

“Once, we were kicked out of a movie theater because Veena was talking constantly,” Ashok uncle says. A fond smile crosses his face. “Then she argued so much that they let us back in.”



OPERATION DDLJ Chat

Leo Bridgers [11:52 a.m.]: Here to announce that pillar #2 of Op DDLJ has been secured. Ashok uncle has had three whole conversations with me.

Kavitha Iyer [11:53 a.m.]: not that you're bragging or anything

Leo Bridgers: [11:54 a.m.]: No, I am bragging. They said it couldn't be done but they hadn't met me yet.

Kavitha Iyer [11:54 a.m.] put that victory dance on pause because tonight, you're tackling Veena Iyer

Leo Bridgers: [11:56 a.m.] Any chance I can just get one more day before our Veena aunty plan?

Rishi Chopra: [12:01 p.m.] Didn't take u for a procrastinator, Leo.

Leo Bridgers: [12:03 p.m.] Abject terror can make you do all sorts of things you never thought you'd do.

Geeta Iyer [12:04 p.m.] The mehndi is tomorrow! The sangeet's the day after! And then it's the wedding and reception! NOTHING is being pushed back!

Kavitha Iyer [12:05 p.m.] you've woken the dragon

Leo Bridgers [12:06 p.m.] Sorry Geeta! We're staying on schedule.

Rishi Chopra [12:08 p.m.]: Time to shamelessly suck up to Veena aunty

Simran Gopal [12:09 p.m.]: And how is this any different than the other times Leo has crashed and burned with Veena perima? No offense, Leo. (But it's true)

Leo Bridgers [12:10 p.m.]: A little taken! (Yeah, I know it is.)

Kavitha Iyer [12:10 p.m.]: because tonight, Leo is going to say the eight most important words he ever will to my mother: you are the best cook I've ever met

Rishi Chopra [12:11 p.m.]: and he's gonna say them in front of MY mother

Leo Bridgers [12:14 p.m.]: Shot and chaser.

Rishi Chopra [12:13 p.m.]: It's a genius plan!

Simran Gopal [12:14 p.m.]: You're using the word "genius" and the word "plan" very liberally here.

Kavitha Iyer [12:15 p.m.]: hater

That night, both families gather at Iyer House, a last dinner before the events kick off and the wedding guests start arriving in droves tomorrow. Leo tags along, grimacing only slightly when Veena aunty purses her lips and says, "Oh. Leo, you're also here."

"Amma," Kavitha admonishes. Leo brushes it off. There's something about Veena aunty's digs that don't feel very personal. She's treating him like she would any interloper to her family. It's basically a rite of passage.

The whole group shoves in around the dinner table, crowded with extra chairs. No one waits on formality, immediately reaching across and over the people next to them to fill their plates. Leo is seated strategically between Kavitha and Rishi because they'll give him a subtle signal as to what foods he can eat that won't trigger his bland palate; he'll then, completely spontaneously, compliment it so effusively that Veena aunty will forget to actively dislike Leo.

A bowl of white rice and grated cucumber mixed with yogurt, dotted with mustard seeds and curry leaves, is put down right in front of him. Rishi's elbow jabs into his ribs from one side, Kavitha from the other. So much for subtle. Just as Leo is about to take the spoon, the bowl gets yanked out of his reach by Veena aunty.

"Eh, why are you eating the thaiyar saddam first?" Everyone stops to look at him. "That's what you end with," she says.

“I heard your um, tha-thayeer-thai—your yogurt rice was your specialty, so I wanted to try it,” Leo says. He reaches for it again but stops at Veena aunty’s look.

“What, you think I only know how to make one thing well?” Veena aunty asks hotly.

“Of course not,” he replies immediately.

“Then you’ll take some of everything,” she says, and scoops a spoonful of every dish, *except* the yogurt rice, which has migrated to the other side of the table. With no other choice, Leo starts with a charred eggplant preparation—it looks like the mellowest of them all.

It’s not. He quickly switches to the dish next to it, string beans flecked with coconut and something else. He can’t figure out what that something else is, but it’s not mild either. He knows he’s turning red. He can feel the heat on his skin, like it’s as inflamed as his tongue. He zigzags across his plate, looking for respite as his mouth only becomes increasingly fiery. But he continues to eat because the worst thing he could do is not finish the food Veena aunty served him, especially with her watching him.

“So, Leo. Tell us about yourself. What do you do in Toronto?” she asks.

Is she joking? *Now* she wants to talk? Leo can barely breathe, let alone speak. He’s fairly sure steam is coming out of his ears.

“I—” He can barely form a word. “... work in language translation.” There. He did it. He answered her.

“Eat the gojju,” she says, pointing at the fieriest, reddest food on his plate. Next to him, Rishi is staring at his plate, shaking his head no. Kavitha coughs into her napkin, “Don’t eat it.”

“How old are you?” she asks, just as he’s taking a bite. The moment the food touches his tongue, he thinks he might black out. He’s going to fall face-first into his plate and then his whole body will spontaneously combust. The worst part is that even as Sim and the others shoot him pitying looks, they’re eating all the same foods, completely unaffected. It’s not just painful, it’s humiliating. He manages to answer Veena aunty, but he’s not sure if he says twenty-eight or eighty-two. Even his brain is burning. How does this woman keep on finding everything that Leo is bad at and making him do it?

Eventually, dinner, and his torture, wind down, ending with Leo wolfing down almost the entire bowl of Veena aunty’s yogurt rice. If his taste buds hadn’t been scorched off, he’d call it delicious. He’s sweat through his shirt

and there are tear tracks on his face but he can't care. He's survived. Veena aunty might have burned the competitiveness right out of him.

"Kavitha, Simran—did you finish the party favors I asked you to put together?" Veena aunty asks, out of the blue.

Both Kavitha and Simran look at each other, alarmed. "I did some! I gave the rest to Kavi because I had to work!" Simran says, pointing at Kavitha.

Kavitha points back at her. "You said you'd done half! You'd barely done any!"

"We need them for tomorrow! How are we going to make five hundred gift bags in one night?" Veena aunty says, somehow looming over them from the far side of the table.

"Actually," Leo says, smiling, though it's probably closer to a grimace. "I did them. They're in the box by the front door." He had recognized the procrastination that would lead to this exact moment when he was talking to Kavitha the other day. It reminded him of Liv. So, despite getting barely two hours of sleep last night, he finished every last one and dropped the box off this morning before his run. The look of surprise on Veena aunty's face is maybe better than any goal or point he's ever scored. He wishes he could parade around the table, arms raised in victory, the Canadian national anthem playing. After all, he is nothing short of a champion for going head-to-head with Veena Iyer.

He'd settle for lying face down in a tub of ice. He's still sweating.

"Good," Veena aunty says with a tight nod, and Leo knows she means "Thanks." Kavitha gives him a surreptitious thumbs-up and Rishi jerks his chin at him in recognition. Even Geeta, across from him, shoots him a dainty, approving smile as Simran tucks hers away while she gathers the plates. It's enough for Leo to feel like he might be able to win the whole damn game. He'd had his doubts, but the benefit of being an optimist is that there is always a chance.

Two days until the wedding

As the woman pulls her hand taut and draws swirls of henna all over Simran's palms and fingers, she takes a moment to consider what's coming. The wedding weekend is here. In the next few days, there'll be at least six separate occasions, each with its own outfit and anywhere from fifty to four hundred attendees. Today's mehndi, held at Iyer House, is the kickoff event. Tents and chairs are set up all around the backyard so the women can get their henna done and then sit in the shade as it dries. The only men attending are Rishi, who'll make a special appearance as the groom at the very end, and Leo, who has been claimed by Manjula aunty to help her since her hands will be out of commission. He's been dashing around like a dutiful errand boy.

After Simran's turn is finished, she takes advantage of the downtime to sneak off to the outcrop of trees beyond the edge of Iyer House's backyard. The conversations are muted to a buzz, the bass of the music pleasantly dulled by the distance—almost as if she were in a completely different place. She lies down in the grass, a few feet from the trunk of a big, leafy tree that provides shade, the sun dappling in between the branches.

The next few days are going to be crowded and chaotic and loud—and she's really excited for them. She loves Indian weddings, the pomp and the fashion and the sense of occasion. They're more than just an event to attend; they're an experience. Indian weddings happen to you. And once the wedding is over and she has the key from her aunt, she'll go back to Chennai. She wants to run her hands along the walls of her bedroom, remembering when she got in trouble for drawing on them with crayons. She wants to stand in the living room and let the hymnic tones of Suprabatham, the morning prayers her mother used to listen to, echo in her memory. She wants to sit in her father's old study and taste the sweet sting and snap of the ginger cookies he used to keep in a jar on his desk, the ones

she'd sneak in to eat covertly that he'd refill without a word. And she's loath to admit it, but after her aunt mentioned it, she's even envisioned the intimate marriage ceremony out on the front verandah she might have one day.

A shadow falls over her and she opens her eyes to Leo's smiling face above hers. "Hi."

"Hi," she says, sitting up. "What are you doing here?"

He holds up a lemon wedge crusted in sugar. "You forgot to take your, uh, nimboo?" She nods. "I volunteered to bring it to you."

She holds her elbows out and Leo curls his hands around her upper arms to lift her to stand. Her palms face up in between them, they bend their heads together as she tells him to dab the slowly drying mehndi with lemon juice and sugar to make it darker and last longer. His thick lashes lower and remind her of pulling the shades down before bed.

"Everyone says the darker your mehndi turns, the more your husband loves you," she says, not sure why she's decided to share this.

He says nothing as he continues dabbing the lemon juice on her hands. Her eyes move over him; the white of his shirt, sleeves rolled up to his forearms, sets off his tanned summer-sun skin, bringing out the gold flecks in his eyes. She realizes she is staring when she sees his knowing, pleased smile. "What are you thinking, Sim?"

She's thinking that her blood feels like kerosene and his hands are a matchstick. Just one scrape against her and she will be ablaze. The air shifts, moody with wanting, and he takes a step towards her.

She shakes her head, holding out her hands. "My mehndi isn't dry." It's barely a protest and it doesn't stop him. Caught up in the hot snare of his gaze, all she can do is retreat as he moves in closer. Her back hits a large tree and he takes her left hand, then her right, circling them at the wrist with his forefinger and thumb. He pulls her arms above her head, his fingers pinning her against the trunk, mehndi safely out of the way.

She looks up at him. "Manjula aunty might notice you're missing."

His voice drapes over her. "Let her."

"Neeta aunty might come looking for you," she breathes.

"Let her."

"Veena perima might catch us."

"Let her," he says, and presses his lips to hers. Simran tries to move her hands—desperate to slide them through his hair, over his shoulders, below

his waist—but he holds her wrists firm and all she can do is arch into his body. Leo stops, his breath ragged, jaw pulsing. They look at each other for a beat before they kiss again, with force, with the intention of going somewhere and getting there faster.

And then they hear it: “Leo! Where are you?”

It’s Manjula aunty. Her voice comes from a distance on the other side of the trees. Leo straightens, pulling away. He shakes his head slightly as he steps away, eyes still on her. He swears under his breath as he walks back towards the party and she almost buries her face in her hands before remembering her mehndi. Laughing humorlessly, she slides down the tree, the material of her clothes snagging on the bark. This wanting, this waiting, it’s turning her inside out.



A little while later, when she finds her way back to the deck, she is greeted by the strangest sight: her aunt and Leo carrying on a conversation.

In French.

“C’est super. Je n’ai pas parlé français depuis si longtemps!” her aunt replies in an enthusiastic tone. Simran has no idea what they’re saying but the way his lips move around the reply makes her gape at him, long enough that Kavitha has to nudge her to stop.

Holding her nearly dry hands out, she sits at the picnic table on the back deck and asks, “Perima, you speak French?”

Veena aunty shrugs, as if it were not a big deal to be, at what is Simran’s last count, quintilingual. “Yes, I speak it fluently. As a young girl, we spent summers in Pondicherry. It was a French colony, you know?”

“Ahh, the sweet fruits of colonialism,” Kavitha says. “It’s called Puducherry now, Ma.”

“You’re going to tell me the name of the place I lived in? Everyone there still calls it Pondi. The place and the culture is ours; the British and the French left things behind, but they had to leave, didn’t they?” Veena perima grins, as if she might have personally had a hand in Indian independence nearly eighty years ago. Then she laughs to herself. “I used to write my diary entries in French, so my mother wouldn’t be able to understand if she found it.”

Simran and Kavitha exchange a look.

“Ow!” Kavitha yelps as her mother pinches her shoulder.

“So don’t think I don’t know everything you’re up to!” Veena perima says. Kavitha gulps, ever terrible under any scrutiny. “We were doing it before you were even born. Silly children.”

“Ces enfants terribles,” Leo comments and Simran is shocked to hear her aunt chuckle. There it is: another person who is getting along with Veena perima. Even Leo, whom she’s literally insulted to his face! Simran knows that’s the point of Operation DDLJ, but it seems genuine on Leo’s part. He might actually like her aunt.

Geeta steps onto the back deck then, resplendent in her butter-yellow silk pavadai melakku, and everyone at the mehndi emerges from all corners of the house and backyard to get a look at her. A few minutes later, cheering breaks out when Rishi joins, wearing a cream veshti with a gold border. Next to Simran, Kavi explains to Leo that it’s a traditional South Indian garment that would not be worn by Rishi’s North Indian family except for the family he’s marrying into.

Manjula aunty walks up to where Veena perima stands and they eye each other as they always do. But then the taller woman breaks into a wide smile. “Thank you, Veena. I could not have asked for a more beautiful daughter-in-law,” she says. “My Rishi is so lucky.”

“She and him will be very happy together. They’re good children,” Veena perima replies, and Manjula aunty puts a hand to her chest, a détente in their domestic warfare.

The six of them take a family photo—Geeta and her parents, Rishi and his—as Simran watches from a few feet away. What will *her* family photo look like? She might never have this. She feels a pang of envy for Geeta’s perfect life as she circles downwards, following the sorrow into a tighter and tighter spiral, a dizzying but familiar path.

Geeta calls for the whole family to come join. Simran hangs back, unsure if that includes her; after all, it feels like this family is closer, happier, since she has left.

“Akka! Hurry up,” Geeta says, annoyed, and Kavitha yanks her arm and pulls her in. After a couple of snaps, Rishi winks at her as he brings Leo into the shot, behind the parents.

The photographer yells, “Say ‘cheese’!” and from a corner, an uncle shouts, “No! Say ‘paneer’!”

Everyone groans as the shutter clicks. The photo is ruined and it's perfect.

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One day until the wedding

Mehndi Laga Ke Rakhna” plays from a Bluetooth speaker and Simran hums along with the iconic song from *DDLJ* as she curls Kavitha’s hair. They’re at the hotel in the second suite the family has rented for the weekend. The sangeet is in a couple of hours, followed by the wedding ceremony tomorrow. As she loops a lock of hair around the hot barrel, she stops and says, “Have you ever thought of how truly backwards some of the lyrics of our favorite songs are?”

“All. The. Time,” Kavitha says, fastening a necklace and looking at her reflection in the mirror. “Every song has the word ‘gori’ in it—like, I know it metaphorically means ‘beautiful’ but it literally means ‘fair girl,’ which is gross. Even this song has it! It’s terrible.”

“But so catchy.”

“Been stuck in my head for literal decades,” Kavitha agrees. Simran beams back at her; it feels like she and Kavitha are back to at least one part of their old selves. Maybe the rest will follow.

“I actually meant how all the songs are so gendered,” Simran says. “It’s always a guy and a girl or a bride and groom. What if you’re gay? What if you’re nonbinary? What songs do you get to sing when you fall in love or get married?” She shakes her head as she sections out another chunk of Kavi’s hair.

Her cousin has stopped looping rows of thin bangles onto her wrist and is looking at Simran through the mirror. “What made you think about that?”

Simran shrugs. “I’m a millennial who self-medicates with the nostalgia of our favorite movies and music from our youth to escape the terror of our current times.” She releases the curl from the iron and lays it down Kavi’s back carefully.

“I mean, same,” Kavitha says as she fidgets with the links on her gold and gemstone hand chain.

“What?” Simran asks.

Her cousin’s mouth is drawn in, like that time she spilled ketchup on Simran’s favorite white sweatshirt and tried to hide it. “Kavi, what is it?”

“Nothing,” she says.

“Okay, but you’re not acting like it’s nothing.”

“I haven’t said anything!” Kavi insists.

“Exactly! Unless you’re doing an uncanny impression of Ashok peripa, that’s weird,” Simran replies. Kavitha gives a half-hearted laugh but goes silent again.

There’s only one thing to do. Quietly, Simran hums. Then, still mostly to herself, she starts to sing.

Kavitha’s face falls and she pleads, “No ...”

Simran raises her voice so it fills the room. And she is—as she has always been her whole life—completely off-key.

“Stop!” Kavitha says. She plugs a finger in one ear as Simran continues to sing and curl the other side of her head. “God gave you one mouth and two feet—that’s why you’re a dancer and not a singer!”

Simran gets louder.

“Okay!” Kavitha slaps her hands on her legs and Simran stops midbray. “You want to know what’s up? Here it is.” Shoulders back and neck straight, she meets Simran’s gaze in the mirror and says, “I’m gay.” Simran goes still, absorbing her cousin’s words. She’s surprised. She hadn’t considered it, figuring Kavitha didn’t date because she simply wasn’t into the mama’s boys or finance bros she’d met so far. But now she gets that this was presumptuous and heteronormative, despite thinking she was neither of those things.

An odor fills the air. “Shit!” Simran cries, dropping the curling iron onto the floor.

“Did you just burn my hair?” Kavitha screeches. She relaxes when she sees Simran sucking on her injured finger. “Nope, mostly just your hand. We’re fine.”

Simran holds out her palms and takes a recentering breath. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to reply to what you said with ‘Shit.’ Can we rewind?”

“Sure! Akka, I’m gay.” Kavitha chuckles and says to herself, “The internet is right, it does get easier the more you say it.”

Simran spins Kavitha by the shoulders so they’re facing each other. It matters deeply how she replies, perhaps more than any other words she’s

ever spoken. This is Kavitha, her favorite person in the world. She's already let her down so many times, missed so much in her life. She has to get this right and searches for the words that simultaneously convey her support and love. She takes a deep breath as she places a palm flat to her chest and replies, "I am honored and grateful that you shared your truth with me."

Kavitha stares at her for a moment before her nose scrunches up. "Ick." She spins around to face the mirror, talking to Simran through it. "That was truly the worst thing you've ever said to me. Chee chee chee."

Simran rolls her eyes, the moment shifting into something looser as she finishes up by dousing Kavitha's head in hair spray. "What did I say wrong?"

"Try not sounding like AI replying to a coming-out." Kavitha sticks her tongue out, standing to get dressed.

Simran sticks hers out right back as she hands her cousin the top of her outfit. Kavitha pulls it over her head and Simran asks, "Am I the first person you've told?"

"No, Geeta and Rishi know," her cousin says, head popping out of the neck before she shimmies the fabric down her torso. Simran feels a pang, and Kavitha turns and pulls her hair over her shoulder so Simran can do up the back buttons. She's glad Kavi had someone to confide in, but she wishes it had been her.

If she had been here, or just stayed in touch, it would have been her. "Is that why your engagement was called off?" Simran broaches as she starts to dress. Kavitha walks behind her and does up each of the three ties that hold Simran's open-backed top in place, cinching her like a corset.

"Yes. Ajay and I—there was no ... physical compatibility there. That's sort of when I realized," Kavitha says. She chuckles emptily as she pulls on the skirt of her outfit. "Ajay knows, even though I never told him. He guessed. He was so great; he called off the engagement and took the responsibility for it."

"So why'd the Pillais give you the death stare when we were at the store?" Simran asks.

Kavitha fixes her with a look. "Because I'm the girl who dared to not end up with their perfect son."

"You could have just ended with 'I'm the girl,'" Simran notes. "It must have been awful telling your mom you weren't getting married."

“Actually, it wasn’t.” Simran’s eyebrows shoot up into her hairline as Kavitha continues. “I mean, after going on and on about the engagement ending, and of course, the trilingual conclusion: ‘Log kya kahenge?’ and ‘Yellarun enna solva?’ and ‘What will people say?’ But the minute she heard that Ajay’s parents were talking shit about me, she basically forced everyone into ostracizing them. They’re not even invited to the wedding.” Kavitha laughs as she hands Simran her dupatta. “It’s the Veena Iyer dichotomy. She’ll ream you out at home for every little thing but she’ll fight anyone who isn’t family for you too.”

“I wish I’d known all this was happening,” Simran says, gesturing to Kavitha. “I would have come back.”

“No, you wouldn’t have. You didn’t even come home after Appa’s surgery,” Kavitha says. Her tone is mild, though the words are anything but—and completely true.

Simran looks down. “I know. It’s not an excuse, but—”

“It was right around your parents’ death anniversary. I remember,” Kavitha says quietly. “For weeks leading up to it, Amma was a mess. She was going to go up to Toronto to find you; I was going to go with her. Then Appa had the heart attack and all that had to take a back seat.” Simran swallows the lump that’s formed in her throat. After a few moments of quiet, Kavitha is back to her lighter self. “Besides, what was I supposed to say? ‘Hi, come home, I’m a lesbian.’”

Simran is grateful to her cousin for not pressing on that particular wound, for both of their sakes. “That might have worked, actually.”

She pulls on her skirt and triple-knots the ties as they move to the complicated business of adjusting their dupattas. Kavitha has always been the better pleater of the two, and Simran the better pinner. Her cousin’s fingers move like lightning back and forth over the material till she has a set of tightly folded pleats; she holds them out as Simran pins them securely. She says, “I’ve wanted to tell you for a while.”

Simran’s heart constricts. “You have?”

“At first, I thought maybe I never wanted to get married. But watching Geeta and Rishi get engaged, and now Leo and you ...” Kavitha trails off. They stand so Simran can start pinning the dupatta. “I want big love. That Bollywood, singing-in-foreign-locations kind. I want someone who I run through airports for or who wants me enough to take part in nutty schemes or date in secret for years.”

Simran slides a safety pin into place near Kavitha's shoulder. "I feel like the four of us might be setting a bad example for how to healthily pursue a relationship."

"Obvi, Akka," Kavitha says. "I just want someone who wants me enough to do it. I don't actually want schemes and secrets."

"Wait a minute," Simran says, recalling something. "The other day, when we were all watching *K3G*, you were going on and on about Shah Rukh Khan with me. We agreed he's still our dream man."

Kavitha laughs. "He is. He is quite literally the only man for me. The difference is, maybe you like him and I like how much other women like him."

Simran clears her throat. "Has there ever been anybody? A woman, I mean."

Kavitha walks over to the desk and picks up her purse, fiddling with the clasp. "Sort of. We were really young. She was my first kiss ever and ... it really caught me by surprise. I didn't know what to do with how I felt about another girl so I pretended it had never happened. I decided it was just that one time. The few guys I went on dates with were disappointing, but I guess I figured maybe that's what men are like."

"To be fair to you, that *is* what men are like. Most of them," Simran says.

"But when Ajay and I got engaged, I was staring down the barrel of a future I realized I couldn't take."

"And no one since?"

"No!" Kavitha wails as she flops back onto the bed next to her. "Because of this first-Ajay-now-a-gay situation, I have never actually been on a date with a woman."

"But it's been six years since you and Ajay split."

"Six years I've spent under Veena Iyer's roof," Kavitha reminds her.

"Fair enough," Simran says, words garbled by the safety pins in her mouth. She feels the weight of her absence. Kavitha needed her and she wasn't there. Maybe she could have come back sooner. Even once. Simran allows the regret to settle fully into her—it feels like a square block in her gut, solid, immovable, the edges poking at her insides. Resentment was so much easier to live with than this feeling. "I'm sorry I didn't come back all this time."

Kavitha hands her a second expertly pleated dupatta, this one Simran's own, and they repeat the process. "You don't need to keep saying it. You're

forgiven.”

Something wells inside of her. “I am?”

“Yes. You made a mistake. And then you kept making it. But you’re here now,” Kavitha says. She takes the remaining pins from Simran and places them on the dressing table. “People aren’t perfect. You love them despite that.”

Simran feels so full she might tip over into tears. She missed Kavitha so much all these years and the relief that now she doesn’t have to miss her anymore is overwhelming. She’s here, and even the days they fight are better than ones she was away.

“I really missed you,” she says.

Kavitha reaches over and squeezes her hand. “I missed you too. Don’t hug me, though.”

Simran laughs and it pushes away the weepy feeling. “As if. You were never a hugger.”

“It feels good to be seen.” They go back to getting ready, too aware that they’re on a schedule—Veena Iyer’s schedule.

“So are you going to tell Perima and Peripa?” Simran asks, fastening a heavy earring.

“I want to but I don’t know how,” Kavitha admits.

“I’m here for you. You tell me what you need and I’ll be there. Whenever, wherever,” Simran says solemnly.

“Thank you, Shakira,” Kavitha replies. “God, you’re bad at emotions,” she says, grinning.

Simran sits on the bed to do up the straps of her heeled sandals. “It’ll happen for you. I know it will.”

“I hate when people in relationships say that to single people. You don’t know that!”

“Maybe you’ll meet someone at the sangeet tonight!” Simran suggests. “Absolutely not,” Kavitha says, shaking her head. “We do not need to add any more complications to this wedding.”

“You’re right. But after the wedding, Operation DDLJ ends and Operation Kavitha Gets Her Girl begins,” Simran says.

“We’ll have to come up with a better name. But I’d like that,” Kavitha says. They nod at each other in the reflection of the full-length mirror in perfect sync, a new pact made.

Simran, almost a head taller than her cousin, is in a violet bandhani lengha. The cropped full-sleeved blouse and skirt are marked with signature little white diamonds, finished with a mirrorwork border with a gold dupatta. Kavitha is also in a lengha, but hers is tangerine with the same bright shade on her lips to match. It brings out the rich tones of her skin to perfection. Simran hip-checks her cousin. Giggling, Kavitha does it back as she says, “Damn, we look good.”

As they head out of the room, Kavitha says airily, “I think I’m ready to enter my ‘Live, Laugh, Love’ era.”

Simran scrunches her nose and snorts.

“It’s better than the opposite,” Kavitha says.

“What’s the opposite of ‘Live, Laugh, Love’?”

“‘Cry, Sigh, Die.’”

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22.

Simi akka, can you help me?”

Simran refastens the loose tie on the back of Geeta’s blouse.

Her cousin turns around and beams her thanks, almost too pretty to look at today in a hot-pink anarkali with silver paillette detailing that reflects light with her every move. Simran’s gaze once again strays to the person standing in the corner of the banquet hall.

“You have got to stop staring at him, Akka,” Geeta says. “You’re going to give the whole thing away and then pandemonium will ensue.”

Simran hears the frantic edge in Geeta’s voice. She holds up two crossed fingers in promise. “Nothing is ensuing unless it has your permission to ensue.”

A sly smile creeps over Geeta’s features. “You have no idea how right you are.”

Simran clears her throat. “Kavitha told me about ... herself.”

“I’m so glad. She’s been waiting to do that for ages, ever since she told me.”

Simran lets the dig land. “I wish I’d been here earlier for her to tell.” Geeta glances over at Simran and her smile softens, warmer than ever. “That’s done now. All that matters is that we’re there for her, for whatever she needs.”

Simran says words she never imagined she would: “Couldn’t agree with you more.”

“Can you handle one more secret?” Geeta asks, face animated.

“I think so.”

Her younger cousin leans over and whispers in Simran’s ear, hand cupped around her mouth, “I’m pregnant.”

Simran jolts back to look at her in surprise. “Oh, Gits!” She pulls her cousin into a hug. “Thank you for telling me.”

As they pull apart, Geeta puts a mehndi-darkened finger to her lips and Simran grins, a co-conspirator yet again. “Aside from Rishi, only you and Kavi know. And you can tell Leo too. But that’s it.”

“How do you feel?”

“Pretty great. It’s early on and, luckily, I’ve only had a little morning sickness. Totally manageable,” Geeta says.

Simran looks her up and down in awe. “I would have never guessed. You look amazing.”

Geeta grins, always thrilled to be complimented. Simran looks out at the huge hall and the long colorful streams of fabric that go from the perimeter of the room to the center of the high ceiling, creating a tentlike effect indoors. Without realizing it, her eyes land back on Leo.

Geeta tuts. “That’s the opposite of ‘stop staring.’”

Simran pouts outrageously. “But I don’t wanna stop staring.”

Geeta strokes her hair like she’s pacifying a child. “I know. You can play with him when you get home, okay?” If someone had told her years ago that she’d laugh at a joke made by GNN, she would have called them crazy. But coming back here has been so different than she thought it would be.

The sangeet begins and just as Simran predicted, there’s too many speeches, several unplanned as uncle after uncle hijacks the mic and waxes on. One even ends his impromptu speech by singing happy birthday to his dearest friend—who is not at this wedding. In between, there are dances from various parts of the family: the little kids, adorable and enthusiastic; Geeta’s tentative-but-smiling hospital colleagues; and Rishi’s aunts and uncles, featuring guest stars Manjula aunty and Ravi uncle, who bop arrhythmically. Simran spies Veena perima’s look of judgement and laughs—her aunt would never dance to a song whose lyrics translate to “Light your cigarette with the fire in my chest.” For a culture that claims to value chasteness, some of the songs sure are horny as hell.

Then it’s time for the closing dance that Simran choreographed for Geeta, Rishi, and all their siblings, cousins, and friends. It is still a bit of a mess despite her best efforts, but then again, that’s part of the tradition too. It’s doing it together that matters.

The three sisters do their solo dance to roars of applause and then the rest of the group comes back in for the finale. Simran has arranged the steps so Rishi plays the hero, singing to Geeta’s heroine in code to keep her mehndi fresh because he’s coming to elope with her. Everyone is split into the groom’s and bride’s sides, cheering him on and jokingly pulling her away so he has to chase her. As Simran dances, she feels a shoulder nudge hers. It’s Leo, and time seems to slow down as they round each other, shared

smiles, shared secret, before he moves to the other side of the stage for the next set of steps.

No one celebrates like Indian people do: pounding bass, infectious zeal, an endless loop of catchy, deeply familiar songs. The dancing is sloppy and unselfconscious because the joy is frenzied and unfettered. It startles her to realize that she hasn't listened to songs like this, loud and with a crowd, outside of her classes or her own two headphones in years; the noise and the energy and the celebratory delight seep into her. Even the gossip of her return is part of the acceptance. Here, it's okay that she left and it's okay that she's come back. She can slip into it at any time, like a warm, worn glove.

The performance ends to a clamor of hoots and whistles at that earpiercing volume that only uncles seem to know how to achieve. All the activity and the crowd have made her sweaty and Simran ducks out to the hall to get some air, making her way to the lone bar that doesn't have a line. Someone else has had the same thought: Leo, whose face blooms into a smile when he sees her coming. She's never seen him in a suit before and it's fitted just right; despite the dancing, it still looks crisp and he runs a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his forehead, a few strands falling forward anyway.

"You look great," she tells him.

"You look like a painting," he replies.

Something thrums between them. The bartender clears his throat, interrupting their bubble of want and warmth. "Sir, anything to drink?"

Leo shakes his head. "No, thank you. I need my head clear around her family." He jabs a thumb in her direction.

She lets out a laugh. These past few weeks have been ridiculous—and fun. "God, they're a lot, aren't they?"

"They're the most. I'm exhausted." But he's laughing along with her.

The realization hits her suddenly: She's happy. Truly happy for the first time in a long while. The weight of her grief seems almost bearable here, with him, but also because of the people inside the hall. She wants to tell Leo that his showing up and blowing apart her plan to stay on the fringes of this wedding and this family has brought her and Kavitha closer than ever. It's brought her the record player that belonged to her father, and the knowledge that it's her uncle's most prized possession. She still needs the key to her house from her aunt, but all of this is more than she could have

ever dreamed returning to Iyer House would bring her. She doesn't know how to voice that without opening the floodgates.

A commotion of voices from down the hall pulls her out of her thoughts and she and Leo take a step away from each other. Veena perima, accompanied by Leo's fan club of the morning-run aunties, plus a few others, comes around the corner, their loud chatter dying down to a nosy silence when they spot the two.

"Leo!" It takes Simran a second for it to register. Did Veena perima acknowledge Leo? And greet him in a friendly way? "And Simi. You two are having a drink together?"

"Not together," they reply, unfortunately, together.

"The lines inside were really long so I came outside," Leo adds. "Did you know, this lovely young man has been so helpful!" Manjula aunty goes to stand next to Leo, looping an arm through his as she practically preens to the group.

Veena perima's face is going slightly red; Simran can tell she cannot stand being left out of the discovery of this "lovely young man" who all her friends are cooing over. "It's nice that Rishi brought you to stay," she says.

"I'm happy to be here," Leo replies, directly to Veena aunty. He is pulled into the circle of women as Simran steps away, glad to be forgotten. "It's been so interesting to learn about the rituals."

"You like Indian weddings?" Neeta aunty asks.

Leo's smile is like a pickpocket, hitting each of its marks without them even knowing. "Definitely. They're way better than weddings in my family. Those only last a day! If you ask me, that's not nearly enough time to celebrate." The women titter in approval.

"Once Geeta is married, we'll find you a nice bride to settle down with," Veena perima says, eager to matchmake *anyone*, apparently. "What kind of girl do you like?"

Above everyone's heads, Leo briefly catches Simran's gaze as he pretends to think about his answer. Simran bites down on her lip to keep from smiling as he replies, "Oh, I'm sure you know someone who is just my type."



When the sangeet ends, rather than getting to go home for a good night of sleep before the hectic day to follow, the family has to prep. The same hall will now be turned into the site for the wedding ceremony less than twelve hours from now. There are outfits to iron, ceremonial objects to assemble, jewelry to put in the safe, and on and on. By the time the Iyers and Chopras start heading back to their homes in batches, it's past midnight and no one is quite sure where anyone else is.

Simran is in the room she and Kavitha were getting ready in earlier and has finally finished folding all the programs into a neat stack. She is about to take them to the bridal suite when Kavitha comes in and shuts the door behind her.

"We're the last ones here. Amma and Appa left for Iyer House a few minutes ago. They think I'm going to drive the two of us home too," Kavitha says.

Simran frowns. "Are you not?"

"Well ... no one is staying in the hotel tonight," Kavitha replies.

"So?"

"You can stay at the hotel tonight," Kavitha says.

"Why would I do that?"

"So maybe you and Leo, who is still downstairs, can get some time to yourselves?" Kavitha says slowly. She grins at the expression that must have overtaken Simran's face. "Now it's clicked."

"You're a genius," Simran says.

Kavitha shrugs. "It was Leo's idea. I'm just the accomplice. I'll tell him to come up on my way out. Just make sure you get to Iyer House by five so Amma doesn't notice you never came home." Kavitha rolls her eyes as she looks back at Simran before she leaves the room. "Down, girl."

23.

Simran sits on the bed, one leg crossed over the other, foot wiggling madly when Leo lets himself into the room a few minutes later.

“Hello,” she says as he closes the door and leans back against it. There is a delicate crackle of anticipation in the air. His eyes are on her and greener than she’s ever seen them.

“Hi,” he replies. He smiles but makes no move to come any closer.

“So ...” she says, trailing her fingers over the velvet bed runner.

She looks up at him. “Hotel room to ourselves for the night. What should we do?”

Leo’s smile slopes sideways as he pushes off the door. “I thought we could practice.”

Her eyebrows go up. “Practice?”

“My Hindi and Tamil, of course.”

“Of course,” she replies, uncrossing her legs and placing her hands on her knees. Her fingers are trembling.

He stops in front of her. “I’ve been having some trouble with synonyms.”

She looks up at him. “Do tell.”

“Well, for example, in Hindi, ‘body’ is ...”

“Badan,” she replies as he takes each of her hands in his and pulls her to stand.

He nods. “But ‘body’ is also ...”

“Shareer.”

“And ...”

“Jism.”

“See?” Leo says, running his hands up and down her arms. “It’s very confusing.”

“If you think there are a lot of words for ‘body,’ you should hear how many there are for ‘love,’” Simran tells him, sliding her hands up his chest, toying with the lapels of his suit jacket.

“Really?” Leo raises his eyebrows. “Lay it on me.”

“Well, in Tamil, there’s ‘kadhal,’” she says, slipping the jacket off his shoulders. It falls to the floor. “And ‘nesam.’” He smells like the city after a downpour, lush and still.

“And in Hindi?” Leo asks, as she points to the various places where she’s pinned into her outfit and he begins taking them out.

“Oh, even more in Hindi,” she says, pulling his tie loose and then off. “Ishq.” He kisses the side of her face.

“Pyaar.” Behind her ear.

“Mohabbat.” Down her neck. “Chaahat.”

And then there are no more words she can think of, in any language. Her mind hushes as she loosens the fastening on her skirt and turns her back to Leo so he can undo the ties at the back of her top.

“The only thing keeping this on all night were these three flimsy strings?” he asks, tugging the first one loose and trailing his fingers over her bare skin.

She looks back at him. “Yes.”

He groans, resting his forehead in between her shoulder blades as he undoes the others. Turning her, he nips at the hollow in her neck as she curves into him. She’s in only her underwear, and the textures of the clothes he’s still wearing rasp against her oversensitive skin: the plastic press of his shirt buttons, the cool stamp of his belt buckle, the smooth rub of his dress pants. He tilts her head back for a searching kiss.

“Sim,” he says.

“Yes,” she replies. When he says her name again, she realizes that he’s actually trying to talk to her.

“What is it?” she asks.

He swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing. “Before we do this, I just want to make sure we’re both on the same page.” She glances down pointedly to where she’s clutching his hips to hers. He laughs and she feels it, along her fingers, against her stomach, deep inside. “Not about that. About your family.”

“Leo. I really don’t want to talk about my family when I’m this close to naked.”

“Trust me,” Leo says, straightening as he exhales deeply and looks down at her. “I really don’t want to talk about anything when you’re this close to naked. So you know I mean it. I spent so many years liking you from far away, but the crazy thing is, the closer I get, the better it gets. The more I

know you, the more I get to be with you, the more incredible you become to me. So whether this plan succeeds or fails, you tell your aunt and family. You tell them that you're with me and I'm with you and there's nothing to do about it, except let us be happy together."

She almost teases him that this is just his competitiveness making him want to win Operation DDLJ, but the tenderness in his gaze stops her. Leo has never asked anything of her.

"Okay," she whispers, and he strokes her face almost reverently, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. He splays his fingers against her back, drawing circles down her spine as she takes his face in her hands, running her thumbs over his lips. For a perfect moment, they don't move.

And then he dips his head, kissing her so deeply she feels it in all the tips and crevices of her body. His long fingers are tangled in her hair and he coaxes her mouth open further so he can run his tongue along hers fully, till she's alight all over.

He's made her burn so slowly, she didn't even realize she was on fire.

He wanted her for years, but now they've switched roles. She's the one who can't get enough of him and doesn't care how desperate she appears and he's calm, controlled, doling out touch and just enough pleasure that she is ravenous for more as she takes off the rest of their clothes. And then she's overcome by the textures of him: the hard knots of muscle, the hair dusted across his thighs, the strong, proud jut of him into her. She chases down the dizzying spiral of want as he sits on the bed, pulling her to stand between his legs, dragging his mouth from her rib cage down, down, down so deliberately slow that she thinks she might combust. But she's too impatient and moves into his lap, a knee on either side of his hips, the closest they've ever been.

She tilts his chin up. "No more waiting, Leo." Briefly, before she loses the ability to, she thinks that it may not have been thirteen years, but he has certainly taught her how excruciating even a little bit of waiting can be.

And then there really is no more waiting, just touch and feel and mouths and hands and skin. Simran finds herself astonished by this side of Leo. The playful man she's known for years is still here, in the pleased curl of his mouth when she gasps as he flips her body under his. But the intensity of his focus is new, as if he still wants her even as he has her, even as he is *having* her. It pulls her over the edge once, and then again, before he follows.

“We have a problem, y’know,” Leo says a little while later. Despite the molasses-slow satisfaction in her body, they’re both wide awake, Leo stretched out on his side next to her, head propped on his hand.

“We do?” She can’t think of a problem in the world right now. She can’t think at all.

“Yes,” he says. “You are with a man who loves ... to talk on the phone.”

She groans and rolls away. “Nooooo. What have I done?”

“You? What about me?” Leo says, pulling her back to him. “This woman, who I’ve liked for literally half my life, the star of my dreams—regular and dirty—likes to text. Fifteen messages coming in rapid fire, not to mention a new essay in a giant block of blue shooting up before I’m even done reading what she’s just sent, completely unrelated rambles connected only by ‘also!’” She laughs at how accurately he’s summed up the way she texts. He continues, “So tell me: What can I do to get you to talk on the phone? Regular and dirty.”

“Sorry, there’s nothing regular you can do.” She smirks. “And you’re going to do the dirty stuff anyway.”

He sits up. “So you’re telling me, years from now, when I call you to say ‘Honey, I’m running late, can you take the dog for a walk?’ you’re just *not* going to answer. Me, the man who wakes you up with coffee every morning and always unloads the dishwasher because you hate doing it. You’ll see my devastatingly handsome picture pop up on your phone and think, ‘It’s Leo, the joy in my days, the thrill in my nights’ and send me to voicemail?”

She’s full-on laughing as she replies, “Can I point out that it’s easier to ask me to take the dog for a walk by text?” He opens his mouth, but she interrupts before he can go on another rant. “What’s our dog’s name?”

“Biscuit,” he replies, lying down again. “A total rascal.”

“I’d expect nothing less,” she says, scooting into his side. “Biscuits. Plural.”

“This is our dog, Biscuits,” he says to the room before turning back to her. “Yeah, I like that better.”

There’s a sense of serendipity, she thinks. University housing randomly placing her and Liv as roommates. Their immediate friendship. Liv having a younger brother who first was her friend, and now so much more. It almost feels predetermined, if she goes back even further: her parents’ passing, coming to live in New Jersey, Rutgers being the college she chose.

All those things, good and bad and between, that took place exactly the way they did. She's never believed in bargaining with the past; what's happened has happened. Time moves inexorably forward. But how sweet of it to lead her here, to this room, with this man.

"All right, flip onto your stomach," he says with a light tap to her bottom. His demand thrills her. "To do what?" she teases.

"To give me a good memory that'll get me through the last few days of sleeping on Ravi uncle's terrible pullout couch."

She laughs and then gives a cheery "Okay" and rolls onto her front before looking at him over her shoulder. His eyes blaze with some swirling mixture of arousal and affection. "How are you real?" He kisses the base of her spine, asking the bones there quietly, "How are you mine?"

As he moves over her, she thinks the same thing about him.

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Wedding Day

Simran is bleary-eyed and sleep-deprived and deliriously happy. After sneaking into Iyer House as dawn was breaking, she had just enough time to shower before the family returned to the hotel. Now she hears faint beats of music and steps out of the double doors that lead to the balcony of the bridal suite, where she and Kavitha are helping Geeta get dressed. The high vantage point allows her to see the flat, vast grounds of the hotel sprawling under the endlessly blue midmorning sky dotted by a handful of cotton ball clouds. Gathered around the two-tiered fountain at the entrance gate is the baraat. All the guests from the boy's side, plus anyone else who wants to join in, escort Rishi, seated on top of the back seat of a red convertible Maserati (replacing the horse he'd traditionally ride with horsepower) towards the wedding venue. His face is shrouded by his sehra and the veil of flowers swings from side to side when he stands and dances. Other hotel guests step out on their balconies to watch as the group dances and cheers their way down the long driveway.

Simran goes back inside and closes the doors behind her, the air-conditioning a relief on her already clammy skin. Kavitha clears her throat obnoxiously and taps her collarbone before pointing at Simran. She looks down and goes red, adjusting her dupatta as her cousin smirks at her.

"Okay, I'm ready," Geeta calls and steps out of the walk-in closet. Simran is stunned into silence at the sight of her youngest cousin in her full bridal regalia. Geeta is in a crisply pleated Kanjeevaram sari, the silk a rich and vibrant red with spun gold threads that make her look like she's wearing the sun itself. A gold chain kamarband cinches her waist and her hair is smoothed into a long braid adorned with flowers and jewels, while a traditional sun-and-moon hair piece and rows of gold chains rest along her middle part and hairline.

"You look otherworldly," Simran says. "Like a goddess," Kavitha agrees.

Geeta's smile rivals the sunshine outside. "Thanks!"

"You finally look the way you've been acting all these years: like you're God's gift to the world," Kavitha teases and Geeta sticks her tongue out at her sister. She suddenly gives Simran a stricken look and shrieks. "A hickey? Are you guys sixteen?"

The main door to the suite opens, and Veena perima and Ashok peripa enter. Her aunt is dewy-eyed and doesn't say a word. She reaches out to adjust a pleat but instead just smooths it, as if she can't improve upon how perfect her daughter is in this moment. Geeta pulls both her parents in for a hug and Simran aches with a million different feelings. But she leans into the happiness, watching Ashok peripa kiss his daughter's forehead so gently that it's almost reverent. Veena perima cups Geeta's cheek and she reaches over to wipe her mother's tears away.

Outside, the baraat crescendos as it reaches the entrance, ready to finish. Veena perima and Ashok peripa rush downstairs to greet the boy's side, while Simran and Kavitha stay upstairs to escort Geeta in a little while. Though their parents organized most of the pre- and postwedding events, Geeta tells Simran that she and Rishi insisted on planning the ceremony to reflect them better, with a mix of practices from both their cultures, along with things they've liked from non-Indian friends' weddings, like having an aisle for the family to walk down before Geeta does.

Simran opens one of the balcony doors so the three of them can get a peek out at the baraat: It's a hive of bright colors and brown skin, pulsing to the reverberating twang of the live dhol player cutting over the piped-in music. Simran's eyes find Leo, standing out, tall and handsome in a navy-blue-and-gold sherwani and a gold safa around his head, as he dances a little but mostly watches the crowd. They match, she realizes with a smile. Her outfit is the inverse combination, a navy blouse under a shimmering, biscuit-colored chiffon sari with a zari border.

"Your gora boy is pulling off desi formal wear," Geeta says, resting her chin on Simran's shoulder. "He's going to look really good at your wedding."

She opens her mouth to protest, to say it's way too early to be talking about getting married, but the words that tumble out are, "I always knew I wanted to get married, but I could never picture it before." She blinks, snapping out of her haze to find her cousins gaping at her.

“Aww, Geeta, it’s like when the Grinch’s heart grows three sizes,” Kavitha says. She pats her on the back. “Don’t worry, we’ll throw you a killer wedding too.”

Cheeks on fire, Simran brushes them off, refastening a bobby pin to hold the flowers in her hair more securely; she loves wearing jasmine in her hair, her favorite smell in the world wafting over to her. When she turns back to the crowd below them, her gaze stops on a man towards the back of the baraat whose face is strangely familiar. He’s very tall and his skin is a rich mahogany tone contrasted against a wide, white smile.

“Oh my god,” she murmurs when she realizes who it is.

“What?” Geeta asks, jewelry jangling as she turns her head to look at Simran.

“Oh my god!” This time it’s Kavitha, stepping forward on the other side.

Geeta’s head jangles in the opposite direction. “What?” she asks, a little more impatiently, not enjoying being left out.

“Is that ... Kamal and Payal?” Simran asks, and Kavitha nods comically slow.

“Wait, as in Kamal Kumar? Chennai Kamal Kumar? The boy from next door?” Geeta asks.

“The *boyfriend* from next door,” Kavitha adds.

“Not my boyfriend,” Simran says, the same way she used to years ago when her parents would tease her. For a second, she wonders what he’s doing here. Apart from following each other on Instagram, she’s not talked to him in years. Why is he at Geeta’s wedding?

“So, speaking of things that happened when we were teenagers,” Kavitha says, her voice small. “Remember how I said my first kiss was with a girl I knew when I was young?”

It dawns on Simran, just as Geeta asks, “Payal?”

Simran looks down at the girl dancing next to Kamal, who shares the same features but set in a delicate, heart-shaped face. “Which means, outside of the three of us and your other halves, she’s the only person in the world who knows I’m gay.”

“Oh god,” Simran says, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Why would Amma even invite her?”

“Because she invited Kamal,” Simran says flatly. “Probably to set him up with me.”

“Oh god,” Kavitha repeats, pinching the bridge of *her* nose. But when she pulls her hand away, she goes back to watching Payal’s dancing form.

“Maybe Amma just wanted more guests on the girl’s side than the boy’s side,” Geeta reasons. “You know everything’s a contest between her and Rishi’s mom.”

Neither Simran nor Kavitha reply, both looking down at the gyrating crowd until Geeta wraps a hand around each of their arms and pulls them back into the room, turning them to face her. “Stop stressing. Well, stop stressing about anything that isn’t about making this the best day of my life, okay?” She jangles as she turns to Simran. “Your scheme?” Jangle-turn to Kavitha. “Your secret? They’re both safe.”

“How do you know that?” Simran asks.

“Because there’s going to be a lot of things that distract Amma and Appa and the Chopras today,” Geeta says, a knowing smirk playing on her lips. “Rishi and I have changed some stuff. We’re not, like, taking a stand or anything; we’re just getting married in a way that feels right to us. And the parents are going to have capital ‘O’ opinions about that. Like they do about everything! So trust me and don’t freak out.” The way Geeta speaks now, voice fluid with confidence, gentle with warmth, makes Simran understand exactly why her cousin was meant to be a doctor.

It’s time for them to leave. Simran and Kavitha escort Geeta down to the entrance of the hotel as the *baraat* reaches fever pitch, the entire group crowding the front driveway and open-air lobby for the final few minutes of no-holds-barred dancing. Leo catches her eye and gives her a secret, beckoning smile over the tops of everyone else’s heads. Despite the worry that’s gnawing at her, she smiles back, a frisson of heat making her shiver as she remembers last night. Directly behind him, Kamal gets the force of her look accidentally and waves at her. Hesitantly, she waves back.

The front entrance to the hotel is packed with wedding guests, jostling for the best vantage point. An older white couple walks out and, upon seeing the crowd, turns right back around. At the top of the steps, Rishi and Geeta face each other, their respective parents and family members behind them.

“It’s time for the *maalai maatral*!” one of the aunts on the Iyer side declares.

A murmur of confusion goes through half the crowd until Ravi uncle says, “Arrey, it’s just the *varmaala*. They call it something different in South India.”

“In Tamil,” Geeta corrects him, annoyed. But it’s all lost in the shuffle as Rishi’s cousins move forward to lift him to put the garland on Geeta, usually a contest over whether the husband or wife can do it first, and therefore, as the lore goes, call the shots in the marriage. Instead, he bats them away. Grinning at his bride, Rishi kneels and waves his hands, telling Geeta to go first. She has found something more precious than winning; she’s found someone who wants her to win, always. She puts the maalai over his head before Rishi stands and does the same to her. The dhol player bangs out a raucous beat again to signal the completion of the first ritual of the marriage as everyone cheers.

With loud direction from uncles and aunties, despite some of them having no idea where they’re going, the crowd churns and swarms into the garden, where the sun has guests using the programs that Simran painstakingly put together as flimsy fans. There is an ornate bench swing, its wooden frame decorated with garlands of flowers. Rishi and Geeta sit down on it for the oonjal.

“I’d like to petition to get one of these in the backyard of Iyer House,” Rishi says, looking past Geeta, as Simran and Kavitha gently push the back of the swing.

“Show some respect, Rishi! We’re helping you through the ups and downs of life. This is a *symbolic* swing,” Kavitha says.

“Yeah, and you can continue to help me through the ups and downs of life with an *actual* swing,” he replies.

“Hi!” Simran turns to find Kamal next to her. He was cute when they were growing up but he’s properly handsome with his now-clear skin and straight, stately nose.

“Fancy seeing you here,” she replies. “Can’t believe you came all the way from India!”

When he grins at her, he looks exactly like the boy she knew nearly two decades ago. She can’t help but grin back. “I didn’t. My parents are still in Chennai but Payal and I moved to the States a couple years ago.”

As the whole wedding party makes its way back into the hotel, guests sighing with relief the second the air-conditioning hits them, Kamal explains that he is an engineer living in Philly and his sister is in banking in Chicago. Veena perima’s three requirements for a suitable groom come screaming back to Simran: someone who has a good job, is Tamil, and lives

close by. Somehow, the boy whom she had a crush on as a child has turned into her aunt's dream man.

She pushes the thought away. She wants Geeta to be right, for this to just be a coincidence.

"It's great to see you guys again," Kamal says, their shoulders brushing as the crowd jostles its way inside. It feels a little like being in a mosh pit. "I was really excited when Veena mami invited me and Payal."

"It is really nice that you both could make it," she says, meaning it.

"It's so rare, you know?" Kamal continues. "To reconnect with people you knew as a kid—you and me, my sister and Kavitha. We're linked in this special way. Especially after all that's happened." The nostalgia is notched with hurt, but comfort as well. It feels like a path for how she might be able to think of her childhood again, instead of how it ended. He lightly nudges her. "After all, you never forget your first crush."

Simran gives him a tight smile and ignores alarm bells sounding in her brain. "Sure. Listen, I've got to go find Geeta and Kavitha. Bye!" Finally, after all the guests have filed into the same hall that the sangeet was held in the night before, it's almost time for the actual marriage ceremony. Simran pokes her head in through a side door to get a peek of the setup. Rishi is already inside with both sets of parents, standing on a large elevated stage at the front of the room under a canopy of champagne-colored chiffon and garlands of marigolds and red roses. Front and center on the stage is the mandap, with a row of gold chairs on both ends for the siblings and immediate family members, and the rest of the guests are seated facing the stage. Ducking back out to the hallway, Simran goes to her cousins, catching Kavi carefully looking at everyone walking in. Rishi's younger brother, Rahul, walks up to Kavitha and Simran, ready to escort the two of them down the aisle.

Simran feels someone tuck a wayward bobby pin more firmly into her hair, securing her gajra. "You smell incredible." The words skim down her spine and she spins in surprise to find Leo behind her. "You should wear flowers in your hair every day."

She smooths the skirt of her outfit to keep from slipping her hands around him. "Aren't you supposed to be inside?"

Leo breaks into her favorite smile, one side lifting up before the other. "Well—"

“Well,” Geeta says, walking up to the two of them, putting a hand on each of their shoulders. She and Leo share a conspiratorial smirk. “Rishi and I thought it might be nice if the two of you walked together.”

“But ...” Simran looks from Leo to Geeta. “Isn’t this supposed to be for family only?”

“No, it’s supposed to be whoever Rishi and I want. Haven’t you noticed that he and Leo are obsessed with each other?”

Leo nods. “It’s true, Rishi’s the best.” Geeta clears her throat. “Second best.”

“Gits,” Simran says, voice thick. She swallows. “This is really nice of you.”

“I know,” Geeta says, squeezing her hand, and Simran laughs. “Now hurry up, it’s almost time to go in.”

Leo holds his elbow out to her, his hazel gaze as warm and solid as if he had a hand on the small of her back. “What do you say?”

Her bangles make tinny tinkles as she tucks her fingers into the crook of his arm. “I say—”

A side door to the main function hall bangs open. Veena perima hustles out, dragging Kamal behind her. She pulls him over to Geeta, Simran, and Leo, who quickly shuffle away from each other.

“Everyone is ready?” Her aunt’s eyes ping around the room, appraising everything she sees.

Geeta says, somewhat exasperated, “Yes, Amma. We’re all ready to walk in. Aren’t you supposed to be up on the mandap?”

“What ready, Geeta? This is no good,” Veena perima says, weaving her way in between them. Simran steels herself. Something is coming, she can feel it.

Kavitha clearly has the same thought because she steps forward, saying, “Amma, it’s all settled, what—”

“How can Rahul walk down with two people?” Veena perima asks. Behind her aunt, Leo extends his hand out to Kamal. “Hey, I’m Leo, I’m a friend of Rishi’s.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kamal. I was Simran’s neighbor in Chennai before she moved,” Kamal replies, shaking his hand. Simran sees understanding dawn on Leo’s face.

Geeta grits her teeth, still smiling, as she says, “Actually, like I told you before, we’re handling this part. Rishi and I figured out a solution so Rahul

doesn't have to walk with Simi and Kavi akka."

"I also have figured out a solution," Veena perima declares. "Kamal will walk with Simran!"

"Amma—"

But Veena's already pulling Leo away and pushing Kamal into place. "See how nice you two look together?"

A rushing sound fills Simran's ears and she finds herself not quite present, as if she stepped out of her body and is watching her aunt wreak havoc.

"Amma." Geeta's smile has dropped. "Rishi wants Leo, *his friend*, to walk in the wedding. He doesn't even know Kamal!" She blinks before looking at him and says, "No offense."

"Absolutely none taken. Veena mami, I don't—" Kamal starts to say, but she cuts him off.

"Only family is supposed to walk down the aisle. Kamal is basically family, no? And one day, he might officially be family, nah?" She gives a Cheshire cat grin, mad with scheming. Simran has been trying to avoid a fight with her aunt, but it's found her anyway. She opens her mouth to join the chorus of arguments as the wedding planner comes up to the group and tries to tell them, over the noise, that they're behind schedule.

"All of you, stop doing dikhat!" Veena perima raises her voice and everyone shuts up. She pushes Kamal and Simran towards the doors so forcefully that he stumbles. "We're already late, you don't want to delay the wedding! Go in, go in!"

Simran heads into the hall, arm linked in Kamal's. The strip of carpet down the aisle is plush and laden with rose petals, each row of seats marked with glass globes of floating candles and marigolds. But all Simran sees is a haze of red. She takes her assigned seat onstage, Kamal next to her. When Leo slips in through a side door and takes a seat towards the front, she catches his eye and shoots him an apologetic look. As everyone turns to watch as Geeta walks in, he smiles, waving his hand as if to say forget about it. His easy forgiveness only makes her frustration more entrenched, but she tries to push it down for the sake of her cousin and this wedding.

Once Geeta has reached the mandap and the long set of rituals has started, Kamal leans in. "Listen, I'm sorry about that."

"It's not your fault," she whispers back. "There's no stopping Veena perima once she gets an idea in her head."

“It really is good to see you again,” Kamal replies. “I thought about reaching out when my parents bought the Chennai house so you could—”

“Wait,” Simran says, turning to look at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Of course, you left that house so many years ago,” Kamal says, not understanding. “But I promise, it is still the same as when your aunt sold it to my parents.”

An iciness fills her from head to toe. The home she grew up in, the last link to her parents’ brief time on this earth, the whole reason she came back to Iyer House, and it is no longer hers. Her aunt sold it without even talking to her, without even letting her know.

“When?” she asks.

Kamal blinks. “A couple of years ago. She—”

“And the things?”

His forehead creases. “Things?”

“All my parents’ things. They were packed up and stored inside the house,” she says, struggling to keep her voice even.

“There were no things there the last time I saw it,” he tells her.

Simran lets this information roll through her, muttering that they’ll talk later, using the excuse of watching the wedding. She looks around the room, so different from the night before, floor-to-ceiling curtains pulled open so sunlight streams in from one side of the room. Everything feels different from last night, from just a few minutes ago. She watches the rows of people dressed in their richest colors and finest jewelry. They lean over to whisper opinions to their seatmates. Far in the back, a chubby baby runs in excited lurches, gurgling in delight as his father follows, stooped to catch him. None of it registers.

She tries some calming breaths, the closest to therapy she ever let Liv share with her, but her mind won’t stop spiraling, the next thought intruding before she’s even finished the previous. The Chennai house, no longer hers. Her parents’ things, gone. Who knows what her aunt did with them. Even Kamal sitting next to her feels like a taunt. The last vestige of her parents’ lives no longer belongs to her. She won’t get married in the house she grew up in and be able to create a new memory in it. She’s going to be stuck, sad, alone, crying, like on her birthday, for the rest of her life. Coming here has changed nothing; she doesn’t know how she thought, even for a moment, that it had.

By the time she lets out her third shaky breath, Simran is so detached from everything and everyone around her, she might as well be back in Toronto.

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25.

So that was Ganesh puja,” Poonam aunty, who Leo’s not sure is related to either family, explains to him. Since the moment he sat down next to her, she’s been narrating the wedding (without his asking), explaining the significance of everything from the holy fire, or agni, that the rituals will be centered around to the lavishly decorated four pillars around the stage, covered in flowers. “We also call him Ganpati, you know: the god with the elephant head. He is the remover of obstacles, so we always pray to him before any important occasion.”

The remover of obstacles. What a wondrous thing to have on your side. Leo’s not particularly religious or spiritual, mostly because he doesn’t know how to be. There’s something bigger than this everyday living, he’s sure of it. He’s felt it. In the perfect pass of the puck on the ice. When he stood in front of *The Persistence of Memory* at MoMa and tears came to his eyes, even though he couldn’t explain why. In that hotel room last night with Simran. And in this vast, usually unremarkable hall, today wholly transformed by the brightness of the marigolds, the incantations of the priest, and the winding, earthy smell of incense as these two longtime loves adhere to eons-old traditions for the most human of acts: binding yourself to another for life.

“You can leave, you know,” Poonam aunty says, turning fully to him.

Leo blinks. “Excuse me?”

“You can leave. Anyone can. This will take at least two hours so you can go to the bathroom or grab a drink—of water, no alcohol during the ceremony!—in the hallway. See now, even Veena is getting up. It’s normal in Indian weddings,” she tells him. Leo rubs his left temple, which still throbs from the pressure of the tight safa he wore earlier. This is so different from any wedding he’s ever been to, which have been short, a little stiff, and, frankly, pretty white. He kind of likes that this barely contained chaos, the many rituals, the humanness it invites, could be what his wedding looks like.

Plus, Rishi’s outfits are cool as hell.

Over these last two weeks, being the only white guy in most rooms, having everything explained to him, or getting things wrong because everyone knows them but him has given him a fresh perspective. He's understood, for a long time, that the world was set up for him, where others have to work years—sometimes over generations—to get to what he's been born with. Even though he tries to move through the world conscientiously, it will always tilt in his favor. He's never not been the default until these last two weeks. It feels like something he needed to understand and something he's a little ashamed he didn't contemplate more deeply—after all, how he feels here is probably how Simran has felt at some point.

Onstage, Geeta and Rishi have exchanged another set of thick flower garlands when Kavitha reaches down to tie the end of Geeta's dupatta to the end of Rishi's sherwani scarf.

"Oh! They've forgotten to do the kanyadaan," Poonam aunty says.

"It's the part of the wedding where the bride's father gives her to the groom, thanking him for taking her on."

Onstage, Manjula aunty must have just quietly said the same thing. But when Rishi replies, also inaudible, her discrete manner is replaced with a loud "What do you mean we are not doing a kanyadaan?"

Poonam aunty leans towards Leo. "Uh-oh! Looks like there's some drama." She's practically bouncing in her seat from excitement as she turns back to the stage.

"What nonsense are you talking?" Ravi uncle says, before realizing that he's speaking so loudly even the last row can hear. He lowers his voice. "How can you skip the kanyadaan?"

Leo glances around and it's as if all four hundred attendees have leaned forward to hear every detail of the argument. Some have even moved up a few rows.

"Dad, it's an outdated tradition," Rishi says. "At best, it makes the girl seem like a burden and, at worst, property."

"Those are the old ideas, Rishi beta," his mother says, as if she were explaining it to a small child. "Of course Geeta is an independent woman and we love her like she's our own. The tradition has no meaning."

"Then why do it?" Geeta asks.

"Because ... it's a tradition!" Manjula aunty replies, bewildered by the question.

“Geeta! This is part of how we show our respect and love for Perimaal,” Veena aunty says, sounding exasperated that she has to explain this.

“No,” Geeta says, glancing towards their captive audience. She doesn’t lower her voice. “Our marriage will be blessed by God because we love each other and because we strive to be good people. That’s what I learned, what you taught me, Amma, during all those years when we’d go to temple. It’s not disrespectful to change outdated rituals, especially ones that exclude or oppress others. As long as God is in our hearts, then our practices can change as we as people change.” Her voice is so assured that it invites anyone to challenge her; Leo can’t imagine who would. “Rishi and I both feel strongly about how we want to start our marriage.”

“Should have let me make the PowerPoint,” he jokes, and the two of them laugh.

This seems to displease the parents further. “But how can you—” Manjula aunty says as Ravi uncle begins, “This generation and their *feelings*—”

“Okay, Mummy-ji. There is one solution,” Geeta says to her soon-to-be mother-in-law. She glances at Rishi, who nods firmly. He’s got her back. “We will do a kanyadaan—but only if you also give Rishi away to my mother.”

Veena aunty opens her mouth to protest but then shuts it, as if she wants to see where this goes. The laugh melts from Manjula aunty’s face when she realizes it’s not a joke.

“What?” Ravi uncle says. “Why would we do that? You are the one joining us, Geeta.”

“Why?” Geeta probes. She and Ravi uncle are both squared off, the agni crackling between them.

“Because you’re the daughter!” he says.

Rishi throws his hands up in the air. “Dad, that’s exactly what we mean.”

“You should know, Uncle, that we’re both keeping our last names,” Geeta says, chin raised and shoulders set. “My lineage deserves to be passed on too. Our children’s names are going to be hyphenated.”

Leo swears he sees a tiny upwards flick of Veena aunty’s mouth, as if she likes that idea.

Ravi uncle sputters. “What nonsense! We—”

“I think we should move on.” Everyone goes silent as they realize who has spoken: Ashok uncle. After a few moments of glaring, Ravi uncle

reluctantly mutters “Fine” and Manjula aunty throws her hands up in defeat. Leo is impressed by Ashok uncle’s influence but he knows he shouldn’t be. When a man is of few words, the ones he says carry more weight than anyone else’s.

Veena aunty does that Indian side-to-side head nod meaning “yes,” and looks over the crowd. “Let’s keep going. We can discuss this later. We’re late as it is and we don’t want the shubh muhurat to pass before we finish the rituals,” she says to the whole hall. Leo notes that they swiftly move on. Geeta is not given away by or to anyone (and neither is Rishi). Half an hour later, the ceremony still going, Veena aunty steps off the stage and comes to him. “Leo, there’s a stack of silk saris in a bag at the back of the hall. Bring them to the room behind the mandapam,” she instructs.

“Sure, Aunty,” Leo replies. Yesterday, after the sangeet, he would have said he was well on his way to her approval. But that walk down the aisle told him how wrong he is. Up until now, Leo was competing against himself. Now there’s a contender.

When he gets to the green room, Veena aunty is already in there. “We need those saris folded quickly but properly, seri?” she tells him, like a pint-size drill sergeant.

Veena perima holds up a tight rectangle of fabric with the sides tucked in, the creases perfect, the whole thing appearing to be seamless. “Use this one as an example. We need them all done in the next fifteen minutes, otherwise you’ll hold up the whole wedding!”

“Uh, Aunty, could you show me how to—”

The door to the green room opens again and Kamal walks in. “Can I help?”

“No worries, I got this,” Leo says despite being about to ask for instructions.

“All good,” Kamal says, coming to stand next to Leo. He’s an inch taller. “It’s a two-person job anyway.” Leo stands up straighter.

Veena aunty’s stern, round face softens. “Kamal,” she says, smiling, and then she holds up a sari and instructs how to fold it in rapid-fire Tamil that Leo’s beginner skills are no match for. Surely she didn’t say the word for “banana”? Veena aunty’s usual flat-mouthed expression returns as she looks at Leo. “Help Kamal properly, okay?”

Spinning on her heel, she heads back out to the wedding. Of course Kamal is right. It is a two-person job and they follow a carefully

choreographed process, opening the nine-yard-long sari fully before each grabbing opposite ends and coming together, Kamal folding while Leo holds the material tight to ensure there's no slack. It's practically a dance, as Kamal points out after the fifth sari, pretending to do a little waltz as they step towards each other. Leo laughs, despite himself. This guy speaks fluent Tamil, is funny, and has the face of an Indian Oscar Isaac. How the hell can Leo compete?

"You're pretty good at this," Leo notes.

Kamal chuckles. "You would be too, if you had to help your sister and mother fold these for years. When we were kids, our moms used to give us old saris to play with. They doubled as superhero capes, magic carpets, fort walls. One time, Simi and I wrapped Kavitha in one and rolled her down a hill." Leo catches his easy use of the nickname he's only heard family members use. "Our parents grounded us for the afternoon, though Rangan mama later told me he thought it was hilarious."

And he knew Simran's parents. Leo sighs.

Kamal's eyebrows raise and he misinterprets it. "Listen, sorry I took your spot in the walk," he says. "I know you're Rishi's friend, but I didn't want to make a whole scene back there."

Leo can't hold it against him; he climbed on a roof because Veena Iyer told him to. "It's not a big deal."

They walk to each other and fold the length in half, then in quarters, before he takes the material from Leo. "No, it is. I'm not in this wedding," he says, tucking the ends in smoothly so it looks exactly like Veena aunty's prototype. "I was texting my girlfriend about it and she made me realize just how inappropriate it was."

Leo expects a cool flood of relief from this news but it never comes. As they fold the last of the saris, he realizes why. He's not jealous of Kamal over Simran; he is jealous of Kamal over Veena aunty. Leo wonders what his mother might say about him being in a love triangle with his girlfriend's aunt.

But it's not just Veena aunty. It's the culture, the language, the history, all these points where Kamal is woven into the fabric of this family, so much so that he can come in and out with decades in between and still fit in. Leo has spent the last two weeks shoehorning himself into every space and any acceptance he's gotten, he knows, is only because everyone loves Simran so much.

Veena aunty comes back in to survey their work. She gives a gentle head waggle of approval before plucking one of the saris from the center of the stack. “How did this one get in here? This was my sister’s.” She pauses for a minute, running her fingers over the thick green border. It’s as if her whole being is muted in that moment, almost shrinking, shoulders dropping. And then it crosses her face: a look of such pure sadness. Leo has seen it only once before, on one other person. And just like her, he watches Veena aunty purse her lips and pack it away somewhere deep inside, returning to her usual brusqueness. “We won’t be using this one today. Put it aside, I’ll add it to the things I’ve saved for Simi’s wedding trousseau.”

He leaves the green room and takes his seat next to Poonam aunty, who immediately resumes her narration. He’s barely listening as she explains sapthapadi, where Geeta and Rishi walk around the fire seven times with a special meaning for each round, binding them together for seven lifetimes. When he looks up at Simran, he forgets everything. She is participating in all the activities and rituals with cheer and enthusiasm but something is off. Leo’s seen her snarky or passionate or even sad, but there’s never been this absence of vitality. He’s trying to catch her eye to tell her to meet him outside when one of Rishi’s cousins grabs his arm and drags him out to the hallway. A pair of ornate gold-and-cream slip-ons studded with pearls—Rishi’s shoes—is put in his hands.

And then pandemonium ensues.

As the marriage rituals finally come to a close, another one begins—usually one of Simran’s favorites—where both parties attempt to fight over the groom’s shoes; his side to protect them, the bride’s side to hold them hostage until the groom and his parents negotiate an acceptable sum of money for their return. More important than the money is the pride at stake. It can get ruthless, sometimes downright vicious. At their cousin Kaira’s wedding years ago, a preteen Geeta, Kavi, and Simran watched in awe as the bride’s side wrangled eight hundred dollars to return the shoes, a sum that has now become legendary. Simran once sprinted, shoes in hand, through the marble-floored lobby of the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai with the other side in hot pursuit, nearly knocking over a guest who turned out to be the ambassador to Germany.

Today she’s not in the mood. But before she can signal to Leo to avoid getting caught up in the joothe shenanigans, he’s been pulled out the side door. Simran steps off the stage and follows them out, watching as Rahul and Prateek, Rishi’s friend, and several other cousins wheel over an electrician’s ladder borrowed from a nearby utility closet. It appears their plan is to hide the shoes in a sconce of a chandelier, high enough that only Leo on a ladder—a strangely frequent combination—can reach.

Suddenly, a few of Geeta’s friends and cousins from Ashok uncle’s side come storming down the hallway, rushing the guys. It’s all-out war, especially when twelve-year-old Shweta swipes the left slipper from Prateek’s hand and jets off. Rishi’s friends take off after her with the rest of Geeta’s group on their tail. In all the commotion, everyone has missed that Leo, still at the top of the ladder, is holding the right shoe. When he spots Simran, he immediately climbs down to her.

“This is nuts,” he says, waving the shoe. The hallway is empty. Everyone is either still inside for the ceremony or chasing each other through a different part of the hotel. “Are you okay?” Something inside Simran releases at the sound of his voice and Leo’s face shifts to alarm. He tugs on her upper arm and pulls her into his chest. “Talk to me.”

“She sold our house, Leo,” she says. “My parents’ house, where I grew up, in Chennai. She sold it and she never even asked me.”

“Oh, Sim.” His voice is gentle, as if he’s trying to soften the sharp corners of what she’s up against. “I’m so sorry.”

The rich material of Leo’s kurta is scratchy beneath her cheek. “That’s the whole reason I came back here. I wanted the key to the house. I wanted—I *needed* to go back there, to see it again, to be in the place where my parents were alive. I feel like it might have helped me, I don’t know, move on? Or at least live with it more easily.” It’s the first time she has said it out loud and it feels like she’s giving up the hope the house held for her. “I wanted to bring you there.” Leo’s arms tighten around her and she tightens hers back.

“Maybe she had a good reason.”

She purses her lips. “Don’t do that. I know you see the best in everyone but you don’t know her. She sold it to Kamal’s family. And then she put him in the wedding to walk with me. She’s been planning this the whole time. It’s just so manipulative—” She sputters. “It wasn’t hers to give away. It was mine and it was all I had left of them.”

“What about your dad’s record player that you told me about? Maybe there’s more of their stuff here,” he says. She stiffens and he rubs a hand along her back. “You have every right to be upset. I’m not trying to take that away. I’m just hoping there’s something to salvage.”

“If there was, I wouldn’t have left seven years ago.” She wants to move past this topic, lighten the heaviness. “Guess that means Operation DDLJ is officially a failure.”

But his face pinches and in that moment, she realizes just how seriously Leo was taking it. He’s become too invested in their plan, despite her warning that Veena prima would never come around. She had gotten so swept up in how different being back had felt. But ultimately, everything always ended up the same. Because of her aunt.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“Why are you sorry?” she says. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” At her raised eyebrows, he says, “I have been lying to your aunt since the moment I met her.”

“Because we made you,” she dismisses.

“When you tell her,” he says, “I’ll apologize for not being honest from the start.”

Simran pulls away slightly, frowning. "Tell her?"

"About you and me."

Simran drops her arms, shaking her head. "No, Leo. You don't get it. I don't want her to be part of any more of my life. It's why I stayed away for so long. We'll go back to Toronto and we can live our lives far, far away from her opinions and plans."

"That's not going to solve anything," Leo says.

"Aren't you angry at how she's treated you?" Simran asks, squeezing his arms as if to infuse her hurt into him.

He shakes his head. "No, not angry. Maybe a little sad at how this has all played out."

She shakes her head, not needing to hear more. "I hate that she made you feel that way," she says. She starts pacing, feeling Leo's eyes follow her as she wears down a three-foot section of the stone-colored carpet.

"Look, the wedding is almost over," he says after a few moments. "Fly back with me tomorrow, instead of at the end of the week. We'll decompress in Toronto, hang out with Liv and our friends. You can catch up on work. Once all this has passed, your family will be calmer too. Then we can come back to Iyer House and tell Veena aunty together."

Simran stops and faces him. "I'm not telling her. And I'm not coming back here. It's clear to me now that this place holds nothing for me."

"Sim."

Something about the way he's trying to whittle down her anger only makes her feel it more. "What?"

Leo's mouth is set in a firm line, the furrow between his brows deep. "You have to tell your aunt we're together before you just cut her out of your life."

She picks furiously at a cuticle, refusing to look up at him. "I can't. I don't want her anywhere near my life."

"The last time you left like this, you nearly lost Kavitha."

"It won't be like that this time," Simran insists. "Kavitha and me are separate from how I deal with Veena perima."

"Does Kavitha feel that way?" Leo asks.

Thunderous footsteps sound down the hallway, and out of instinct, they take a few steps away from each other just as Prateek and Rahul come around the corner, careening towards them. Shweta, followed by two of Geeta's friends, eyes maniacal with adrenaline, is hot on their heels.

“Leo, think fast!” Prateek says, tossing him the other shoe. He catches it easily and both he and Simran stare down into his hands, a little mystified at how he ended up with the pair.

“Run!” another one of Rishi’s cousins says, coming up to him and grabbing his shoulders, tugging him into the chase. Leo is pulled into the stampede, throwing an alarmed look back at Simran.

“Take the shoes!” he pleads with Rahul.

“No way! You’re the best runner of us all!”

They disappear around the corner with the girls trailing them, as Simran stares at the empty space where Leo was just standing. She walks in their direction, trying to find Leo again but after a few minutes she realizes she’s too far behind. She has no idea where they ran off to. She turns back to the wedding hall, relieved that their disagreement was interrupted.

A warm hand clamps around her wrist and she’s tugged backwards, into a supply closet.

“Sorry,” Leo says, panting slightly. “Took me a minute to hand the shoes over to Shweta.”

Simran frowns. “But she’s on the girl’s side.”

“Rishi told me that if it comes down to it, I should take your family’s side over his, to get in good with Veena aunty.”

Simran pinches the bridge of her nose, filled with affection and frustration at Leo’s commitment to Operation DDLJ, even after everything her aunt has done.

“You’re not going to win her over, Leo,” she says. His shoulders slump. “I don’t get why you have such a problem with this. I’m choosing you over everyone else.”

He throws his hands in the air. “I don’t want that!”

“You don’t want me to choose you?”

“I don’t want you to choose at all,” Leo says. The closet is low and cramped, lit by a single bulb that casts shadows along the metal shelves and over their faces, shrouding their expressions. He says, “I want you to have everyone you need in your life.”

“It’s too late for that. And I don’t need her,” Simran says, crossing her arms over her chest.

He scrubs a hand over his face. “I can’t imagine what you’re feeling and I won’t pretend to. But I doubt your aunt did any of this to hurt you.”

Simran is shaking her head even before he finishes talking. “You said it yourself. You don’t know what it feels like—because you don’t know her. Why *wouldn’t* she sell my house without telling me, let alone asking me? This is the person who never talked about my parents after they died. The sister and brother-in-law she lived with for two years! Not even once, Leo. It was like she erased them from her mind.”

That’s the poisoned root of the thorny relationship between her and Veena perima. Not her authoritarian rule or insistence on controlling Simran’s life. How can they ever have a relationship when she doesn’t feel the gaping hole that Simran does? Her aunt doesn’t hate her own birthday, her aunt isn’t weighed down by loss, her aunt is living her life and matchmaking Simran as if her parents never existed. She almost wishes she could forget her parents and live unburdened too, except that even if it hurts for the rest of her life, she’ll never abandon their memories. She’s their only child. If she doesn’t remember them, who will?

“Sim.”

“What?” she snaps, angry at him now for pushing this when she just wanted him to support her.

“You’re crying.” He reaches a hand up to wipe away a tear.

She steps back, banging into a shelf. The contents rattle. “It’s nothing. I’m fine. I just miss my parents.” The last sentence slips out of her mouth without her meaning to say it.

Leo’s jaw sets at an angle. “That’s why I don’t want you to lose more of your family. Please tell them.”

She looks away from him, down at her hands. The mehndi is a startling, ruddy brown against the light skin of her palms. “You’re asking too much.” She means it like an off-ramp, to stop them from where this is going.

“You promised,” he says, voice quiet but with an edge. “Last night.”

She knows she’s going back on what she said. But that was last night, the room upstairs a portal to some other, magical world. Here, now, in the real world, the knotted mess of loss and resentment that binds her aunt and her is too complicated to undo. It’s beyond what she’s capable of. The buzzing in her head is now a raging river. “This is not about us, Leo. Please. Just leave it alone.”

She moves to cover her face with her hands, but Leo pulls them away, making her look at him—his eyes are steely, so unlike his usually warm gaze. “Simran. I’m not going to drop it.”

“They’re not your family! They’re barely mine!” she says, voice rising.
“I can’t give you this, so, please, stop asking.”

He lets out a humorless laugh. “Well, at least you’re finally being honest.” He crosses his arms and steps back, away from her. “And it’s not that you can’t give me this. It’s that you won’t.”

She stares at the ground, but she can still feel the heat and hurt of his expression on her face. His hands are clenched at his sides. She knows he’s waiting for her to say something to him. But she’s so tired. She’s been tired for sixteen years.

After a few moments, he makes a frustrated noise and walks out. She sinks to the ground as the closet door closes with a metallic snick.

She’s too wrung out to cry.

But then she does anyway.

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After the joothe negotiation is settled with Ravi uncle begrudgingly handing over a sheaf of hundred-dollar bills to the girls' side, lunch is served. There's some downtime until the cocktail hour and reception, or, in Geeta's case, just enough time to change out of her ceremony clothes, eat something, and then start on her reception outfit, hair, and makeup, the final and most extravagant look of the whole wedding.

Simran finds an empty table, wanting to eat by herself—she's not in the mood to speak to anyone, but Kamal and Payal sit down next to her.

"Indian wedding food is the best," Kamal says as they eat. He looks over at his sister, who is scarfing down her meal. "P, slow down, they're not going to run out."

"You know the family rules. If you don't eat fast, you might not eat at all," Payal says, and then grabs a papad from her brother's plate and bites into it.

"There's, like, a thousand papads over there, why do you have to take mine?"

"Because the food I steal from you just tastes better," she retorts.

Simran laughs, despite herself. "Kamal, this is her birthright as a younger sister."

Kamal clears his throat. "Speaking of, where is Kavitha?" he asks. "She's upstairs in the bridal suite," Simran says. "She ate earlier so she could help Geeta iron her outfit."

"I see," Kamal says. He clears his throat again. Payal looks at him, confused, and he widens his eyes before motioning for her to leave.

"Wow, I'm full." Payal stands abruptly. "I'm going to go. I'll talk to you later, Simi!"

She's gone before Simran can even say goodbye. Kamal chuckles.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be so obvious about it. But I can't help it."

Dread creeps into Simran's stomach, replacing her appetite.

"You know ..." Simran stands, plastic chair scraping the ground noisily.

"I have to go too. Sorry, Kamal!" She dashes to the elevator bay, where she

finds almost the whole crew—Geeta, Rishi, and both sets of parents—heading upstairs. Ravi uncle’s continued grumbles about having to pay for the joothe echo through the tight space, allowing Simran to roil in her bad mood from the back corner of the elevator. She’s not the only one. Manjula aunty scowls at Veena perima crowing about her side winning, their détente over.

Simran is about to head to the room she and Kavitha have been getting ready in when Geeta says, “Come with me, Akka. I have a necklace that I think will go really well with your outfit tonight.”

The seven of them enter the bridal suite, a cluster of noise and movement, stopping short when they find Kavitha standing in the middle of the room. Next to her, hair mussed suspiciously, is Payal. Silence falls over the group as Veena perima looks from Kavitha to Payal and back to Kavitha.

All of Kamal’s comments about the specialness of childhood friends and getting time to connect and him making his sister leave the table click into place. Kamal’s not interested in Simran. He’s been trying to get Kavitha and Payal together. Simran wishes she could telepathically tell her cousin to wipe the guilty look off her face.

“Kavitha? Payal? What were you two doing?” Veena perima asks, and behind her, Manjula aunty crosses her arms. Simran feels panic rising in her. Kavitha is a bad liar on a good day. Under scrutiny, she doesn’t stand a chance.

“We were just catching up,” Payal says, when Kavitha won’t speak up. “Up here? By yourselves?” Veena perima asks, suspicious.

Simran can see it unfolding like a fragile porcelain vase toppling from its perch, about to hit the ground and shatter into a million pieces. Kavitha is going to be outed against her will.

And then, like an outstretched hand that catches the vase, Geeta steps in front of Payal, turns to face her parents and in-laws, and with her arms outstretched announces, “I’m pregnant!”

“What?” That one word comes out in unison. Ashok peripa’s eyebrows go high on his forehead. Simran sees Rishi fondly shaking his head from the back of the group and when she turns back to Geeta, she sees her smilingly shrug back.

“Gits,” Kavitha says, as Payal quietly lets herself out the other door, her hasty exit unnoticed. Simran’s heart might burst; she knows this is not

something that Geeta and Rishi were planning on revealing for a while. GNN has tattled once again, but this time on herself. For Kavitha.

In a rational world, it would be fine, but as expected, three of the four newly linked Iyer-Chopra parents burst into a frenzy of overreaction. Manjula aunty covers her face with both hands, letting out a wail that would give any soap opera actress a run for her money.

“Geeta, ni wodhe vangaporey. This is a terrible joke,” Veena aunty says. It’s the ultimate threat, telling Geeta she’s asking for a beating (even if the beating never actually materializes). But Geeta simply beams at her mother as Rishi moves to stand next to her and takes her hand.

“It’s not a joke, Amma. You’re going to be a patti,” Geeta says calmly. Simran is in awe of how cool she’s playing this.

“But the child is out of wedlock,” Manjula aunty sputters. Rishi runs a hand over his face, the gold of his new wedding band catching the light.

“Wedlock,” Kavitha repeats, incredulous. “I’ll take ‘patriarchal bullshit’ for a thousand, Alex.”

“We’re married now,” Rishi reasons.

“But you weren’t married when you became pregnant, correct?” Manjula aunty retorts, swinging her gaze around like a cocked pistol.

“Geeta, I cannot take this right now,” Veena aunty says, pinching the bridge of her nose as she sits on the edge of the king bed in the middle of the room. She’s so short that her feet barely touch the ground.

“Everyone needs to calm down,” Kavitha says. “Gits and Rishi are married! She’s only twelve weeks along. By the time the baby comes, no one will care.”

“Twelve weeks along,” Ravi uncle says. “So six months after the wedding, you’ll have a baby! You think people can’t do the mathematics? Log kya kahenge!”

Kavitha bites her lips and cringes, realizing she’s given out more information than she should have.

“Thanks for that,” Geeta mutters.

“This is ridiculous,” Kavitha says, half to herself. “It’s not a big deal.”

But the parents have worked themselves into a tizzy. Simran wonders if her uncle might intervene, like he did during the ceremony. But this time he stays silent, seated in a leather wingback chair not unlike his one at home at the far end of the room, massaging his temples, apparently having hit his quota on involvement.

“Couldn’t you horny kids have waited three months before consummating?” Rishi’s mother wails again.

“Mom, please don’t ever say ‘horny’ again,” Rishi says, shuddering. “Or ‘consummating.’”

“Mummy-ji, Papa-ji, you’re going to be a dadi and dada,” Geeta says, trying to soothe them with her best doctor voice. “What else matters right now?”

“It matters that you are bad children!” Veena perima’s voice rises as if she were scolding a pet who’s chewed up a shoe. “We raised you with better values than this.”

“Clearly, you didn’t,” Kavitha mutters, and Simran nudges her to shut up. She suddenly looks contrite, like she’s remembered that she’s the reason Geeta has to endure any of this.

“Look, you guys can freak out all you want but I think if you just take a step back and see the bigger picture—” Rishi starts.

“Don’t tell us what to do! We are your parents!” his father barks at him. “We see the picture we see!”

“We give them everything they ask for, Manjula,” Veena perima says. Her new in-law walks over and places a hand on her shoulder. “Schooling, food, a roof over their heads. Whenever Geeta wanted shoes, we said okay, we’ll buy you shoes. Anything for our children. And how do they repay us?”

Manjula aunty sits next to Veena perima on the bed and clasps her hand. In the gravest of voices, she says, “I don’t understand, Veena. What sins have we committed in our past lives to have to bear this indignity?” Simran is horrified—and, honestly, a little impressed—to see two tears leak down Manjula aunty’s face. Rishi had once said she’d wanted to be an actress back in India; she certainly has the knack for melodrama.

“All we can say is sorry to God and the people who look to our example in the community,” Veena perima says, squeezing Manjula aunty’s hand. The two women fall silent, rivalry set aside for now. “We tried our best.”

“What to do, what to do,” Ravi uncle laments.

“Chalo,” Veena perima says, standing up and letting out a gale of a sigh. “We still have a wedding to get through, no matter how sinful.”

Despite herself, Simran barely holds back a laugh. Her eyes meet Geeta’s, whose mouth is wobbling too.

“You all: Get ready and don’t tell anybody about this!” Manjula aunty hisses. Both sets of parents head to their respective rooms, leaving Geeta, Rishi, Kavitha, and Simran behind in the suite.

“Geeta. You saved me and sacrificed yourself,” Kavitha says, but Geeta waves her gratitude away.

“We knew they’d freak out,” Geeta says. “We know they can ‘do the mathematics.’”

“At least now their outrage is for a good cause,” Rishi says.

“Who cares! Can we just celebrate again that you’re having a baby?” Simran says. She moves forward to envelop both of them in a hug.

From behind her, Kavitha says, “I can make an exception to my rule for a good group hug!,” and barrels into Simran’s back and all four stumble a bit, like a multiheaded octopus drunk on joy. She can be for this baby what her aunt was never for her: a confidante, a safe harbor, a teller of the stories that came before.

“So, Kavitha, what *did* we walk in on?” Geeta asks. She sits down at the dressing table and begins the arduous process of removing her jewelry.

Kavitha goes beet red. “Me and Payal were just, um, catching up.”

“With each other’s mouths?” Simran asks, and Geeta cackles.

Kavi somehow goes redder. “Shut up!”

“Shut up? Shut up?” Simran says. “You expect me to shut up after you have made fun of me nonstop for two weeks?”

“Speaking of, where is Leo?” Kavitha asks, half distracted as she pulls out the steam iron. The mention of his name feels jagged through Simran.

“Um, I think he went back to the house to get changed,” she says, trying to ignore the sting in her chest at her lie.

“Good for him, he deserves a break from our crazy families,” Rishi says. Grinning, he teases, “Does he really understand what he’s getting himself into with you, Sim?”

The other three laugh and Simran, ever practiced, brings a smile she doesn’t feel to her lips. When she and Kavitha leave the suite, her smile drops immediately.

“Let’s get ready for this sinful wedding,” Kavitha says, cracking up. When Simran doesn’t join in, Kavitha looks over at her. “What’s up with you?”

At first, Simran doesn’t plan on saying anything. But when the hotel room door closes behind them, she can’t hold it in. “Leo and I got into ... a

thing. A fight, I guess.”

“About Amma making Kamal walk in the wedding with you?” Kavitha asks. “I know she way overstepped, but I’m sure we can salvage something.”

“It’s no use,” she says. “Operation DDLJ is dead in the water. Shah Rukh Khan has failed us.”

“Blasphemy!” Kavitha mimes giving her a tight slap, but Simran can’t bring herself to crack a smile. “Is that why Leo is upset?”

“Yes,” Simran says. “No. He just doesn’t get it. I told him that I didn’t want to tell Perima about us and he got upset.”

Kavitha frowns. “You’re not ever going to tell her?”

Simran clears her throat, trying to tread carefully without lying. “Not anytime soon. She’s still trying to set me up with random men, for God’s sake.”

“Kamal isn’t random. You told her you didn’t want to be set up with strangers,” Kavitha says.

“I told her I didn’t want to be set up at all.” She waves a hand in the air. “It doesn’t matter. This wedding will be over soon and I’ll go back to Toronto and she won’t be able to do this anymore.”

“Just like before,” Kavitha says icily.

Simran is about to agree until she clocks her cousin’s tone. She’s upset. Well, so is Simran. Neither speaks much as they go through the involved process of getting ready, but Simran’s anger whirls and calcifies within her.

Later that evening, she steps out into the cocktail hour, surrounded by her family and hundreds of people. She’s never felt more alone.

During cocktail hour, the Iyers and Chopras head outside to the manicured gardens at the back of the hotel for the photographs. The summer weather is so perfect it would render Instagram filters jealous. If Geeta looked like the sun come to life in the morning, she looks like the evening sky has embraced her in a midnight blue and chrome lengha, the red of her new sindoor blazing and bright against her dark hair. Rishi matches her in a sherwani in an inverted color scheme and gold chain that Geeta tied around his neck, after he tied her mangal sutra, claiming that he'd never say no to a piece of jewelry. When Geeta, Simran, and Kavitha take their photos together, it creates a gradient—Simran in a royal blue sari with a silver blouse and Kavitha in a baby blue anarkali with a white dupatta—just as Geeta had said it would when she assigned them colors to wear, down to the Pantone number. Simran must admit, her specificity is paying off beautifully.

The main photographer, a tall Indian woman with artfully graying hair, takes Rishi, Geeta, and their parents—both sets still scowling in the direction of their newly wedded and pregnant-out-of-wedlock children every time a camera is not on them—to the far side of the gardens so the hotel's hedge maze can serve as a backdrop.

"You girls come with me over here," the assistant photographer says, pulling them to another corner.

"Cut it out, Kavi," Simran says between clicks of the shutter.

Kavitha's head turns sharply to her. "What do you mean?"

"Excuse me, miss, face forward, please!" the second photographer interrupts. "Tilt your head a little to the left—perfect, hold that pose!"

"You're mad, that's fine. But let's not do the whole silent treatment," Simran says when the man steps away to change out some of the equipment.

Kavitha levels a blank look on her. "Why not? We did it for seven years." Simran blinks, taken aback by her cousin's reversion to low blows. "Do you remember back when this whole thing started, what I said? You asked what

it would take for us to be good again and I said you would have to tell Amma about you and Leo.”

“Okay, we’ve got all we need!” the photographer tells them. “You can go inside and enjoy the party.”

Kavitha storms off, as much as someone can when their heels are sinking into the grass. Simran, in flats, a force of habit around her short family, follows her and catches up quickly. But before they go in, they’re stopped by a yell from Geeta.

“Did you guys get your entrance dance choreo sorted out?” she calls, and Simran’s head falls back with a groan. They haven’t. There’s one more short dance for when they are announced into the reception party. She had started to teach it to Kavitha this morning while they were getting dressed, before they were distracted by all the drama of the day.

The two of them go inside and duck into an anemically lit meeting room. Simran runs through the choreography silently but in the middle of teaching her cousin a move where they put their hands on their hips and jump forward with a pelvic thrust, Kavitha faces her instead. “Admit it. You’re going to up and leave. Again,” Kavitha says, lips set in a straight, unyielding line.

“Do the thrust—I need you to be in the right spot so I can show you the next move,” Simran instructs.

“Are you just going to ignore what I said?”

“No,” Simran replies. “But we don’t have much time to learn this so unless you want to do a sloppy dance in front of all four hundred people attending this thing, keep practicing.” Kavitha makes a face but does as she says. “I said sorry for how I left before.”

“Sorry only means something if you’re not planning on doing it again,” Kavitha replies.

“It’ll be different this time,” she says, imploring. “We’ll stay in touch. And we’ll see each other a lot, I promise. I’m going to visit the baby all the time.” Simran raises one hand and does a “come closer” motion with her palm up and her fingers folding in. Kavitha imitates her.

“So you’ll come all the way to Connecticut to see the baby and Geeta and Rishi. But you won’t come to New Jersey to see your aunt and uncle. The people who adopted you.” The jab lands spikily. Kavitha isn’t sad or disappointed, like before. Now she’s angry.

“What does that matter?” Simran restarts the song.

“It matters,” Kavitha says, running through the first minute of choreography perfectly, her face tight. “Because you didn’t see how heartbroken she was the last time you left.”

It flashes in her mind again, that memory of her aunt’s quiet acceptance when Simran called from Toronto. “She was just upset I didn’t do what she wanted me to. Perima only cares whether I follow the exact plan for my life that she’s set out.”

“That is her way of caring about you! She makes those plans because she wants to see you happy,” Kavitha says, half yelling as she jerks her elbow out four times, moving her legs in tandem.

Simran shimmies forward and Kavitha copies her. “Why does she get to decide what happiness looks like for me?”

Kavitha snorts as she puts one hand behind her head and the other on her hip and moves it out and in, three thumkas in a row. “If you’re holding out for a better answer than ‘Because that’s what Indian parents do,’ you’re out of luck.”

“Adoption or not, she’s not my mother.” Simran and Kavitha meet in the center of the room and slap hands before switching spots and repeating the moves.

“You’ve been saying that since you were sixteen! I get it, she gets it, we all get it!”

“No, it’s hip, hip, then chest, chest,” Simran corrects.

They run through the rest of the dance. “You know,” Kavitha says, panting. “It’s basically impossible for a relationship to improve if one of the people is absent.”

As the song ends, Simran bends over, hands on her knees, catching her breath. Talking, let alone arguing, while dancing is past even her advanced skill set.

“I stuck around and it changed,” Kavitha says. “She changed. I didn’t marry Ajay. My mother didn’t excommunicate me. In fact, she stood up for me. And she was devastated when you left. Why do you think I came up with this scheme? It wasn’t about Leo winning her over. It was about getting you to stick around long enough to see her for who she really is.”

“If that’s all true,” Simran says, straightening and putting her hands on her hips, “why haven’t you come out to her yet?”

Her cousin stops short. “You don’t get to decide that for me.”

Simran is immediately contrite. “That’s not how I meant—”

“Family is complicated,” Kavitha says.

Without the dancing to distract them, Simran doesn’t bother to resist rolling her eyes at her cousin’s sage wisdom. “I know.”

“Actually, you don’t,” Kavitha says, her tone softening. “Your parents died and I’ll always wish that hadn’t happened but it’s not the same. When you lose someone, all the bad things are scrubbed away and you keep all the good. It’s the sole upside: Only the love is important enough to remember. The annoyances, the fights, the spaces where they frustrate you so much—that’s forgotten. You get to forget that.”

“I would do anything for a chance to have all the messy stuff with them,” Simran says, tears welling up at the back of her throat. She bites down on her lip to stop them; she doesn’t want to cry again today.

“You can’t have it with them, but you can have it,” Kavitha says. “You can have it with a mother like mine, who loves fiercely and believes that makes her an expert on your life. A father who is quiet all the time because he was raised to believe men didn’t show emotions or weakness, especially not to women, and is figuring out how to unlearn that while surrounded by only women. A sister who annoyed you so much growing up, but you can’t imagine life without her because who she is helped you figured out who you aren’t.”

“Do you know what it was like for me here?” Simran asks, her voice rising. To realize that Kavitha has never understood feels like a chasm between them too large to overcome. “Why can’t you see? I lost everything and your parents never talked about it! The Simran who had parents, the Simran who went to the same school her whole life and lived in the same house since she was born, the Simran who had friends and took Bharatnatyam lessons after school and got to come and go as she pleased without being questioned about every single thing, the Simran who thought she’d live in Chennai for the rest of her life—she ceased to exist too.”

“I would never minimize how difficult it was for you then.”

“It’s still difficult for me now, Kavi!” Simran says. “That’s why I can’t be at Iyer House.”

“And that ...” Kavitha’s words are small, her ire deflated. “You always call it Iyer House.”

“Everyone calls it Iyer House.”

“And some of us also call it home. You could call it home.”

Simran doesn't have the words to explain the burning buried deep inside her. It's as if each year following her parents' death, each year that no one continued to talk about them or their grief, added a layer of sediment that eventually turned to rock. Now it's nearly impossible to excavate the feeling. "Home is where my family was. And I've lost that home just like I lost my family."

Kavitha holds up a finger. "You lost your parents. You still have a family. You're choosing to push us away."

"She sold my parents' house without telling me, Kavitha," Simran says quietly. It's her trump card, the unimpeachable proof of Veena perima's sins against her.

But instead, her cousin's lip curls up, almost a snarl. "Forget it. You just want to think the worst of her."

The door suddenly opens and Rahul pops his head in. "Simran didi, Kavitha didi, it's time. The DJ is ready to do our entrance intros."

With the guests already inside, the foyer outside the hall is empty but the air is crowded with tension. Ravi uncle stands with his arms crossed, Manjula aunty keeps looking over at Geeta and Rishi and tutting loudly. With every tsk, the frown on Veena perima's face etches deeper and Ashok peripa shifts from foot to foot with palpable discomfort. But Geeta and Rishi? They're beaming, unburdened, their smiles unshrinking in the face of all this disapproval.

From inside, the music cuts out and the DJ's voice booms over the speakers as he riles up the crowd to clap for the family, announcing the bride and groom. The double doors open and Geeta and Rishi enter, holding hands, cheered on like rock stars; the DJ announces Rishi's parents next, followed by Geeta's with an enthusiastic "Put your hands in the aiiiiiir for the Iyerrrrrrrrs."

The doors close and it's quiet again. Simran and Kavitha line up next, her cousin purposely turning her face the other way. Simran's hackles go up and she grabs Kavi's arm to turn her so they're facing each other.

"Excuse me, señorita!" Kavitha reluctantly looks at her. "So that's it? You're going to cut me off because I don't get along with your mother? Do I not mean anything to you on my own? I came here because I missed you, because I want to be there to help you build the life you deserve. I want to help you go far enough away to feel free to—"

Kavitha's sweet features rearrange into pure outrage. "Do you hear the unbelievable levels of hypocrisy and condescension in that sentence? I don't need you to fix my life, I just want you to be a part of it. And that includes my family. Our family! What makes you think I would go far away?"

"You said you wanted to move out of Iyer House!" Simran retorts.

"Yeah, to New York, that's forty-five minutes away! Maybe if you'd stuck around, you would have realized that putting up boundaries doesn't mean moving to another country."

Simran's reply is lost as the DJ calls from inside. "And let's get everyone to put their hands together for the sisters of the bride, Kavithaaaaa and Simraaaaaaan!"

Just as the double doors open and their music cue plays, Kavitha leans over to Simran. "You know what? You were correct. You abandon my family, you lose me too. Actually, it's done: You've lost me." The bass drops and they both shimmy their way into the hall and dance as everyone their family knows cheers them on. Simran puts her all into dancing, allowing it to distract her. As the reception continues, she rushes around, getting water for Geeta and Rishi and making sure they eat. At one point, she gently pushes her uncle into the center of the circle to dance with her aunt. Her emotions twist and warp into a strange shape; she's bopping along with everyone, whistling as they dance in tentative moves. Her aunt is shy, for the first time Simran has ever seen, and it fills her with an unexpected jolt of tenderness underneath her anger. She watches as Geeta and Kavi rush them, hooting and cheering them on, joining in on the dance, a perfect family moment, and something frays within her. As the strobe lights flash, she watches Leo from across the room. He looks back but he doesn't make a move to come to her, and then he turns away. She swallows down the ache in her, returning to the dance floor and clapping as Rahul shows off his amateur breakdancing moves. Her shoulder bumps into Kavitha, who opens her mouth to say sorry until she sees it's Simran. Instead, she turns back to the circle without a word. Simran does the same.

Why did she ever decide to come back? The blank walls of her sorrow close in on her, and she feels more miserable, more deserted, more broken now than she did on her birthday. Than she has since the first few months after her parents died.

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Day after the wedding

The day after the wedding is a slow one. Geeta and Rishi have opted for a farewell brunch in the backyard of Iyer House, without any dances to perform or rituals to follow or patriarchal traditions to deconstruct. In Geeta's words: "We've been doing that for four days straight. All I want is to eat every potato in sight." The guests are dressed casually, while the family wears bright colors in place of the bejeweled, intricate outfits of the past few days. Simran feels the sense of an ending—the jubilant highs of the wedding, but something else too.

Leo hasn't shown up yet, Simran notices, as more and more people file through the house out to the backyard. She doesn't know if he's left already. When she goes out to the front porch, she spots him next door, clothes rumpled, expression subdued, waiting in the Chopras' drive-way with his luggage. This can't be it, he hasn't even said goodbye. For a moment, she's sure he's going to come up to her and break into an easy smile and they'll fix this crack between them before it grows too wide. But all he does is give her that same look he did last night—hurt and something sharper. Anger, perhaps. The car pulls up, and this time, Leo doesn't turn to look back at her; he just gets in. There's no hope to hook her heart on.

Simran has that acute sense of ending again. Her and Leo, those berry-sweet flushes of something new and good giving way under the weight of his insistence and her resistance. She goes back into the house, schooling her face into a polite smile for all the guests. But inside, she's crumbling. She can't believe she's lost him.

It's another gorgeous day and it only makes Simran feel more dour. Grabbing a plate and loading it up with idli and vadas, she glances around. The only free seat at the Iyer table is next to Kavitha and she doesn't feel like being subjected to her cousin's reinstated silent treatment. She goes to a table at the back, joining some distant friends of her aunt who don't even let

her set her butt fully onto the seat before they're telling her that now that Geeta is married, it's her turn next.

Maybe Kavitha's glares would have been better.

She's just finished eating when Rahul, who seems unable to shake his role as messenger, comes up to the table to say that Veena perima is asking for her in the kitchen. Even the short walk back to the house makes her think of Leo, and their dance practice on the back deck. She feels haunted by his absence already.

"Ahh, Simi, good, come, stand right here," her aunt instructs when she gets there.

Simran does as she's told, her, Geeta, and Kavitha all in a line, Veena perima grabbing her arms and adjusting her so she's angled differently. Her aunt looks to the ceiling, sniffs the air, then checks her watch for the time before forging ahead, apparently satisfied with whatever conditions she was looking for. She goes to a cupboard, pulls out a glass bottle of salt and then a flat tub of dried red chilies. When she grasps a tight handful of both and comes to stand in front of the three of them, Simran realizes what she's doing. She's taking out nazar. Veena perima takes her full fist and raises it six inches from Geeta's forehead, then bends down and waves it over her daughter from head to toe. She then circles Geeta and does the same for her back. When she's done, she repeats this for both Kavitha and then Simran, going on her tiptoes to reach the top of her head. Simran's mother used to take out nazar slightly differently but the intention is the same: to remove the evil eye when someone has been looking particularly lovely or having a good streak of luck. Simran would like to be skeptical of it, but as Veena perima conducts her ministrations, she feels a shiver rumble under her skin like a recognition: She is now protected.

"You girls looked too, too beautiful at the wedding," she says. "Everyone was talking about it. And now with this baby, our family is having blessing after blessing. We must not forget to stay humble and gracious to God and remember that the tides can always turn."

Now that the stress of the wedding is behind her, her aunt has realized what her children have been saying all along: There's going to be a grandchild in the family. It's a mea culpa or as close to it as Veena Iyer will ever get. But she won't apologize for her actions. She expects everyone to get over it because she has. It's so typical.

“Thanks, Amma,” Geeta says. She steps forward and hugs her mother from the side as the older woman pats her arm.

“With me as a grandmother and Geeta as a mother, this baby is going to be so stunning, we’ll have to take nazar every day,” Veena perima says slyly.

Kavitha guffaws. “Amma, did you call yourself hot?”

“Aiyo, no. ‘Hot’ is such a bakwaas word.” Veena perima’s mouth twists into a smirk. “I am calling myself stunning.”

“Veena wants GILF status,” Kavitha jokes.

“What’s GILF?” her mother asks.

“Uh, never mind, Amma,” Geeta says, nudging Kavitha, and they both crack up. Even Veena perima chuckles. But Simran can’t bring herself to join in. Everyone is just moving on like nothing happened. Again.

There may as well be a storm cloud rumbling over her head. Murmuring an excuse, Simran shuffles out of the kitchen and goes up to the balcony, the only place she can stomach being right now. But sitting down in the corner, the wall scratchy against her back, all she can think of is Leo, even though he was only here once. She showed him parts of herself that she’ll never show anyone else. He learned languages for her. Does none of that matter now? She knew from the beginning that him being here was a mistake. Everyone thought they knew better than her, but none of them had been broken in the ways she had. None of them knew that you could hurt so much that you never find the bottom of it, a fall so endless that the gravity of grief becomes your only constant.

She pulls out her phone to distract herself, automatically opening her work email even though she’s on leave. There, she sees a message marked by the red exclamation point of death and the subject line: “Please Read Immediately.” A stone of unease forms in her stomach. Somehow, she knows what it is before she even reads the words. Due to budget cuts, her position has been eliminated. The email from puli Paulie has an undertone of vindictive glee as he informs her she should come clean out her desk as soon as she’s back in Toronto.

First Leo and now her job. The realization cracks through her like a fissure: Her life in Toronto has completely fallen apart. She has nothing to go back to—and she can’t stay here. She’s not just alone; she’s also lost.

Suddenly, the music from brunch cuts out mid-song, catching Simran’s attention. She stands, feeling a prickle of dread at the back of her neck, and

leans over the railing, looking down into the backyard to see the crowd surge like a tidal wave around one table. People's voices rise like alarm bells and her heart starts beating fast as she leaves the balcony, taking the stairs two at a time. The throng of guests parts for her and fear feels like ice water flooding her insides when a few people place their hand on her back and push her forward.

Finally reaching the front of the cluster, she sees Veena peripa bent over someone in a chair; Rishi, neck craned and searching the crowd; and Kavitha, kneeling on the grass. When her aunt looks up and sees Simran, her face crumples.

Throughout the years, Simran has seen her Ashok peripa in varying degrees of reticence. He's been quietly content, like when they used to listen to those Kishore Kumar records together. She's seen him drunk, once, when India won the cricket World Cup in 2011, and even then, he danced tipsily but silently as the other uncles gathered in the backyard cheered at the top of their lungs. She's never, ever seen him like this: ruddy from his wide forehead to the skin of his ankles, shoes off because his feet are grotesquely swollen, slouched on a chair, face tight and knotted. He clutches the left side of his ribs as he struggles to breathe.

There's a hush, rare for a group this large, even rarer when those people are Indian. The only sounds are the tinkles of jewelry and the low murmur of worry passing between guests.

"What should we do?" Veena peripa asks helplessly, and Simran is at a loss. Veena Iyer does not solicit opinions.

"Just give him some Eno," someone calls from the crowd, apparently thinking this is an open forum.

At that moment, Geeta runs out from the house and makes her way through the crowd.

"Let her through!" Simran shouts. "She's a doctor!"

Geeta comes towards them briskly. Her voice is still remarkably calm but hollow. "Rishi, call an ambulance!"

"Geeta, what's wrong with him?" Veena peripa's voice is fraught.

Geeta cups her father's cheek. "Appa? Appa, you're going to be okay, just hold on." She takes his pulse, fingers at the fleshy part of his neck, eyes on her watch. She looks up. "His heart rate is elevated, breathing is visibly stressed, and the pain seems to be concentrated on the left side. It could be

...” She doesn’t finish the thought but Simran knows everyone has heard it. Another heart attack. “Let’s get him inside.”

Rishi and another of his friends help half-carry Ashok peripa into the living room. What feels like endless minutes later, the sirens of an ambulance slice through the quiet neighborhood. Two paramedics bring out a slim stretcher on wheels that rattle as it passes through the doorway of Iyer House. They deposit Ashok peripa, his large body slack and weighty, onto it. Instructing a mute Veena perima to follow them to the hospital in her car, they wheel him into the back of the van. The doors shut with a click that feels too final and the ambulance zips away.

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Hospital lighting is severe and unforgiving. Every wrinkle of anxiety in the Iyer-Chopra-Gopal clan is on full display. The bright colors of their outfits are like a shout at a funeral and anyone who passes the area where they're congregated takes at least a second glance. After some paperwork, they are told to wait in the seating area, but Veena perima goes to the narrow hallway outside the room Ashok peripa is in and everyone follows. She, Manjula aunty, and Kavitha sit in a row of three connected plastic chairs as Simran leans on the wall next to them. Rishi stands as Ravi uncle paces back and forth. Geeta has gone to see what she can find out. Even more unsettling than the antiseptic smell or the constant ring of the telephones is that Veena perima is staring silently at the ground. Anguish heaves inside Simran; she's never seen her aunt like this, her straight, proud neck loose and hanging.

Ten minutes pass, then twenty. Geeta returns and she shakes her head at everyone's expectant faces. "They're running all the right tests but they haven't determined whether it's a heart attack at this point." Kavitha gets up so she can sit. "It takes time. We just have to wait." But as she lowers herself into the chair, hand pressed to her belly, Simran hears the words she is quietly muttering to herself: "He'll be okay. He'll be okay. He has to be okay."

The tension is like a stifling, smothering blanket. Rishi murmurs that he's going find coffee and water for everyone. Veena perima stands and starts to walk towards a hospital staff member but Geeta grabs her by the hand. "Amma, I know it's really hard. But there's nothing we can do yet. In fact, bothering them might hold up the process more." Even through her own worst worries, Geeta plays the role of the comforting authority.

Veena perima sits back down in a daze, no further protest. She begins quietly blubbering to herself, in Tamil and Hindi and English and even Marathi. Geeta puts her arm around her mother as tears slip down her cheeks daintily and Kavitha goes to stand next to her.

“You know, girls,” Veena perima says, taking the hand that Kavitha holds out. “Your Appa seems very shy. When we first moved here, he would ask me to talk on the phone for him because they always said they didn’t understand his accent. Which is wrong. You can understand him easily, he just talks too quietly. But no one was patient enough to listen. Still, we made our life here, a good life. He doesn’t talk to others but he talks to me, all the time. I’ve not spent one night away from him in thirty years. What will I do?” Kavitha squeezes her hand and Veena holds their clasped fingers to her cheek.

Simran tries to picture it: Veena Iyer—then Veena Swaminathan, short and young and just as domineering. Before she’d gotten married and moved to the U.S., Veena perima had been Simran’s most frequent babysitter since she lived with them in the Chennai house. She recalls one of the photos from their wedding hanging upstairs in Iyer House, Veena perima in her bright red sari and heavy gold jewelry, cradling six-month-old Simran in her arms, and her uncle, just as tall, the gray in his hair jet-black, his jaw sharp with youth, looking down at both of them.

“I remember the last time we were here for Appa ...” Geeta says, perfect features crumpling.

“Don’t think about that now, Gits,” Kavitha says.

A hollowness funnels through Simran, of guilt and memory. She hadn’t been there the last time. Earlier, she’d had that bitter thought that no one had withstood what she had, but she’d rather stay alone in her sorrow for the rest of her life than have anyone she loved go through this. Muttering an excuse, she dashes away from the group, practically running through the waiting area to escape outside, where she hopes it might be easier to breathe.

It isn’t.

She rarely allows herself to think of the day her parents died and the ones that followed but now she can’t stop the memories from punching a hole through her. Something she’s said to herself over the years, enough to turn it into a comforting thought, is that her parents died on the spot in the car crash. There was none of this terrible purgatory of waiting in the hospital, on a tightrope between life and death, between hope and despair. She supposes she’s thankful for that, at least.

But one moment, she was a normal kid thinking about what she was going to wear to Ria Rathore’s birthday party the following week. The next

moment, nothing would ever be okay again. She can still hear it ringing in her ears, the “oooh”s of her classmates when the principal came to pull her out of class, as if she’d gotten in trouble. She had laughed with them but his face was so grim, she knew immediately something was desperately wrong. The next twenty-four hours are a blur—she only remembers sitting in the neighbor’s house, not speaking until a day and a half later, when Veena perima and Ashok peripa finally arrived off the eighteen-hour flight from New Jersey. Her aunt’s face was blank but it looked scrubbed raw and shook with tremors, as if she might have been crying for a very long time, as if she had barely been able to make herself stop.

The following day, her parents were cremated. Simran has still never seen anything as vivid as the fire of the funeral pyre; she remembers thinking it was deeply unfair that something so alive signified that her parents were not. She didn’t cry very much during that time but everyone around her would break down while hugging her or patting her cheek. She was startled to realize their tears were as much for her as her mother and father. Because her parents were dead and that was terrible, but she was still here without them and that was tragic.

She’d sleep on and off and every time she’d wake up, it would be like washing onto shore after a shipwreck. For a split second, she would forget what had happened and then it would come like a wave, crashing over her, and she’d drown all over again. Sometimes, when she wakes from dreaming of her home in Chennai, it still happens.

After the thirteen-day mourning period, the logistics began to take over. Simran could no longer stay in India with no grandparents or immediate family there. She’d have to move to New Jersey to live with her aunt and uncle. Systematically, they moved from room to room in the only house she’d ever lived in, going through every possession of her parents. They threw out her mom’s collection of *Stardust* magazines, packed away the clock in the living room, the one with the elephants that they’d gotten on a trip to Kenya. The four-poster bed was given to the cook’s newly wedded niece. Photo frames came off the walls. By the end, what was left of her life was in three suitcases bound for New Jersey. The rest was put into boxes that were stacked taller than her and left in the house. She understands, in retrospect, why this had to happen. But for that fifteen-year-old child, leaving her home was like another death. Slowly but surely, the physical proof that her parents had once been here, even though it was just for a

short time, dwindled down to the two portraits in the study of Iyer House and a record player.

Death is cruel and unrelenting but this slow forgetting, the slipping away of the exact details of their living, hurts infinitely more. She remembers that her mother's hands were always so soft, and her father's laugh shook like a rattle—but she can't remember how they felt, how it sounded. Every day is one day further away from the world they existed in and it has pulped her heart.

Those months at the end colored her whole childhood and so she's lost that too. The happy times are no longer untainted, instead recalled with a ticking clock. Her birthday party when she was ten—five years left with her parents. Her fifteenth, which she spent with friends instead of them—the last one her parents would be alive for. The favorite pair of jeans her mother had bought her, the pair she was wearing on the day they died, the pair she never wore again.

She paces, willing the memories away. In their place, she's sick with new, terrible pictures of what might happen to her uncle and what that would do to her cousins and her aunt. She, of all people, knows what a worst-case scenario looks like. She knows if it were to happen, the pain might never lessen and this family would be incomplete forever. Ashok peripa, gone before he can meet his grandchild. Never to hear Kavitha tell him who she really is and give her his blessing. The rocking chair in the living room, still and empty without him. The gaping space next to Veena perima at dinner, on every occasion, with every piece of good news from now on.

“Simran?”

She squints at the figure in shadow, the sun behind him. “Kamal, hi. What are you doing here?”

He holds up a small black object. “Veena mami left her phone at the house; I thought she might need it.”

Simran takes it from him. “Thanks.”

He steps towards her, blocking out the sun so her face can relax. “I'm not going to ask if you're okay because I know the answer. But I'm not going to leave you alone right now either.”

She is grateful for the presence of anything besides her own thoughts. “Let's sit?”

They find a bench along the side of the building that overlooks a single tree in a lone patch of grass. The cars whizzing by on the highway almost

sound like waves.

“So calming,” Simran comments.

They’re silent for a few moments and then Kamal says, “Listen, I’m sorry again about yesterday—walking in the wedding. I shouldn’t have done that.”

It feels like eons ago. Simran waves it away. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I apologized to Leo too,” Kamal adds.

Simran schools herself into nonchalance, even as her chest coils inwards. She should call Leo, tell him what’s happened. But that would require her to say the words out loud. “That’s nice of you.”

“Simi, please,” Kamal says, chuckling. “I know you two are together.”

She sits up straight in surprise. “Did he tell—”

“I watched you watch all those Shah Rukh Khan movies back in the day, remember? I know the face you make when you’re looking at someone you’re crazy about.”

She gives him a weak smile, cheeks burning at how transparent she is.

“Hey, you know what I just thought of?” Kamal says. “That time—I think we were ten?—when you convinced me that if I rode your bike fast enough at the wall between our houses, I would be able to ride up and over it.”

The memory comes to her almost immediately, and then she recalls the aftermath. “Oh god. I remember that. Your arm was the weirdest shape I’d ever seen.”

“Broken in three places. I remember your mom in the hospital,” Kamal says, wincing. “She was raising hell because they weren’t seeing me quickly enough.”

Simran laughs, the forgotten detail coming back to her. “She straight up harassed the hospital staff. I was half in awe, half scared of her.” She goes quiet.

“I was trying to distract you but we landed up at the topic of hospitals anyway,” he says, sighing. “Story of my life.”

“I’m sorry—about your dad getting sick,” she says.

“Thanks. It was a really tough few years in and out of remission but he’s okay. It brought up a lot of stuff, but we’re all doing better now,” Kamal says.

Envy shoots through her—what does it feel like to be better? “Let me guess. Therapy?” she asks.

“Yes but not just therapy. Therapy is important, especially because Indian people don’t talk about their emotions. But it’s also isolating—it focuses on what’s happening to *you*.” He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “There’s so many other things. Time. Distance. Community.”

Simran frowns. “Community?”

Kamal looks out into the distance. “When I was back in Chennai, before my dad was in remission, there were so many people around—relatives, friends, neighbors—who bore the worry along with me and my family. We got to see how many people cared for him. That helped both him and me as much as anything else.”

Simran aches with wanting, with this possibility that never existed for her.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to add my stuff to yours,” Kamal says. “I remember when Ashok mama was in the hospital the last time around.” Simran squirms in her seat. She’s not sure she wants to hear this. “I was still in Chennai then. My folks were rushing to get the money together to buy your house quickly so they could send it over to Veena mami to cover the costs of the surgery. I felt so awful for her; it’s bad enough that your husband is going in for a bypass. But to also have to deal with the banks and foreign exchange and the house deed all on her own? Your poor aunt.”

The low buzz that has droned constantly in her head since they left Iyer House for the hospital clears. Kamal fades into the background. Her Chennai house, which had lain empty for years at that point, practically a mausoleum, hadn’t been sold out of some disregard for her parents’ memory or traded away to the neighbors as a deposit for a future matchmaking scheme. It had been sold to pay for her uncle’s surgery. Which had happened when Simran wasn’t answering any of her aunt’s many, many calls, probably to ask for her permission.

And then another snippet of memory unrolls, this one from less than two weeks ago when she had first come back to Iyer House. On the balcony that night, Simran avoided her aunt at all costs because she didn’t want to talk about her marriage. And when Simran had brought up getting the key to her house, her aunt had looked uncomfortable and then asked to talk to her. Maybe Veena perima wanted to explain why she couldn’t give Simran the key, why she sold the house. And again, Simran hadn’t given her the chance.

Kavitha was all too right. Simran did avoid things; she avoided anything and anyone that would upend her world yet again. Moving on from her resentment of her aunt almost felt like moving on from her parents' death—and then what would she have? It was easier to hold on to her anger than allow it to change. She is doing it right now, sitting outside with Kamal instead of being inside with her family. Standing, she quickly thanks him for the phone and rushes back into the building.

Simran finds them again, still in that hallway, and goes to sit between Geeta and Kavitha in the chair vacated by her aunt, who is pacing up and down the hall.

Kavitha is rocking back and forth, back and forth. "I don't know what I'll do. If Appa ..."

"Don't say it. Please don't say it, Akka," Geeta tells her. Simran has never heard Geeta speak in this scared, pleading voice.

Kavitha's voice, on the other hand, is hollow. "I don't know how I'll survive it."

The pragmatist in Simran, the one that emerged sixteen years ago, could give Kavitha the answer. She'll survive but the meaning of the word will have changed. She'll live, but that life will be lesser. Simran wraps an arm around Geeta, pulling her in, and she grabs Kavi's face, her cheeks misshapen under Simran's firm grip. She looks right at Kavitha. "You won't have to find out. Not today. Okay?"

"Okay," Kavitha says meekly.

Simran lets go of her face and takes her hand before turning to Geeta. "Okay?"

"Okay, Akka," Geeta says, sounding once again like that kid who let her oldest sister boss her around. The three sit like that, linked like a chain, Simran absorbing everything her cousins need to put on her in this moment.

Time stutters and stretches. More than an hour passes since they came in. Everyone feels the need to do something other than wait and the air has turned frantic, borderline hysterical. Rishi is cracking his knuckles disturbingly loudly. Kavitha keeps braiding and unbraiding her hair. Ravi uncle's mobile phone, which several people have asked him to silence to no success, keeps going off. Each time, his ringtone—the inexplicable choice of "Smooth" by Rob Thomas and Santana—sounds out, he answers with the same set of responses: "We're still waiting to hear. Haan, I'll call you when we know anything."

The color has returned to Veena perima's complexion and her jaw is locked as she takes in every inch of their surroundings. Simran knows that face. Despite the differences in their features, she's seen it before, on her mother. Her aunt is done waiting; now's the time for action.

"What do they think, they can just make us sit here forever?" With that, Veena perima begins to ask each and every hospital worker who has the misfortune of walking in their vicinity what is happening with Ashok peripa in increasingly dramatic verbiage. Geeta, head still on Simran's shoulder, just waves it away.

"Gimme your heart, make it real, or else forget about it" sounds from the other end of the hallway.

"Dad, for the love of God!" Rishi bursts.

"Arrey, what do you want me to do! The people want to know what's happening with Ashok bhaisaab!" Ravi uncle protests.

"Just put your phone on silent!" Rishi says.

"Then how will he know when someone is calling him?" Manjula aunty chimes in.

"In my day, we had to sit by the phone, just waiting for someone to call us. And if it was long-distance? They'd have to send a letter to tell us when they were phoning. You kids don't know how good you have it."

"I apologize for being born in an era of immense technological progress," Kavitha says sarcastically.

"It's okay," Ravi uncle replies.

"Excuse me, doctor!" This time, it's Manjula aunty who has tracked someone down.

The orderly smiles kindly. "I'm a nurse."

"But you're a man," she says.

"Mom!" Rishi hisses.

"Never mind," Veena perima says, stepping in between the nurse and Manjula aunty. There's not a trace of her softness from earlier. Her tone is snapping. "Can you tell me what's happening with my husband? We came in two hours ago."

"I'm so sorry—"

"No one will tell me if I'm about to be a widow!"

"Oh my god, Amma," Kavitha mutters.

"Excuse me!" A person in a lab coat with fair skin and red hair walks up to the group from behind.

Veena perima pivots on a heel to stare up at him. “Who are you?”

“I’m Dr. Liebowitz. I’m your husband’s doctor.”

Veena perima blinks, momentum stopped cold. “Yes, of course, Doctor. What’s happening to my husband?”

“He’s going to be okay,” the doctor tells them. The relief feels like the first rain after a drought, cooling and calming everyone’s heated worry. Ravi uncle says a quick prayer of thanks out loud and the group murmurs in agreement. Simran and Kavi hug as Rishi wraps his arms around Geeta. “Let’s step into the room and I can explain.” The seven of them move forward in unison. The doctor glances at the group. “All of you?”

“Yes, why not?” Veena perima asks sharply. She steps up close to him, in a clear intimidation move, even though the man is much taller than her. It seems to be a superpower of sorts because it works on him just as well as it worked on Leo.

The doctor purses his lips and looks over them. “I guess it’s better than you all being in the hallway and disturbing everyone else.” He holds the door open and the group files in, nudging and bumping shoulders as they all jostle for space in the tiny room.

“You said he’ll be all right, Doctor, but what happened? Is it serious?” Veena perima asks, hand clutched to her chest, and the worry builds in Simran once more. “Is it his bypass from five years ago? Has something gone wrong?”

Dr. Liebowitz shakes his head. “No, no. It’s nothing like that. It’s just a case of trapped gas.”

For perhaps the first time in the history of the Iyer-Chopra family, there is total silence.

“Gas?” Geeta repeats, and Simran giggles, the emotions bubbling into hysteria before her aunt silences her with a glare.

“As in ... farts?” Kavitha asks.

“Kavitha!” Veena perima admonishes.

The doctor chuckles and it adds another layer of relief that no one seems to know what to do with. “Not quite that simple physiologically but not that much more complicated medically. He must have eaten something that gave him a nasty case of acid reflux,” he explains. “A side effect of his bypass procedure is that air can get trapped in the esophagus, which makes it hard to breathe. That can lead to temporary but ultimately harmless heart palpitations, caused by severe indigestion. He won’t even need to be kept

overnight. He can go home with you all and continue life as normal but he needs to stay away from oily foods going forward, and he needs to exercise more, build up his stamina.”

The group remains quiet, absorbing everything that’s happened.

And then, so slowly it sends shivers down Simran’s spine, Veena perima pivots from the doctor to face the bed. Ashok peripa is sitting up, not making eye contact with any of them, picking at a thread on the bedspread. Despite his height and gray hair, he gives the impression of a young child in trouble. Veena perima’s hands go to her hips as she asks, in a low, deadly voice: “Ashok, did you eat the onion pakodas?”

Her uncle says nothing, simply looking to the side.

“Ashok, tumne pakodey khaye?” she asks again in clipped tones.

“Ashok!”

Finally, he nods, still not meeting her eyes. “Haan. I ate the pakodas.”

“I told you they give you acidity! Why can’t you ever listen to your wife?”

“Arrey, it was my daughter’s wedding, I just wanted to enjoy myself—” he replies. Simran blinks, unused to a version of her uncle who isn’t monosyllabic.

“What do you mean you wanted to enjoy yourself?” Veena perima is still going. “Your daughter getting married is not enjoyment enough?”

“What yaar, Bhaisaab,” Rishi’s dad chimes in. “You’ve made us all worry so much. You know my phone has been ringing off the hook—”

“It’s just pakodas, Veena,” Ashok peripa replies. Geeta covers her face with both hands, shaking her head.

“Clearly not! Look what happens when you don’t listen to me,” Veena perima shoots back. “And I told you to exercise, nah?”

“I have been! Ask Leo! Ask Rishi!” Ashok peripa retorts.

“Excuse me, please lower your voices!” says Dr. Liebowitz, whose own voice has to be raised a few decibels to get his message across. “This is still a hospital!”

“Of course, Doctor. And we’re so thankful to you and your staff for making sure our Ashok is okay,” Veena perima says, contrite. Ten seconds of gracious quiet pass. “It’s just that I told him not to eat the pakodas! They give him the motors every time.”

“Dr. Liebowitz, I’m Dr. Iyer,” Geeta says, crossing the room and shaking his hand. “Could we talk outside? I’d like to get more details.”

The doctor seems relieved to have her levelheaded presence emerge from the chaos and they step away. When Geeta comes back in, she confirms to Kavitha and Simran that he really is going to be okay. The three of them stand in a row as Manjula aunty snuffles and Ravi uncle loudly talks on the phone behind them, informing everyone of the good news, like a one-man phone tree who keeps repeating that “turns out, it was only gas!” Rishi yanks him out of the room by the arm to finish his information blitz in the waiting area. Veena perima’s chattering admonishments continue like a soundtrack in the background; Simran is grateful for them. It means that things are back to normal.

Kavitha is chuckling at her parents’ back-and-forth as Simran turns to Geeta. “You okay?” she asks.

Her younger cousin looks slightly startled, like she isn’t used to the question. “Yeah,” she says. And then she bursts into tears. Simran envelops her into a hug, reaching for Kavitha behind her. They stay like that for a long time, one sister crying, the other laughing. Simran forces the relief to sink into her as well, letting all the emotional doomsday prepping she has been doing disintegrate into nothing. This time, those scenarios she envisioned didn’t come true. This time, her family is going to be okay. This time, she is here.

31.

The trip back to Toronto blazes by in a haze. After the sprawl and noise of the wedding, Leo's apartment feels so still. There's only the gentle pinging from the streetcar that runs by his house, nothing to drown out the whirr of his thoughts. He pulls down all the shades and sinks into his plush couch, something lumpy pressing into his back. He reaches behind him and pulls out Simran's sweater, the one she was wearing the last time she came over, a few days before their first kiss. Even as one part of him tells him not to do it, he presses it to his nose and inhales deeply. It smells just like her hair, floral with the hint of the ocean.

"Argh!" He stands up and flings it into his closet. Changing, he meets up with some friends at the basketball court close by, channeling his frustration and sadness into winning a game of pickup by twenty points. But after it, he's back to his too-quiet apartment and his too-loud thoughts.

He flips on the TV. An old favorite is playing and he hopes it'll distract him. But there's a rattling inside him, like a loose cog. He and Simran went from that perfect night at the hotel just a few days ago to barely talking. Is that all they are ever going to get? Maybe his leaving has broken them—but Simran's obstinance left him no choice. What else could he have done? Trying to change her mind was like talking to a wall.

The jangle of keys snaps him out of his thoughts and Leo looks up. *Titanic* has been on for half an hour but he's barely watched a minute of it. He twists on the couch to see his sister walk into his apartment, a small carton in one hand.

"Leo." She greets him before looking past him at the TV and nodding at the man on-screen. "Leo."

He mutes the television and gets up, pouring them two cups of coffee, along with some type of creamer that's basically a candy bar in liquid form for Olivia, and joins her on the couch. "So how was Europe?"

"No way. No fun sightseeing stories for you." She crosses her arms and stares at him sternly. "Not until you tell me what's going on."

"It's nothing," he says, shaking his head and unmuting the TV.

Liv grabs the remote from his hand and mutes it again. “Your expression would depress Eeyore, you’ve not mentioned Simran once when all you’ve done is bring her up every second sentence for the last two years, and you’re watching your in-your-feelings-over-a-girl movie.”

“Fine. It’s something but I’m not ready to talk about it,” he says. He makes a split-second decision and tosses Liv his phone. “Just don’t let me call or text her, okay?”

She immediately puts it in her back pocket. “You know I relish having this type of control over another person,” she declares as she shoves half of a purple-frosted donut into her mouth. “Go forth and wallow.”

“I’m not wallowing. I’m just—” He breaks off as he looks around his apartment, shades pulled to blot out the beautiful summer sunshine, the ultimate tearjerker on TV. He thinks about Simran’s sweater and drags a hand down his face. “Fine. I’m wallowing.”

“You have till six p.m.,” Liv tells him. “We have Sunday dinner with Mom tonight.”

Leo groans and drops his head back onto the sofa. The last thing he needs is his mother recreationally therapizing his possible breakup with the girl of his dreams.

“It might not be that bad. She’ll probably just want to talk about her and Félix’s trip,” Liv says.

Leo softens. “You think?”

“Possibly. She deserves to, after all she’s been through. First my dad, then yours. I hope to get lucky enough to have my third marriage be to a kind, caring man who spends half the year at his ancestral home in the Dominican Republic.”

Leo frowns at the ceiling. “I hope to get lucky enough not to have a third marriage.”

“Such a romantic,” Liv declares in the same tone someone might call a person an utter moron. True to her word, his sister doesn’t bother him for the rest of the afternoon, letting the movie play before putting on another one of their mutual favorites, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Morgan Freeman has just intoned his closing lines about hope when Liv stands. “All right, let’s go. We’re meeting her at The Swan.”

Leo’s spent the last six hours in the same position: sunk deep and low into the oversized armchair, a cushion to his chest. He pulls it over his face. “Please don’t make me go.”

“You know the deal,” Olivia says. She slaps the side of his leg. “We don’t miss Sunday dinner unless we’re out of town. I know you don’t want to go. That’s the reason for the rule: to keep it when it’s hard, not when it’s easy.”

Sighing, he stands. He gets his sister’s point. And in the end, dinner is fine, as it always is. Even though his mother can be a bit much—you can take Dr. Linda out of her practice, but you can’t take the practice out of Dr. Linda—she doesn’t ask about Simran. Leo thinks she is going to at one point, but then Liv kicks her under the table and she changes the subject. Halfway through the meal, he hears a buzzing and Liv hands over his phone. For a second he hopes it’s Simran, but it’s Amerie giving him the good news that he got the promotion. At least one thing is going right in his life. A small part of him itches to call and tell Simran the news, but he pushes the thought away, handing his phone back to his sister.

“You asked Mom not to bring up Simran, didn’t you?” he says to Olivia as they walk back to their respective apartments after dinner.

“You showed up. You kept your end of the bargain; I thought that earned you a reprieve.” They cut through Trinity Bellwoods Park, still packed with people as the sun starts to set. Leo spies a couple, both reading, curled into each other under the shade of a tree. The casual intimacy presses on his heart.

“She made a promise to me,” Leo says, the words sharp. “Simran. And she broke it. Twice. Each time I ask her to be in this with me, and she says she is ... but then she won’t hold up her end.” He runs a hand through his hair. “It sucks. I don’t think I ask for much. It made me mad and it really hurt me. I’d do anything for her; I deserve to be able to count on her.”

“You do,” Liv agrees as they turn the corner onto her street.

Now the emotions are flowing fast. “And underneath it all, I’m still so fucking crazy about her. So much of me just wants to let this go, let her get away with it, like the first time. Maybe there’s too much of Mom’s voice in my head and I’m trying to fix something that’s none of my business.”

“You’re talking to the wrong person about having Mom’s voice in your head,” his sister says. “I became a guidance counsellor.”

Leo laughs.

“Look, you don’t give up on people,” Liv tells him, as they stop at the gate outside her apartment. “You are the only person in the world who I know who would put up with your dad—but you do, and you don’t mind it. I don’t think you know *how* to give up on people. It’s the best thing about

you, even if it's annoying. When I was ten, I had an entire plan formulated to throw you in the trash bin of a McDonald's."

"Which one?"

"The one on the corner of Queen and Spadina," Liv says.

"That is *the* sketchiest McDonald's in Toronto!" Leo says, offended.

"There was a raccoon family living in the dumpster! You wouldn't have been alone. I'm not cruel. Anyway, it didn't matter. You were just so damn nice I couldn't do it."

Leo crosses his arms. "Does this story have a point?"

"Yes." She hands him the bag of leftovers. "She feels the same way as you do; you should have seen her face when she told me about you guys. She looked so shiny and hopeful, like a Disney Channel tween. Maybe she just can't see past whatever is going on with her family."

"What if ..." He swallows to give himself a moment to voice his deepest fear. "What if she keeps breaking her promises? What do I do then?"

Liv gives him an obvious look. "Don't let her."

"Is this the kind of sage advice you give your students?" Leo asks.

"Can it, smart-ass. If you want something good, then you have to learn to fight for it just as much as she has to learn how to keep it. Don't let her off the hook, but don't give up on her either. It's like our dinner rule. What matters is what holds you two together when things are difficult, not when they're easy." Leo lets his sister's words sink in.

"All right, I'm beat. Here's your phone." She tosses it to him so quickly that he doesn't have time to catch it and it falls to the street with a sickening crunch.

"Olivia, come on!" he says roughly as he picks it up. The screen is completely shattered.

"Oops ..." she says, cringing. "Sorry! I'll get you a new one tomorrow."

"Maybe I would have been better off with the racoon family," he mutters. When he gets home, there's a text he can just barely read through the cracked glass.

Rishi Chopra [8:36 p.m.]: Ashok uncle went to the Hospital today. He's fine, it was a false alarm but the Family was a little shaken up for a bit. I don't know if Simi told you so I wanted to make sure you heard. Let's catch up when I'm back from my Honeymoon?

A tumult of feelings flashes through Leo: concern and relief over Ashok uncle, hurt that Simran didn't call him, and an unexpected warmth at Rishi

thinking to tell him. That night he falls into a deep and dreamless sleep. Well before his alarm is set to go off, he startles awake with a crack of clarity: All that matters is what holds them together. Simran pushed him away and even though she shouldn't have done that, Leo shouldn't have *let* her. He shouldn't have left.

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After two straight weeks of Iyer House being packed to the gills, returning to an empty, silent home is disorienting. The family gets back from the hospital in the early evening, the lights strung across the house a jarring sight. Inside, it looks just as it should after the whirlwind of the last few days: Things are strewn everywhere, another of the plastic covers has come off the couch, much to Veena perima's annoyance, and even the house seems tired, creaking and groaning, as if it needs a recovery period as much as the family who lives inside it.

Simran walks upstairs, carefully balancing the unwieldy object in her hands. She steps into the room, watching as Veena perima fusses over her husband, insisting his water bottle should be right within reach.

"Peripa, I thought you might enjoy some music," Simran says, setting the record player down on a side table. She holds up the album choices she brought with her, and her uncle points to the one he wants. Putting the table close to him so he can easily change the records, she drops the needle and "Mere Sapno Ki Rani" starts playing. Motioning her to come close, her uncle pinches her cheek gently between the knuckles of his index and middle fingers. There's a lump in her throat and she hears a quiet but distinct sniff as her aunt fluffs her uncle's pillow one last time and they go downstairs.

Like a mildly deranged Energizer bunny, Veena perima busies herself with tasks, cleaning up the mess of boxes and paper, making chai, going upstairs every fifteen minutes to check on her husband. When Rishi offers to help, he is shut down with an illogical, "No, you rest. You're going to have a baby."

Geeta pulls Rishi by the arm down next to her on the sofa. "Don't bother. Errands are therapeutic to Amma; she needs to keep busy. It calms her down."

"At least she seems okay with the baby now," Simran says, sitting on the armchair across from Geeta.

Geeta waves her hand. “This is how it always goes. When I was younger, I used to freak out every time we fought, like the world was ending. But then, slowly I realized—she’ll come around. Maybe she won’t agree with me, but eventually, we come to some sort of peace and either forget about it or move on.”

“You’ve had fights like this before?” Simran asks. Veena perima always seemed so pleased with Geeta and her every achievement.

“So many,” Geeta says, her jhumka earrings jangling. “When I wanted to be an ob-gyn instead of doing cardiology, when I went to MIT in Boston instead of Princeton a train ride away—oh my god, the fight we had when Rishi and I moved in together!” She shudders. “In the beginning, she didn’t even like that I was with Rishi. She wanted me to be with a Tamil guy.”

“Well, you know Veena perima’s criteria.” Simran counts off on her fingers. “From our community, lives close by, and has a good job. Two out of three ain’t bad, Rish.”

Silence hangs in the air as Rishi and Geeta exchange a glance. “Not quite,” Rishi says. “I’m quitting my job when I get back from the honeymoon.”

“To quote Keanu: Whoa,” Simran says.

“It was killing my soul. Geeta actually loves what she does and someone’s going to need to take care of the baby, so ...”

“You’re going to be a stay-at-home dad?” Simran asks. The wideness of both their grins tells her it’s absolutely the right decision.

“We’re waiting till we’re back from our honeymoon before we tell the parental units,” Geeta says. “They weren’t even supposed to know about the baby yet; they can only handle so much at a time.”

“It’s not their fault, not really,” Rishi says. “I mean, we could have told everyone about the baby when we first found out, instead of hiding it.”

“Come on,” Simran says. “You think they would have reacted better to you *bad children*?”

“I do,” Rishi says fervently. “We could have given them time to process it, rather than add it to everything they were dealing with in the middle of their kids’ wedding! They probably still would have freaked out but that’s okay. As Geeta said, they would have come around. They always do. We didn’t give them that option. The more you withhold from people, the less of a chance you give them to connect to you.”

A series of clangs emanates from the kitchen and, though she's not heard it in a while, the sound is familiar to Simran: Kavitha is loading the dishwasher. In the hands of her cousin, this has always been a strangely violent task and it's comforting to find that hasn't changed. Simran gets up and goes towards the noise, standing at the sink and turning on the water.

"You don't have to rinse beforehand." The worry of Ashok peripa's hospital visit has receded and Kavitha has reverted to petulance. "The dishwasher is designed to take care of it. You're just wasting water."

Simran turns off the tap. She hands cups and spoons and plates to Kavi, who loads them without speaking. Kavitha's attitude is annoying but also how Simran knows she still cares.

"I'm sorry," Simran says, turning to face her cousin, resting a hip against the counter.

"For what?" Kavitha asks, abandoning her task and straightening.

There's several answers to this question, Simran realizes. "For saying you should come out before you're ready. That's always your decision. And I'm sorry for ..." She swallows. "For being so ready to leave again."

Kavitha sags back against the counter. "Why do you and my mother operate like bumper cars around each other?"

Simran bites her bottom lip. The thousands of grievances she's built up over the years—the way her aunt bulldozes her way into Simran's life, her machinations because she thinks she knows best, her firm belief that her children aren't owed space or privacy—swirl around but ultimately seem insignificant after this afternoon. All except one. "I told you. She never talks about my parents. It's like they were erased."

"So tell her," Kavitha says, voice gentle. "Don't leave. Work it out. Fight it out, even."

"Kavi, come on," Simran says. "Your mother is like a hurricane."

Kavitha raises one eyebrow. "You're no wilting flower, Sim. Convinced you're right and others just don't get it. Thinking you're protecting people but just making decisions for them."

"I hear you," she mutters.

"I don't think you do. You and my mother? Cut from the same stubborn, protective, loving cloth," Kavitha says. "The main difference is that you express it in one language and she uses four. But she's trying to change, even though she doesn't really know how. Give her a chance to." Simran's not even sure where to start. But she will try, even if she also doesn't really

know how. Those few hours in the hospital, standing once again on the precipice of uncontrollable loss—she halts her thoughts before they spin out. She knows better than most that life will take what it's going to, when it's going to. Nothing can stop that. But she doesn't have to give things up before it is their time to go.

"As for the other thing ..." Kavitha says. "You're damn right. A person only has to come out when they're ready. But you were also right about me."

Simran blinks. "I was?"

"I've been waiting," Kavitha says. "To find someone so I could, I don't know, give myself permission. To be proof that I am who I think I am. My mother's obsession with marriage has turned being single into this terrible, scary thing. It's not. Our parents just don't know what to do with a woman who is over thirty and unattached. But Paula Cole and our beloved *Dawson's Creek* gang were correct: I don't wanna wait for my life to be over! I want to live it. Starting now."

Right then, Veena perima comes into the kitchen, oblivious to the epiphany unfurling in her older daughter. "You girls finished loading the dishes? Good. Rest now, you must be tired."

Simran can hear the shakiness in Kavitha's inhale, the tremor in her voice as she speaks. "Amma, I need to tell you something."

Veena perima is sorting through the mail that has collected on the kitchen island and doesn't look up as she asks, "What is it?"

Simran reaches across the countertop and threads her fingers through Kavitha's. She is with her cousin for this, for anything, for always.

"Amma, I'm gay."

Veena perima goes still and Kavitha squeezes Simran's hand so tightly her fingers start to go numb. The cicadas' noisy song fills the kitchen as Veena perima looks up. Simran wants to shush them, ask them to respect the importance of this moment.

"You're gay?" Veena perima repeats. "As in ..." She doesn't continue.

"As in ... if I get married, it will be to a woman," Kavitha says.

Veena perima is all circles—eyes round and wide, mouth open in a slight O of surprise. Only her eyebrows, furrowed and crowding low on her face, give relief to the curves of her expression. Then, one by one, her features straighten. Her brow goes taut and her mouth forms a tight line. Simran braces herself.

“Eh! What are you saying?” Veena perima asks. Kavitha and Simran exchange a tense glance. “*If* you get married? Are you going to be a spinster?”

“That was just a turn of phrase,” Kavitha says, stumbling over her words. “But I am gay, Amma. You’d have a daughter-in-law, not a son-in-law. A marumagal, not a mappillai,” she adds in Tamil, as if to make sure her mother understands.

“Tsch, I understand what becoming gay means, Kavitha.”

Kavitha holds a hand up. “No, Amma, it’s not ‘becoming gay.’ You are gay.”

Veena perima cocks her head. “Okay, but if you don’t become gay, how can you be gay?”

“You just ... are.”

Veena perima frowns, but it’s different than her disapproving one—a little more pensive, her mouth soft instead of stern. “All right. So you are gay or you are not gay.”

“That’s not right either. There’s a whole spectrum—”

“Maybe save the Kinsey Scale explanation for another day,” Simran whispers.

“Actually, people use the Klein Grid ...” Kavitha stops herself at the look on Simran’s face. “Got it. Not the time.”

Veena perima looks right at Kavitha. “Are you still going to be a lawyer?”

“Yes, of course, why would that change?”

“And you still want to get married?”

“Yes, but—”

“And have children?”

“Yes.” Kavitha blinks several times and begins to loosen her hold on Simran’s hand incrementally. “I still want all of that.” She glances at Simran, who can only stare back at her. “Amma, you’re okay with this?”

Veena perima takes a small pile of the mail and dumps it in the recycling bin before moving to the stove to pour herself another cup of chai. “Aiyo, I wish you girls would give me some time between these things. Yesterday I find out Geeta is pregnant. Now you are telling me you are gay. What’s next? Simi, you have something for me?”

Simran freezes. Before she can jump in with her own confession, Veena perima barrels on. “What am I going to do? Am I going to stop loving you?”

Stop talking to you? Nonsense. Your father is safe and sound now, your sister got married yesterday, and soon there'll be a grandchild, a kuti paapa. These are blessed times for us. Tschh. Life is life, you do what you can, you keep your family well, and you accept the rest."

"You heard it here first, folks: Life is life," Kavitha jokes, but her grin is true in a way that Simran doesn't think she's ever seen before.

"Tomorrow, we'll start the marriage search," Veena perima says, almost talking to herself as she drains her tea. "I'm sure there are very nice girls who are Tamil, have a good job, live nearby, and are gay. Anyway, I'm going to sleep now, it's been a long week."

She walks out of the kitchen. As she passes Kavitha, Veena perima cups her cheek and pulls her face down to kiss her forehead before continuing on her way. Once she's gone, Kavitha pivots on her heel to face Simran, mouth open in joyous surprise. "Did that just happen? Did I just come out to my mother and she was fine with it? Am I in an alternate universe?"

Simran has no answer. This is no alternate universe; they are in a brand-new world.

"Do we have any champagne left from the wedding? I feel like this warrants a toast. I want to clink something," Kavitha says, rooting around the refrigerator. She emerges with two glass bottles of Thums Up, an Indian Coca-Cola knockoff that tastes better than the real thing. She grabs the bottle opener and the metal caps come off with a tinkle and a hiss.

"To ..." Kavitha's smile is as fizzy as their drinks. "To me."

"To you," Simran agrees. The heavy glass bottles make a clunking sound as they cheers. "How should we celebrate?"

"I'm too tired to do anything that requires standing upright." But she doesn't look tired. It's as if Kavitha had been on a screen dimmed to fifty percent. Now she is at full brightness and what a difference it makes. "Let's do what we always do, Pinky."

"Try to take over the world?" Simran asks.

"Nah. Watch *DDLJ*."

They settle in the living room and Rishi and Geeta join them. Simran hasn't watched a movie with her youngest cousin in decades and she quickly realizes she may never do it again. Geeta talks through the whole thing with Rishi. They are continuously shushed by Kavitha and both blithely ignore her. A little more than halfway through, after a comment by Rishi, Geeta gasps and threatens to annul their marriage.

“I’m just saying,” Rishi tells her.

“Stop saying! Stop speaking at all!” Geeta shrieks.

Rishi wilts under the three burning glares aimed at him. “It’s not that *DDLJ* isn’t great! I’ve watched it twice in two weeks!” he says. And then adds, “But as far as rom-com-fam-drams go, I think I like *Rocky aur Rani ki Prem Kahani* or even *Dil Dhadakne Do* more.”

Kavitha runs to the TV and spreads her arms wide to put a hand on either side of the flat screen where the movie is still playing. “Shhhh! It’ll hear you!”

“Isn’t it a little problematic and patriarchal?” Rishi insists. “It was made in the nineties!” Simran replies.

“It has flaws, but you love it anyway,” Kavitha says slowly, like she’s explaining this to a very small child.

Rishi shrugs. “Meh.”

“Meh?” Geeta repeats, incredulous. She looks around the room and says, “My baby has no father.”

“Man, I need Leo here. He’d have my back,” Rishi grumbles.

A hush comes over the group as they all look at Simran. She feels it deeply—how incomplete this is without him. How incomplete everything will always be without him. She knows she needs to talk to him.

But there’s a promise she has to keep first.

So instead, she turns back to the movie, and it occurs to her that the one thing Shah Rukh’s and Kajol’s characters never do—no matter how overbearing her father is in the movie, no matter how many obstacles get thrown in their way, no matter how much others tell them to—is leave.

The next morning, Simran wakes and goes downstairs to an empty house. Geeta and Rishi left for their honeymoon a few hours earlier and with Ashok peripa still resting, the only person up is Veena perima, whom she finds in the kitchen, in an old ankle-length cotton nightgown under a light brown cardigan with tortoiseshell buttons. Her hair is loose and spills around her shoulders, wavy from years of wearing it in a thick braid. Simran is caught off guard by how much gray there is. A lot more than seven years' worth.

Veena perima looks up from where she's making a cake. "Coffee vennum?"

Simran waves her hand to indicate her aunt should keep working on the cake. She's always loved the coffee in Iyer House. They make it the authentic Chennai way, letting it sit in a stainless-steel drip, a laborious enough process that most people, even her parents when they lived in Chennai, opt for easy brewing. She walks back to the kitchen island and stands on the other side of it. Her aunt doesn't look up as Simran noisily slurps the coffee because that too is part of the ritual of drinking it.

Simran should tell her aunt about losing her job but that's for another time; there's another conversation she wants to have today. She picks up a knife and helps hull and slice the strawberries that Veena perima will place on top of the cake when she's done frosting it. Even after the hectic barrage of wedding events, she has found time to make Kavitha's favorite cake, which makes Simran smile.

"It's been nice having you in the house again," Veena perima says. "It almost felt like the old times, you living with us, Geeta back as well. All my girls together again."

All my girls. Despite adopting her years ago, it has never sunk in that Veena perima thinks of Simran as hers. She'd always assumed she was an imposition, brought to this house by tragedy, and that Veena perima saw her as something to tame, to control. Simran swallows and stands straighter,

knowing that she has a promise to keep. But more than that, she wants this from her aunt. She puts the knife down.

“I’m in love with Leo,” she tells her aunt. She always thought confessing to Veena perima would be nearly impossible, but the words come out easily. “We—I lied to you about not knowing him. He’s my friend Olivia’s brother and I’ve known him for some time.” Veena perima doesn’t stop icing the cake. “We are together. I want to marry him some day.”

At this, her aunt gives her that X-ray gaze that feels like it sees through all the walls Simran has built. After a long moment, she looks back down at the cake, turning the plate so she can ice the other side. “I thought as much.”

Simran can feel her jaw drop. “You did?”

Veena perima nods. “I didn’t know if you loved him back, but I could tell he loved you.”

“How?”

Veena perima shrugs as she explains, “Just the way he’d look at you when he thought no one was noticing. Silly boy. He was quite obvious.” Warmth at the thought of Leo dissipates in a hot flash of irritation. “So you knew I wouldn’t be interested in Kamal and, still, you pushed me towards him?”

Her aunt purses her lips. “Leo lives in Toronto. I didn’t want you to leave again and never visit. Kamal is in Philly, you would be only an hour away. And he’s not some *aira-gaira*. He knew your parents and we know his family. If you married him, it would be perfect.”

Simran sighs, seeing her own complicity in what has driven her aunt to extremes. But she hates the authority with which her aunt makes decisions for her. “That’s not what I want.”

Veena perima flattens her mouth into a straight, unrelenting line. “I have the wishes I have. And my wish was for you to marry Kamal.”

Was. Simran decides to take it as a tiny peace offering. “I can understand that. But what about Leo? What about what I’ve just told you?”

Veena perima is silent for a long time as she puts finishing touches on the cake and sets the spatula down. Then she looks up at Simran. “I always wanted you to marry a nice Tamil boy,” she says. Seeing Simran open her mouth to argue, she presses on. “This is how I was raised. I understand things are different these days. Like with Kavitha. Being gay is not a choice. It’s who she is, I accept that. I will love her however she is, even if I

had a different picture for how her life would go. You cannot tell me what to wish for your life.”

“And you cannot arrange my life to fulfill your wishes,” Simran says.

“I’m your elder,” she says. “I know what’s good for you.”

“Maybe,” Simran says, though she doesn’t think so. “But maybe I don’t want what you think is good.”

Veena perima chin’s lifts. “Leo, what religion is he? Will he make you convert? Will you ask him to become a Hindu, like us?”

“No, Perima. People marry across religions and cultures all the time. You find ways to make it work. You share each other’s traditions,” Simran says, realizing now she has to explain this. Her aunt came to this country so long ago. Thirty years back, she was among a first set of immigrants from her part of the world in a completely foreign place. The way she kept her culture intact, the way she held on to her identity, was to cling onto it tightly with both hands.

“What about when you have children? Family is so important to us; it’s not the same way with these Westerners sometimes. Does Leo understand that we are very family-oriented?” Veena perima says, but her words are a little softer.

Simran thinks her aunt already knows the answer to that question. “What do you think he’s been doing all these weeks? He’s been trying to learn about our family.”

Veena perima’s face allows a split second of recognition before she purses her lips. “I don’t know anything about his family.”

And in that reversion back to fighting this, Simran understands. It’s not intolerance. It’s fear. Veena perima’s understanding of the world is to get married to a Tamil man and have Tamil children—in that very strict order—because that’s what she did. Neither of her daughters is doing that; Simran is her last chance. The legacy she wants to leave behind to her kids, so they can leave it behind to their kids, are her traditions, her culture, her religion. That’s how she sees the world and she doesn’t want children and grandchildren she can’t understand because they don’t view the world the same way. She thinks the differences between them will make her lose them. It’s that fear that makes her put conditions on what Simran knows is unconditional love.

But the fact that Simran has confessed about Leo and Veena perima is still speaking to her, the fact that she gave Geeta and the baby her blessing,

the fact that her aunt is making this cake for Kavitha—all of this means that there's a part of her that would rather adjust that world-view, however begrudgingly, than lose her children. There's hope. Kavitha had said as much: Veena perima doesn't know how to change, but she is trying. It will take time and it won't be the way either Veena or her children have pictured it but a patchwork of both.

"I know you are worried," Simran says. "But Leo's an incredible man. He works hard, he loves his family, he's kind to everyone." She continues, needing Veena to truly understand. "Perima, I stayed away all these years because I felt like you were pushing a life on me that I didn't want."

Veena perima sighs, grabbing a barstool and sitting on it. She's still shorter seated on it than Simran is standing. "You're right. I wanted you to settle down years ago. I wanted you to have a few children by now. I wanted to look at the picture of my sister in the study, like I do every day, and tell her, 'See? Simi is settled. You don't have to worry. I took care of her after you were gone, and now she has someone who will take care of her after I am gone. She won't be alone.'"

Simran is caught wholly off guard. "I never thought—I don't think—it's not—" She shakes her head, trying to unscramble her emotions.

Veena perima's voice is far away when she speaks. "Your mother and I—we loved each other, but we were different. Maybe because I was the older daughter; after your patti died, I felt like I raised her a bit. I made sure she had a clean school uniform and cooked dinner in the evening. One day, when she came home talking about a boy named Rangan, I made sure our father arranged a meeting with his parents."

Simran is almost afraid to breathe. "You've never talked about Amma or Appa before."

Veena perima won't look at her. "I must have."

"I've been waiting all these years," Simran says.

Veena perima hangs her head. "We don't talk about these things. I remember when my thatha died, my mother never cried once. She believed in—what did she call it? Keeping a stiff upper lip. So that's what we did. Why share your emotions and make everyone around you sad too? And then when your parents ... At first, I was too sad. So I stopped thinking about your mother. I stopped remembering them. I stopped focusing on how different your life would have been if they had been alive. I thought we'd get you married young, so you could have someone who was yours, after

being alone for so long. Then you left so suddenly and I knew I'd failed them. That's why I let you go. That's why I let you stay away."

Kavitha's words come back to her: She and her aunt are so similar, both unable to move past their own sorrow. Grief is a type of myopia, a way of seeing the world in negatives, the empty spaces sharp and clear, the full ones blurry and overlooked. Simran couldn't see how much she hurt the people around her because it felt like her wound was the biggest. It was so large, it swallowed her whole. And the same thing had happened with Veena perima.

But it had repercussions. It made her grief unbearable. The insomnia, the dreams, the weight of it all nearly crushing her. Did her aunt go through that too?

"When you came back for Geeta's kalyaanam, I thought, challo, we'll have Simi in our house for a few weeks. It'll be so good. Maybe if she and Kamal reconnect, she'll stay this time," her aunt continues. "I thought if you married Kamal, then you would forgive me."

"Forgive you?" Simran asks.

Her aunt lowers her face to stare at the ground, a sheaf of hair hiding her expression as she says, in the smallest voice Simran's ever heard her speak in, "Forgive me for selling your parents' house to his family."

Her aunt is asking for forgiveness but it's Simran who is filled with shame. It's clear that Veena perima was torn apart by having to sell the house and Simran only made it worse by not giving her permission years ago and not giving her absolution in the time since. "Perima. There's nothing to forgive. *I'm* sorry for not answering your calls. You did it for Peripa; his health is more important than any house."

"I thought, if you married Kamal, it would come back to our family," she says, raising her head. Simran can't help but marvel at her aunt's reasoning. She really is a next-level strategist.

"House or not, I was never going to marry Kamal and I wouldn't have stayed if I had," Simran tells her. "I left because I was so sad here all the time. I understand now why you never talked about Amma or Appa, but it hurt me so much. All I wanted was to talk about them, to miss them out loud, to miss them with someone. But you never did and it made me feel like you wanted to erase that they ever existed. I felt like a burden, something you had to take care of for your dead sister and her husband."

“You don’t understand it, Simi,” Veena perima says, shaking her head. “You’d just lost your parents and then you had to move to New Jersey? How was that fair to you? I should have stayed back in Chennai with you, let you live there, but how could I, with Geeta and Kavi here? Everything I was doing was wrong. I know it wasn’t how your mother would have raised you, but it’s the way I knew how to raise a child. So I forced myself not to think about it. You find ways to set your world right again, even when everything is upside-down. And you keep at it. Eventually, you’re just doing whatever you have to do to get to the next thing.”

Simran is quiet. “Perima, what about their belongings? Have those been given away?”

“No!” her aunt replies, alarmed. “Of course not, I would never do that without you. We had the boxes shipped to us—your parents’ things are in the garage. Once I’d told you about the house, I was going to ask you to go through them with me.”

There it is again—another thing Simran thought she lost, all because she stayed away. They had both trapped themselves in the same cycle of avoidance; it’s just that she’d chosen distance and her aunt had chosen silence.

“Do you know how you got your name?” Veena perima says, all of a sudden.

“No.”

“When your mom met your dad, she knew immediately that she wanted to marry him. They hardly were together—dating, as you kids might call it—for a few months before they got engaged. Vidya married first, even though I was the older daughter. I remember—” Her aunt laughs ruefully. “It’s such a small thing but there was a family heirloom, a watch, that had been passed on to the first husband to join the family for generations. It went to your Appa and I was jealous. But then, after their wedding, they asked me to come live with them since our parents were gone. Those were some of the happiest times of my life. All the ways I wasn’t close with my sister, I was close with your father.”

“You and Appa were friends?” Simran asks, surprised. She has vague memories of her father being fond of her aunt, but she never knew they were close.

“Your dad was like the brother I always wanted, always teasing me. He called me Chinnah even though I was older than him and I called him Jija

Saheb.” A watery laugh escapes Simran at hearing that her father called her aunt “Little” and she called him “Mister Brother-in-Law.” “I used to resent that your mother got everything I wanted—a husband, a baby—before I did. But that time living with your mom and dad felt like I had a family again, for the first time since your patti and thatha had passed.”

Simran has never thought about how Veena perima must have felt—must still feel—first with her own mother dying when she was a teenager, and then her father a few years before Simran had been born. Then her sister had died too, all before she was forty-five. Her aunt lost her whole family, the one who raised and shaped her.

Just like Simran.

“Your mom was close to giving birth,” Veena perima continues. “You were a big baby from the start, so tall already.” She laughs, holding her arms out, miming how round her mother must have been. “There was a great discussion over what to name you. Your father’s family had so many suggestions. But one day, we were sitting in the verandah of the Chennai house, just me and your Appa. I asked him if I could give you your name. And without hesitation, he said he would be honored to have his child named by her second mother.” Veena perima pulls out a handkerchief with embroidered scalloped edges and roughly swabs at the tears sliding down Simran’s face till she takes the cloth from her aunt. “I told him I wanted to name you Simran, even though it wasn’t a Tamil name. Do you know what ‘Simran’ means?”

She’d looked it up a few years ago and then slammed her laptop shut, feeling like it was a cruel joke. But now she understands. “It means to remember.”

“That’s what you were to me, to your Amma. You were our way to remember our parents. The first child, the first new member after we’d lost so much of our family. Your poor mother had terrible health—they call it postpartum depression now but back then, there was no name for it. So while she recovered, I would feed you and put you to sleep. I helped raise you from when you were born until I got married and moved to New Jersey; it broke my heart to leave you, to leave India and your parents. It was all I’d ever known.

“And then, when I became pregnant, your dad called me up and said I had to let him name the baby. He chose Kavitha—I’d never considered that name before. Ashok and I didn’t know yet if the baby was a boy or a girl,

but once your dad said Kavitha, I knew we'd have a girl and that would be her name. That's how much I trusted him." She wears something too sad to be called a smile. "So every time I say her name, I feel like I'm saying hello to Rangan. Like he, and your Amma, are still a part of us, every day."

Simran's lips wobble with the effort to hold her tears in. "I miss them so much."

Veena perima stands and pulls her across the island. She takes the handkerchief from Simran's hands and this time gently dabs at her cheeks. Her eyes are shiny with tears. "I do too, chellum. I do too."

And then Simran lets the dam within her break and she weeps, leaning down onto her aunt's shoulder, the awkward angle unnoticed. She feels her aunt's tears seep into her hair. In that moment, like they have been for so much of their lives, they are the same: the ones who are left behind.

"You don't have to marry Kamal," Veena perima says when their tears have subsided and they've pulled apart. "It's not what you want and I am not your mother to tell you whether I approve."

This is Veena perima trying to change, just like Kavitha said. It's not perfect and it's not easy, but she's giving it so much. Simran wants to meet her where she is. "You're the closest thing I have to a mother. You're my second mother," Simran says, echoing her father. "I don't need your approval. But I want it."

"I know when you think of our relationship, you think of the times since you moved here, where all we did was fight. But when I see you, I remember so many more years than that. There was a time you wouldn't eat unless I fed you." Veena perima blinks rapidly, like she's turning an idea over in her head. "So let's throw away this approval nonsense. You will not ask for my approval and I will not give it. I will not wait for some sign showing me you are okay and I did a good job with you. We will be a family and that is enough."

Simran swallows. Tears hang off her chin like stalactites. "Yes. Let's do that."

"Then let me ask you for one thing," Veena says earnestly. "Aa, Simran. Aa. Come back home. Stay close by so I can tell you stories about your parents and you can tell me about your life in Chennai with them. We have not done a lot of remembering, but we still can."

Her aunt's request thunders through her. To come back here would mean to leave Toronto, her life, her friends. Leo. "Perima, I can't do that."

“I thought as much. I’ve been hinting—” Simran snorts and her aunt smiles slyly. “Achcha achcha, I’ve been saying it. But I know that would be hard for you. It’s okay. There will always be a place for you here, no matter where you go, no matter how long you stay away. This is your home too.”

Maybe there can be closeness without immediate proximity. But a small part of Simran is sad to have to leave once more, just as things between them are mending.

They’re quiet for a moment and then her aunt’s voice is back to its declarative, confident tone as she resumes bustling around the kitchen, putting the cake in a container and emptying the dishwasher. “But I expect you to come home for the baby’s celebrations. And your parents’ birthdays. We’ll remember them on good days, not just their death anniversary. And then you’ll have to come back for Tamil New Year, Diwali, Ganesh Chathurti—for all the holidays, okay? Leo must tell his family he has to spend these times with us.”

“His family doesn’t celebrate the same holidays as we do,” Simran says. “So we’ll always come home to Iyer House for the celebrations.”

Veena perma stops her ministrations and her chin tilts, perked to this new notion. Simran tamps down a smile. She can tell her aunt hadn’t thought of this upside to being with someone who isn’t Indian. “Leo is too tall, but challo, what can you do about that? At least he’s handsome. Your children will be very good-looking.”

It’s not an arms-wide-open approval of Leo—but what had her aunt just said? They didn’t need that now. They only had to be a family and that, Simran thinks, is finally what they feel like.

A couple of hours later, Simran watches the foliage whiz by as Kavitha drives them through upstate New York. They're on their way to Toronto; after the emotional conversation with her aunt this morning, all she wanted to do was talk to Leo. But he wasn't answering his phone—Simran shoves down the notion that he is refusing to talk to her—and when she looked up flights, they cost over a thousand dollars, which she couldn't have afforded even if she wasn't newly laid off. She's never loved her cousin more than when Kavitha, only half awake, suggested a road trip. Finally, after all this time, Kavitha and Simran would be in Toronto together.

They told Veena perima what they were doing, no made-up friends or half-truths. Simran thinks she let them go without too much of a fuss because of their morning conversation, but it's also probably because an empty house following the wedding sounds pretty great. And that's how she and Kavitha find themselves on I-94, armed with hastily packed overnight bags, a Tupperware of cake, and playlists chock-full of nineties and early two-thousands Bollywood songs. Simran's itching to text Liv to ask about Leo but she doesn't want to put her friend in a difficult position.

Kavitha reaches into the tub on Simran's lap and grabs a piece of cake, and just as she shoves it in her mouth, Simran asks, "So what's the deal with Payal?"

"Grheath thiming," Kavitha says, a few crumbs flying out of her mouth as she chews. After she swallows, she says, voice suspiciously even, "Nothing."

Simran raises her eyebrows. "Bullshit!"

"I mean, we made out but—"

"How can you say nothing, then?" Simran practically yells.

"Love the energy but we are literally two feet away from each other in a confined space. I'm going to need you to turn the volume down a bit," Kavitha says, but she's clearly pleased by the enthusiasm. "Payal's nice.

But I didn't feel any fireworks. I guess that's not shocking—who ends up with the first person they ever liked?"

"Well, Rishi and Geeta," Simran says.

"Ugh, those two overachievers." Kavitha snorts. "I still want a big love. But I think first I want a big life. I want to figure out what and who I like and don't like. I want to pick out my own pillowcases. I want to not have to tell anyone what time I'm coming home. I want to not come home some nights."

"I think that if you want a big life, you'll have a big life. Because you'll *make* a big life," she says.

"Der aaye, durust aaye," Kavitha says. Simran's breath hitches at the familiar words. "I remember your dad used to say that all the time and I always thought it just meant 'Better late than never.' But it means something different: Even if it's late, it's still the right time." She smiles excitedly. "I'm going to do it. Leave Iyer House. Move to New York City, get a job there before my bar exam results expire."

"You'll be close to your parents and to Geeta and Rishi and the baby too. It's perfect," Simran replies but there's a pang in her chest. Their original pact will be fulfilled. Just in separate cities.

"I know! And if you think this big grin is excitement—you're only eighty-four percent correct. The other sixteen percent is pure terror. My mother's going to throw a fit."

"She is. But you'll both get through it," Simran says. "If there's one thing I've learned from all this, it's that."

"You've only learned one thing from all this?" Kavitha asks.

Simran laughs. "Shut up."

But for the first time she can remember, she really does feel that she and her family will get through anything. After seven years of solitary Diwalis spent with Liv and Indian takeout, Simran will have family holidays and casual visits and milestones. This wedding will become part of the stories they share with the new baby and all the family members to come. She's already missed out on years of this. As the Toronto skyline peeks out from beyond the blue expanse of Lake Ontario, Veena perima's request for her to stay burns in her chest.



Simran and Kavitha arrive at her apartment in the early evening. “Liv, it’s me!” She leads Kavitha into the living room, where Olivia is sitting on the couch. “Surprise!”

“I’ll say,” Liv says, shock all over her features. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to Leo. He isn’t here, is he?” Adrenaline courses through her in anticipation of seeing him.

“No, he’s not,” Liv says, standing slowly. “And he’s not at his apartment either.”

All the energy in Simran funnels into fueling her worst fears: that she has broken something beyond repair between them.

“Liv, where is he?” she asks, not even bothering to keep the desperation out of her voice. “I really need to see him. Now.”

Liv snickers. “He felt the same way.”

“What do you mean?”

“You pair of absolute clowns! He’s flying to Newark to see you,” she replies, shaking her head.

Kavitha laughs but is silenced by a scolding glare from Simran. “He’s going to New Jersey?”

“Sure is,” Liv says. “You just missed him. His flight’s in an hour-ish.”

“Call him and tell him not to get on the flight!” Simran screeches, four inches from Liv’s face.

Her friend levels her with a trying look but pulls out her phone. It immediately goes to Leo’s voicemail. “I think his phone might be broken. I, uh, accidentally threw it on the road yesterday,” Liv says sheepishly.

“I have to get to the airport and stop him!”

Liv angles herself to face Kavitha. “Okay, we have so much to talk about.”

“I know! I made a whole list of movies for you to check out,” Kavitha replies.

“Wait—how do you two know each other?” Simran throws her hands in the air. “No! I don’t care! We can discuss that once we’ve found Leo.”

“Fine! Let’s go!” Liv says, grabbing her keys from a hook next to the door.

“You’re coming?” Simran asks as she shoves her sneakers back on.

“I can show you a shortcut,” Liv says. “Leo’s leaving from the city airport—it’s only about twenty minutes away, so there’s a chance you can

catch him before he gets on the flight. But traffic is bad.”

“And water is wet. It’s Toronto, of course it’s bad,” Simran mutters. “First, water is not wet. Water makes things wet. Second, there is only room for one obnoxious person in this friendship and it’s me,” Liv says. “My Vespa is parked out front. We might be able to get there faster on that than in a car.”

“All three of us won’t fit on the scooter,” Simran says, looking at Kavitha.

“I’ve already aided and abetted a crazy dash to the airport to stop Leo. I can sit this one out.” At Liv’s questioning look, Kavitha says, “It was very romantic and horrifically public and only a little pathetic. All things that Simran swears she isn’t. We’ll compare notes later.”

“In return, I’ll tell you about how she made heart eyes at my brother for a mortifying six months before doing anything about it,” Liv says.

“Deal.”

Simran dashes forward and hugs Kavi, who recoils. “Thanks, Kavitha. I owe you one.”

“You owe me lots,” she says. “Now get off me and get out of here.”

Simran dashes out the door, trailing Liv, who’s already ahead of her by ten feet. Within a few minutes, they’re flying down the street on Liv’s yellow Vespa, breaking more than a few traffic laws and simultaneously endangering and enraging every person who has the misfortune to be in their path. As they approach the city airport, the wind whipping through her hair, Simran prays to all of her many gods—a real perk of being Hindu, especially in situations that require divine intervention—that she’ll get there in time to stop Leo before he gets on his flight.

At the airport, Simran leaps off the scooter, tossing her helmet to Liv, who drives away to find parking. She knows she looks crazed. The combination of the wind from the scooter ride and wearing a helmet has given her an unintended banshee vibe. She is out of breath by the time she gets to the check-in area and the space is dense with people moving slow, like a thick syrup. She hopes the crowds mean that Leo hasn’t made it past security and she crosses the rows of counters, neck craned, searching for a burnt caramel head of hair and her favorite hazel eyes. When she can’t find sight of him there, she takes the escalator to the next level, drumming her fingers along the railing frantically. At the top, she spies the line for the security check and has a flash to the last time she did this.

But she doesn't spot Leo this time. Instead, she spends the next increasingly frantic minutes looking for him before Liv catches up to her. "No luck?"

"I can't see him anywhere," Simran replies, eyes still sweeping the terminal for any sight of him.

Finally, at the time the flight is departing, Simran concedes. "I think we missed him." A thought pings through her brain and she bats it away, like flappers on a pinball machine, because it is ridiculous. But as she and Olivia make their way back to the parking lot, it keeps coming back, more and more insistently, until she realizes there's no other choice.

Leo walks off the plane in Newark airport with long, purposeful strides. Yes, it was a little extreme to fly to New Jersey instead of just calling Simran, but he needed to see her. He doesn't want a phone call where she can brush him off; this is the type of thing they need to work through in person. He's determined to show Simran that she can try to push him away but he won't let her. But neither will he give up on the things he needs from her.

For the first time in years, he feels nervous at the thought of seeing her.

He speeds up his walk from the gate into the terminal. This time, he'd just like to get out of the airport like a normal traveler. Pulling his phone out of the pocket of his jeans, he curses his sister when he sees the shattered screen—it died on his way to the airport. He scans the arrivals hall looking for the taxi line and sees drivers waiting with signs for their C-suite passengers and a family with young children dressed in dinosaur costumes, and Veena aunty looking right at him with Ashok uncle looming tall at her shoulder, and—

Leo's brain does a record scratch.

Veena aunty is here. And she is waving to him, though it's more a beckoning as she shifts from foot to foot. Like she's expecting Leo. He walks forward, as if his body automatically obeys her, until he stands in front of them on the other side of the waist-high metal barricade.

"Aunty?"

"Hello, Leo," Veena perima says. "Simran told us to come pick you up."

Nothing quite computes in Leo's brain as he tries to add this latest piece of information to his limited understanding of what's going on. "Where is she?"

"She and Kavitha went to Toronto," Veena aunty replies, exasperation in her voice as if Leo is slow on the uptake.

"Sim is—I mean, Simran is in Toronto?" Leo asks, clutching the top bar of the barricade. She went back to Toronto. For him?

"Yes. But by the time they got there, you had already left."

Yes. For him. Something within him releases.

Veena aunty gives him a full eye roll. The familial resemblance to Simran has never been stronger. “Your generation is always glued to that phone until you need to be,” she complains before shaking her head from left to right. “Chalo chodo. Let’s go back home, I hate the airport.”

Stunned and still trying to comprehend what’s happened, Leo trails Veena aunty and Ashok uncle as they go to the elevator bay that leads to the parking lot.

“Uncle, Rishi texted me about you going to the hospital,” Leo says. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Not okay. No more pakodas,” Ashok uncle says mournfully. Then his head lifts. “Walk tomorrow?”

Leo grins. “Seven a.m.”

Once they reach the house, Veena aunty immediately puts him to work with a wave of her hand, indicating he’s to help her in the kitchen.

“I was thinking,” Veena aunty says. Leo is surprised when a mischievous smile steals over her face. “We cannot keep letting you make terrible chai.”

He cringes but also can’t help but smile back. By some miracle, Veena aunty is *teasing* him. He stands next to her at the kitchen counter and follows her instructions: grating ginger, pulverizing the black nubs of cardamom into powder in a mortar and pestle, heating the milk and turning off the burner at just the right time so it doesn’t boil over. When he lifts the cup to his lips, she pulls it away in that rough manner that has become familiar to him. “Don’t do that. You’ll burn your tongue and the whole taste will be ruined. These things take time, you understand?”

He’s starting to.

They wait and she blows on the cup to cool it. As Leo does the same, Veena aunty says, “Simran told me. That she loves you. You two are together, nah?”

Leo freezes, mouth still puckered, and it takes him another moment to realize what she has just said: Simran has told her aunt about them.

More than that. She told Veena aunty she loves him.

And Veena aunty has let him in her house knowing that.

“Uh ... yes, Aunty. We are.” Blinking, he takes a deep breath, steadying his nerves to give the heartfelt confession he’s been practicing in his head.

“I love S—”

“Okay. The temperature is right,” Veena aunty interrupts. “Drink your chai now.” She takes a big gulp of hers. Leo does the same, and the sweet, velvety liquid hits his tongue and sets his brain buzzing. He takes another sip and then another and by the time he has drained his cup, in seconds, his big speech is completely forgotten.

Veena aunty is smirking at him. “You like it?” she asks.

He pulls the cup back to his nose and breathes in the scent. “It’s incredible. I can’t believe you didn’t throw the chai I made for you in my face.”

Veena aunty laughs, an actual guffaw, and Leo thinks there might be magic in this tea. “It’s not your fault. No one taught you. But if you’re going to be part of an Indian family, you need to know these things. Next time you come, I’ll teach you how to make sambar and rasam.” She looks at him pointedly.

Leo blinks rapidly. Did she say—and was she inviting—and did this mean—

But before he can respond, Veena perima speaks again. “Simi is very stubborn. ‘Ziddi,’ we call it in Hindi. Some people say I can also be like that. I don’t think so. Only when others don’t listen to me.”

Leo smiles and takes a second to practice the words in his head before he says them out loud. “Adudan enakku piddikum.”

Veena aunty turns to him, shocked. “You speak Tamil?”

“Nan kathunutten,” Leo replies. He’s learning, though he might have got his tense wrong. “Aur Hindi bhi.” *And Hindi too.*

Leo basks in the look of begrudging respect Veena aunty gives him. “You will call me once a week. Naan Tamil peshuven so you can practice. Aur Hindi bhi. You’ll get nowhere if you only talk with Simi. And I can practice my French with you.”

“Allons-y,” he replies, and she gives him a tight nod of approval. He’s fairly sure he’s just agreed to a light berating on a weekly basis. Veena aunty moves away from him, refilling Leo’s cup without asking. He gulps down the second just as quickly and then helps take the utensils and dishes they used to the sink.

A faraway look steals across her face, happy and sad at the same time. “You know who taught me to make chai this way? Jija Saheb.”

“Who is Jija Saheb?” Leo asks.

“My brother-in-law. Simran’s father,” she replies. Not a moment later, Veena aunty is back to her busybody self. She pulls out her phone. “Okay, let’s call Simi. No long conversations, just tell her you’ve reached safe.” She begins to hand the phone to him but then pulls her arm back. “Actually, it’s good you’re here. Before talking to her, go get the ladder from the garage and take the lights down.”

Just the thought of getting back up on the roof makes Leo’s kneecaps feel like they’re disintegrating. They’re getting along so well, but he can’t get back on that ladder. Steeling himself, he says, “Actually, Aunty, I’m sorry but I can’t. I’m afraid of heights. Going up the first time was really difficult for me.” He swallows. “Is ... is that okay?”

He braces himself but she reaches out and swats him on the arm. “Aiyo, pagal, of course. Why didn’t you say that? Who goes up on the roof of a house when they’re afraid of heights?” She tuts. “I know you like Simi, but there’s no need to do all these sorts of foolish things for her.”

She dials Simran’s number and puts it on speakerphone. This is going to be a group call, he realizes.

“Perima?” Simran’s voice comes through the phone, worried. “Did you find him?”

“Sim, it’s me,” Leo says. “My phone died. Your aunt and uncle picked me up at the airport.”

“Leo.” She breathes his name more than she says it. “I—”

“You’re on speakerphone,” he interjects.

“Oh. Okay.” He can hear the hesitation in Simran’s voice.

“See, Simi? He’s safe. You come back here and you two can talk then,” Veena aunty tells her. With that, she hangs up. Leo has no choice but to do what Veena aunty says, which he realizes is probably going to be happening a lot more. He doesn’t mind all that much. He knows now he can say no when he needs to.

Simran thinks her cousin might be eligible for sainthood as they pull into the driveway of Iyer House early the next morning. After a quick nap, she drove all night back to New Jersey, just so Simran could see Leo as soon as possible.

Kavitha switches off the gas and turns to look at Simran. “Really? You were so impatient in Toronto, I thought you’d be out of the car and sprinting to Leo the second we turned onto the street.”

Simran reaches for her weekender in the back seat and pulls out the tube she stuffed in there before leaving Toronto. “I have something to give you.”

Kavitha opens it and her eyes light up. “The *DDLJ* poster signed by Shah Rukh Khan! But this is yours.”

“I asked Liv, she agreed. I’m sure Leo will too.” Simran smiles. “Your first housewarming gift for your New York City life, from your Toronto crew.”

The mood dims. “Maybe we can share custody,” Kavitha says. “Six months in each of our places. That way, we’ll have to see each other to make the exchange.”

“We’ll see each other more than that,” Simran says, though she has no way to guarantee it.

After a moment of quiet, Kavitha shoves her out of the car. Simran can hear her aunt gardening out back and when she turns from the foyer to the drawing room, she spies Ashok peripa in his chair. He points to the back of the house. “Study,” he tells her. She gives her uncle a smile and rushes through the labyrinth of hallways at the back of the house.

She takes a moment, stopping in the doorway of the study, looking in. Leo, his back to her, stands in front of her parents’ portraits. The people she loves the most, past and present, in the vicinity of each other. It makes her feel whole and hopeful.

“Hi, Leo.”

He whips around, mouth open in surprise. “You’re here.”

“Kavitha drove all night,” she says, stepping into the room. “I had to see you.”

The sight of his smile suffuses deep relief into her bones. He came back to Iyer House for the same reason.

“I have to tell you something. I should have told you before you left. I should never have let you leave,” she says, walking closer with each word, till they meet in the center of the room. “I love you, Leo.”

Leo’s eye crinkles come out, like a map of her favorite places, and she curls her hand into his shirt in anticipation of him saying it back.

“Yeah, your aunt told me that already.”

Her jaw drops. “Excuse me?”

“You’ve been scooped,” he says, the flecks of gold in his eyes practically dancing.

She gently shoves him but he pulls her fully into his arms. She can feel the rumble of laughter in his chest as he holds her close. “Even if you’d never said it and Veena aunty hadn’t told me, I would know. You show you love me all the time, even when you don’t think you are. *Especially* when you don’t think you are.” She rolls her eyes and he laughs. “Like whenever you roll your eyes at me. When you stood up for my truly awful chai. When you got jealous of the aunties hitting on me. As if I ever even saw anyone else. I love you too, Simran. I always have.”

He slips his hand behind her neck and pulls her to him for a lingering, delicate kiss. She likes how he sees her, her flaws as mysteries to unlock but not solve. She likes that he can tell her actions are how she feels, not her words. She likes that he’s been devoted to her all these years because she plans to be devoted to him in equal measure from now on. But something insistent keeps tugging at her mind.

“Leo ...” She glances over his shoulder at her parents’ portraits. “I haven’t really told you much about my parents, have I?” she asks.

“You look like your mother,” he says as they turn to face the photos. Everything swirling inside her calms to a halt. Simran sees the similarity, especially now that she is closer to the age her mother never moved past, a thought that feels like tiny pinpricks all over her arms and legs. But there’s also happiness at hearing her face has grown into her mother’s. “And I act like her too.”

“Stubborn?” She laughs because he’s not incorrect. Her mother was quite hardheaded and just as bighearted.

“Determined,” she amends. He chuckles, a sound she wants to wrap around her like a blanket.

He pokes her cheek. “This dimple is all your dad, though.”

“I want to tell you about them, Leo. Like how my mother would make this wheezing noise that sounded like a rusty gate whenever she laughed too hard. Or that my father arranged his shirts in color order without realizing it. That I hope when they went, it was quick and peaceful and they didn’t hurt too much. That I hope, wherever they are, they know I’m okay.” She takes his hand in hers. “They would have loved you, right from the start, no schemes needed, because they would have seen how happy you make me. I’m going to tell you everything about them. The big stuff and the small. But to do that—I have to remember it. And I need help with that. So much of them is here, tied to this house and the rest of my family.” She swallows and gives him the love he gives right back, with complete openness. “I want to move to New York. With Kavitha. Will you come with me?”

He doesn’t answer but that vertical furrow between his eyebrows appears. Her finger worries at the cuticle of her thumb. “I don’t know ...” he says finally.

“I know, that’s a lot to ask. I don’t expect ... I’m really happy you got the job, Leo.” At his questioning glance, she says, “Liv told me.”

“She’s like a publicist I never asked for.” He chuckles. “They want me in the Toronto office full-time. No remote work,” he says. Leo looks down at their joined hands and runs his thumb over the arc of her nail. “If I moved, I’d have to quit. Not to mention that Liv’s going to miss having you around.”

She knows how excited he is about this job. She places one hand on his chest, hearing what he has not said outright: Leo likes his life in Toronto. The thought that they might have to be apart just as they’ve figured it all out sits heavy within her. But Leo hasn’t said no yet. He’s still considering if this is something he needs to do for her, for them.

She cups his cheek. “You don’t want to leave,” she says. “So don’t.”

His eyes are tight with emotion. “I don’t want to be away from you either. And I understand why you have to move here.”

She takes his hand and brings it to her lips. “You need to stay in Toronto. You *want* to stay in Toronto. I know you’d move for me but you don’t have to,” she tells him. “You don’t ever have to do anything for me. I just want you.”

He pulls her in close, kissing her softly, but she presses back against him. She doesn't want him to feel like this is a compromise; it is a choice they're making with each other. They'll be apart now for a better future together soon. When they pull away, she says, "At least we know it's not difficult to travel between Toronto and New York."

"Maybe we learn something from this," Leo muses. "Less schemes and hijinks and running through airports and more just ... talking to each other."

"On the phone, even," she says.

He tilts his head, eyes luminous. "Wow. You really are in love with me."

She laughs. Burying herself in his arms, she memorizes the shape they make together, something to carry her through the days they'll only have pieces of it apart. She misses him already, even though he's right next to her.

Leo pulls away the slightest inch to look at her. "It's like the Tamil phrase for 'goodbye.' Poitu varen."

Simran nods, her nose brushing against his. "We'll leave now—"

"And we'll come back."

"To each other? Always."

Epilogue

Eleven months later

Simran watches as the key of her childhood home in Chennai is placed in the palm of a stranger. The tall man in wire-rim glasses thanks Kamal's mother as his wife urges their two young daughters to stop running around the front garden and tell the Kumars how excited they are to live so close to their school and friends.

Simran steps back from the interaction—it's no longer hers to be a part of. This house technically hasn't been hers for years. The Kumars, out of respect for her and her family, hadn't changed a thing, renting it out as is until they'd received an offer to buy it a few months ago. It had felt like a sign. A chance to say goodbye that she hadn't gotten seventeen years ago, one she hadn't been able to find since.

"Please, go ahead. Take all the time you need," the new owner says, gesturing to Simran and Veena perima. Knowing that she's seeing this house for the last time, Simran stands on the second stair of the verandah where her family used to have breakfast on Sundays. She walks through her old bedroom, through the living room, through her father's study, all the places she's been picturing and dreaming of for years now. She opens the Godrej wardrobe where her mother's saris used to hang and smiles at the familiar metallic groan when she closes the door. She cries in the kitchen when she spots a broken tile that's never been fixed. She hopes it never will be. Her aunt shows her the space by the window where she'd rock Simran to sleep. They do one last round, going to each room as they say goodbye not just to her parents but to the people they'd been in this house.

Leo's outside in the garden and as Veena perima goes to talk to the new owners, Simran beckons him over.

"I have something for you," she says to Leo as he steps onto the verandah.

His eyebrows go up. "Shouldn't I be the one giving you things?"

She takes his hand. “Not till tomorrow at least.” She folds his fingers to make a fist and then pulls a heavy gold object out of her pocket, slipping it over his wrist. Her father’s watch, a piece of family lore she’d never even known about till her aunt had told her. Veena perima had kept it in her safe all these years and given it to Simran last month, when they’d pored over her parents’ wedding album on one of Simran’s weekend visits to Iyer House. “This watch has been in my mom’s side for generations; my father used to wear it. The tradition is to give it to the first man who marries into the family.”

Some dreams will stay steeped in loss and sorrow and never come true, like the wish both she and Veena perima had for her to get married in this very spot. But they have so much more now than just dreams. They have these links to their memories—the record player, this house, the items they finally unpacked from the garage. She has her aunt’s stories about her parents and the ones she shares, with her aunt, with Leo, with her cousins.

“Thank you,” Leo says, his voice wobbling a little, as he runs his finger lightly over the dial. He looks at her, lips pursed with emotion.

“It looks so right on you,” she says, throat tightening. Her parents should have been the ones to give it to him; she’ll never stop feeling their absence. Her therapist keeps reminding her that won’t go away. Grief is many things: a wall, a net, a weight. But it’s also a tether that brought her back to the people she lost and the ones she still has.

She doesn’t want to get this heavy, not today. Leo picks up on the shift in her mood and nudges her. “You know, Simran, you’ve already got me. You can stop flirting with me.”

She breaks into a smile. “Pass.”

A few minutes later, Leo, Veena perima, and Simran say goodbye to the Kumars and the new family. As they walk to the gate, Veena perima takes Simran’s hand and she pretends not to notice the tears on her aunt’s cheek. Just before they exit, they turn and look back.

“Come to think of it,” Veena perima says, her voice back to her default haughty tone. “The color of this house has always been too dull. I hope they finally paint it.”



The next day, her thirty-second birthday, Simran sits on the sandy shore of Marina Beach, just as the dawn breaks and the sun peeks over the horizon. She thought saying goodbye to the house would hurt far more than it does. But just because it's not hers anymore doesn't mean it's not still home.

Or at least a part of home. Because a part of home is Iyer House now. A part of home is her apartment in Manhattan with Kavitha. A part of home is Toronto. A part of home is always wherever Leo is—so currently, sitting on the beach next to her, knees up, digging his toes through the sand.

“Happy birthday?” he asks her. The first rays of daylight streak through his hair and turn his eyes golden. “Or sad birthday?”

She thinks of how far they've come in just a year and takes his hand. “Mostly happy. But maybe a little sad too. Can it be both?” she asks.

He gives that smile, one side up, then the other. “That sounds right.”

Her phone chimes with a video call request and she holds it up to answer.

“Happy birthday!” Rishi and Geeta say in unison.

“Thank you!” Simran replies. “I can't believe you guys are calling me so early. It's still yesterday in Connecticut.”

“Well, the baby's up, which means we are up.” Geeta's voice is exhausted and exhilarated.

“Guess that means Kavitha has to be up as well,” Kavi grumbles, coming into the frame in a third window.

“Put my niece on the phone,” Simran says. Rishi holds the phone up to the baby. She's wriggling, her chubby hands demonstrating her newest skill: fist pumping as she gurgles enthusiastically.

Something happens to Simran whenever she sees her niece. It's not so different from the first time she heard Leo speak Tamil. She feels parts of herself join and bind, fitting together. Late in Geeta's third trimester, when the arguments over what to name the baby had reached fever pitch (Leo and Rishi kept insisting LeBron James Iyer-Chopra was a great name for a girl), Veena perima had been the one to come up with the solution, suggesting a new family tradition, one where the aunt names the baby.

The afternoon that Veena perima called her to say that Geeta was having contractions, Simran rushed from her desk at Fordham's international student office and caught the train to the hospital in Connecticut. There, she held her niece in her arms for the first time as Kavitha told everyone the name she'd chosen: Vidya. After Simran's mother. And Simran, who still kept insisting she never cried, wept and laughed at the same time.

When Simran looks at baby Vidya, she doesn't just see her family's future. She sees its past too. Maybe her parents aren't here anymore, but they still are. Because Simran is here. Because her aunt is. No one is gone forever as long as someone remembers them.

"Hi, Vidya," she says gently to the screen. The baby wails in reply. "She's as grumpy as Simran is," Kavitha comments as she pads into the kitchen.

"How's Annie, Kavi?" Leo asks. Kavitha shrugs noncommittally and Leo gasps. "No more Annie?"

"Maybe just less Annie," Kavitha says, yawning again. "I have some oats to sow. Not wild ones. More like steel-cut."

Leo grins nefariously. "Got it. But let us know when you're ready to bring Annie or whoever to a family wedding and pretend you're strangers so she can fulfill every single whim of your entire family and win them over ..."

Kavitha snorts. "Who would ever agree to that?"

Leo laughs, sliding his arm around Simran. "Only a complete idiot."

"Besides ..." Kavitha says mischievously, "we'd need to have a family wedding first." She drums her fingers along her jaw. "Do you know anyone who could get married soon?"

Simran groans and lightly pushes Leo. "You walked us right into that one."

"You sound like your mother," Leo tells Kavi.

At that moment, Vidya makes it known to all that she doesn't appreciate her mother and father's divided attention and they end the call with a plan to celebrate Simran's birthday when she and Leo are back. Daylight has fully broken and people are spilling onto the beach. Children shriek as they touch the tide and run back up the shore to the waiting arms of their parents. Vendors come by, and when one selling fresh ellaneer, straight from a hacked-off coconut, rolls his cart past them, Leo gets up. Simran hears Leo tell the man in Tamil that he'd like one and sees the seller's surprise at his fluency.

Leo plops down next to her in the sand. "Would you like your birthday present?"

"I can't believe you had time to get me something," she says, taking the coconut from him.

“Let’s just say it’s been in the works for a while,” Leo says. He pulls out his phone, scrolls quickly, and hands it to her. She takes in the fancy header on the email and reads it out loud.

“Dear Mr. Bridgers, it is with great pleasure that we inform you of—” She looks at him. “That we inform you of your acceptance to the Master’s Program for Advanced Linguistic Studies at NYU.”

“The company wants me to get more formal training, so they’re going to cover my degree while I work out of the Manhattan office.”

Simran turns her shoulders to look right at him. “You’re moving to New York?”

His grin is so wide, eye crinkles everywhere. “I’m moving to New York!”

She flings her arms around him. “Forget what I said, it’s a happy birthday!” she says to the space behind his ear and then changes her mind again. “*Happiest* birthday!”

For so long, Simran thought life was a straight line, moving in only one direction. That once something was lost, it was gone forever. It’s only in the last year that she’s understood how wrong she was. Life is not a straight line, it’s not even a circle. It’s a spiral, up, down, and all around.

Sometimes, you might even pass the same places as before.

She watches the waves break onto the shore before retreating, over and over again. The tide moves out and it comes back, a different stretch of ocean than what came before. Simran left this home behind, and now she has returned, also different than before. She and Leo left each other and soon they’ll reunite for a life they’ll build together. Her parents left this world long ago, but the man she loves is wearing the watch her mother gave her father, and now there’s Vidya with her gurgling laugh and earsplitting scream. Maybe someday, there’ll be another baby and Simran’s father’s double dimples will be back in this world as well.

The world spins on and time moves forward. But goodbye is not the end. The hope for another meeting is infinite.

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Lavanya Lakshmi has lived in nine cities across India, China, the US, and Canada. One of her many childhood homes was a suite on the 37th floor of a luxury hotel. She earned a Master's degree from NYU and lived in New York City for nine years before moving to Toronto, where she currently resides, despite being a very vocal hater of cold weather. *Leave and Come Back* is her first novel.

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