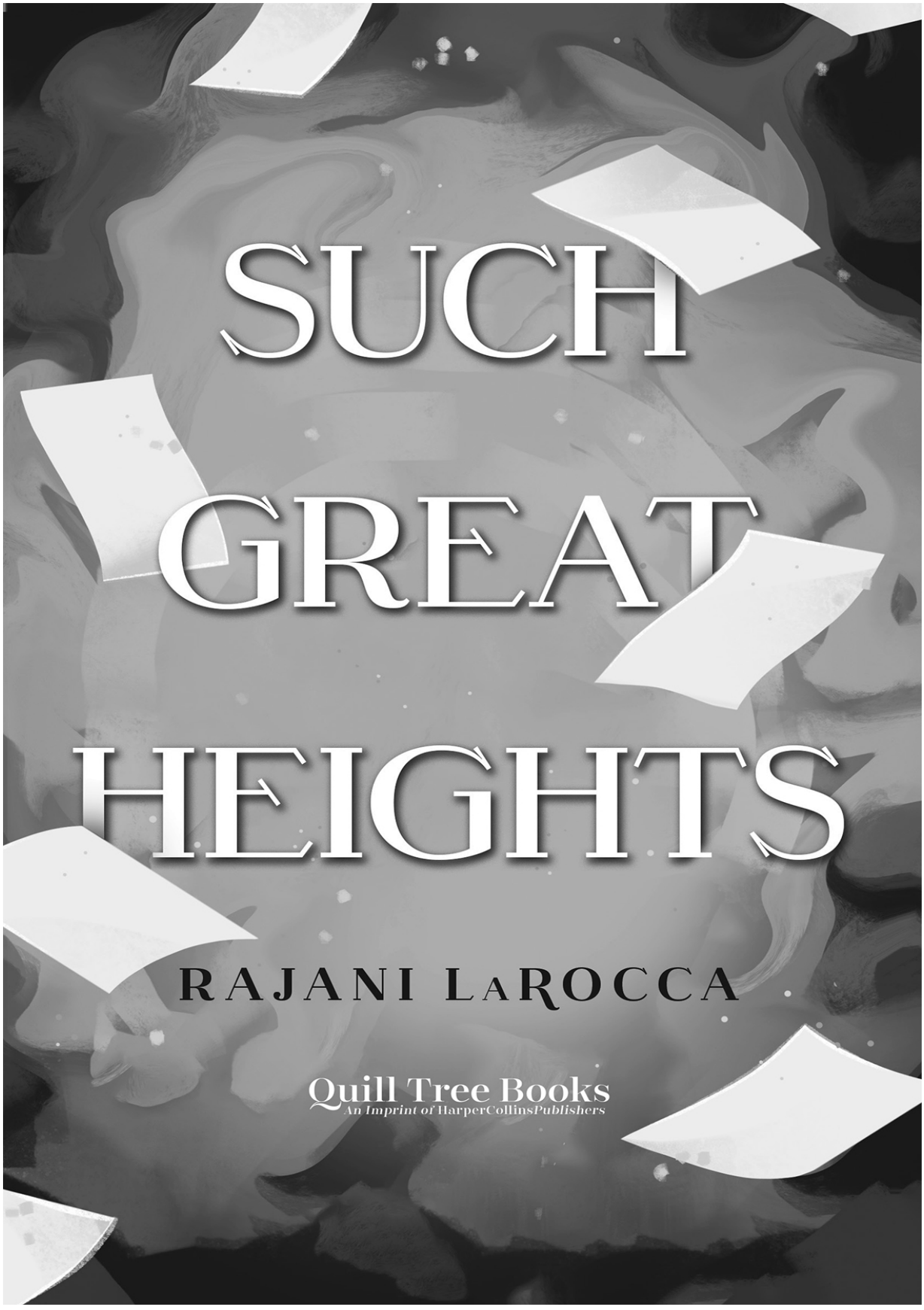
Does the truth matter if no one believes it?

SUCH GREAT HEIGHTS

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

RAJANI LaROCCA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RAJANI LaROCCA
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Dedication

For Lyn Tillett, outstanding teacher and mentor

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Prologue

The *Ramayana* is one of the most revered epics in Indian literature and the Hindu religion.

It tells the story of Prince Rama and how he overcame strife in his own family, endured years of exile, and defeated Ravana, the evil king of Lanka, to return triumphant and rule over the kingdom that was his birthright.

But the *Ramayana* is also the story of Sita, Rama's wife. In many ways, Sita's story drives Rama's.

Sita is venerated as a model of virtue and loyalty, as the highest pinnacle of what a woman should be.

But her story is tragic. Sita endures exile, kidnapping, rejection. Her story ends with loss.

Not because of what she did, but because of what was done to her. Not because she couldn't prove herself a truth-teller, but despite the fact that she did.

Does the truth matter if no one believes you?

Chapter 1

I slip off my shoes, put my bare feet on the ground, and sit on the bench as the early-morning sun shines through the dark green foliage of our Japanese maple. I remember sitting here with my mom on a cool autumn afternoon, with dried leaves rustling around us and the smell of woodsmoke in the air. I'd told her about something that had hurt my feelings, some childhood drama that I can't remember anymore. She'd listened and dried my tears.

"You know who you are, Siya," she'd said. "Your heart knows what's right. Come here, sweetie." I'd scooted forward and planted my feet, just like her. She put her arm around me. "Whenever you need me, I'll be right here."

I didn't know at the time that I'd lose her just two months later. But I still come here to feel her presence, just like she told me to. Dad says I look like her—and I see the resemblance in my curly hair, the shape of my eyes. But I really want to be like the way she *was*, the way she moved through the world, confident and strong and helping people. Mom was a lawyer who dealt with corporations all day but spoke for those without voices in family court at night.

And no matter how busy she was, she always took care of us—Dad, my sister Asha, and me. She always put us first.

"Mom, if you're listening," I say, "wish me luck."

The classroom smells of whiteboard markers and new beginnings. Bulletin boards display images of the Founding Fathers, the Constitution, the

Declaration of Independence, and quotes from Locke and Rousseau, MLK and Gandhi. People who sought the truth above all else. Or so we've been told.

"Well, Mr. Albert," I say to Max. "You should be able to remember what you were doing on that momentous morning. It's the morning your neighbor and friend died."

Max blinks at me. "I do remember. I was watering my flower beds at 8:30 on the morning of August sixteenth, like I always do."

I lean over him. "Are you sure about that?"

Max looks down. "Yes, I'm sure."

I hold up a piece of paper and wave it in the air. "But Mr. Albert, in your affidavit, you said you were already at work at 8:40, and it takes you half an hour to get there. But now you've just said that you were in your yard at 8:30." I draw myself up to my full five foot four. "Were you lying then, or are you lying now?"

Max gapes.

"It's a simple question, Mr. Albert."

"I . . . I'm sorry. I guess I don't remember that morning well, after all." He is pleading with his big brown eyes.

But I'm made of stone. I turn on my heel and walk away, then turn back to fix Max with a cold stare.

"Then why should we believe anything you say?"

He collapses into his seat and puts his hands over his face, and I barely stop myself from doing a celebratory hop. He was lying, and I totally caught him!

I glance at an imaginary judge. "Your Honor, I have no further questions."

But Max isn't moving. "Hey," I say. "Are you okay?"

He won't look at me. Did I go too far? I can sometimes get carried away.

Another second ticks by. And another. "Max . . ."

He suddenly sits up and breaks into a grin. "Whew! You had me sweating, Siya. I thought I remembered last year's case, but you tripped me up. You've got this in the bag."

Relief warms my blood. Of course he's fine! He was just acting. That's his job.

I smooth my hair behind my ears. "You really think so?"

Max nods. "You deserve to make attorney this year."

“Truth?” I ask softly.

“Truth,” he says, standing and giving my hands a quick squeeze.

Max knows what the truth means to me, even if it hurts. Because I’ve learned that when you lie, even with the best of intentions, even to protect someone, it can backfire.

“Well, I hope the heads of the mock trial team agree with you.”

I want to be chosen as an attorney. I’d be only the second sophomore in recent memory to do that.

I glance at the clock. “We need to get to class,” I say.

Max hoists his backpack onto one shoulder. “I know you’re going to impress everyone.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Even Mr. Perfect?”

Max rolls his eyes. “Even him.”

We laugh as we make our way out the classroom door.

Just over the threshold, Max almost runs into another student. I glimpse dark eyes and a flash of white teeth.

It’s him. Rajiv Raghavan, the *first* sophomore in recent memory to make attorney. Most of my female friends are obsessed with his broad shoulders, six-pack, and wavy black hair that falls just so, not to mention his role as a top scorer on the varsity soccer team. And if that isn’t enough, his dad is literally a brain surgeon, and his mom is the first-ever Indian American US senator from the state of New Jersey.

He’s Mr. Perfect not because I think it fits, but because he so clearly does.

This year, Raj is a junior and co-head of the mock trial team, so he’s assigning the roles. I need to impress him at tryouts.

Did he just hear me call him Mr. Perfect?

“Rodriguez.” Raj nods at Max. “See you at soccer practice.”

“You know it,” Max says. They fist-bump and Max heads down the hall.

Face hot and heart racing, I try to step past Raj.

“Siya,” he says, and I look at him in surprise. I wasn’t aware that he even knew my name.

Raj stands in the threshold. His arms are crossed. His megawatt smile is gone; he’s frowning.

“Nice cross. Pretty much *perfect*.” The last word is almost a growl.

“Uh, thanks.” I can’t meet his eyes.

“Guess I’ll see you at tryouts.” He moves past me into the classroom.

I scramble to class, knowing the trial hasn't even started, and I've already insulted the judge.

I fly through my morning classes—trig, English, Spanish—and I'm starving when I get to lunch. Grace slides in next to me, and Max leans back in his seat to grin at us both. The three of us have been best friends at Bright Academy since fourth grade, when my mom died suddenly in a car accident.

When your parent dies, the whole world changes.

It was hard enough at home, where Dad and Asha shared my grief. But when I went back to school, I didn't know how I fit into the world anymore. Most kids said "sorry" and then either acted like nothing had changed or stopped talking to me altogether. But Grace and Max listened when I wanted to talk and talked when I needed a distraction. They didn't tell me everything was going to be okay. They just helped me through that horrible time until, little by little, I moved toward okay.

That's the kind of friendship that doesn't go away.

"How was your morning?" Grace asks. Her dark brown hair is up in a messy bun. She somehow manages to look chic in overalls, and there's a smear of blue paint in the shape of Florida on her elbow.

"English is going to be excruciating this year," Max says. He's tan from the summer and his wavy hair is streaked with golden highlights. "Why do we have to take it all four years?"

"Our Women in Lit class is already amazing. Right, Grace?" I say.

"Absolutely," she says. "I can't wait to dig into some Austen. What are you reading, Max?"

"Russian novels," he says with a groan. "I didn't even put it down as an option. But I think it's the only thing that worked with the rest of my schedule."

"You're too smart for your own good." Grace smirks. "Serves you right for taking pre-calculus as a sophomore."

"Exactly." I start eating my grilled cheese with tamarind chutney—Dad's specialty. He still insists on packing lunch for me at least once a week. Slightly embarrassing, but delicious.

Max gives us his sad puppy look. "First, Siya roasts me while practicing for mock trial before school, and now I'm being mocked at the lunch table.

Is there nowhere I can escape this abuse?"

"It's our job to keep you from getting too full of yourself." Grace pushes her bangs out of her eyes and smiles evilly at Max.

"Speaking of which, I'm pretty sure Raj Raghavan heard me refer to him as Mr. Perfect." I put my head in my hands.

"He didn't hear us," Max reassures me. "Besides, he's cool. He wouldn't hold that against you."

I shake my head. "You didn't see how he reacted."

"He probably thinks you were just telling the truth," Grace says, and we all laugh.

"I'm serious," I say, still giggling.

"These chips are seriously delicious," Max says, stealing another truffle chip from my bag.

I open the bag wider. "My chips are your chips." I only bring them for him, anyway. I finish my sandwich and bite into an apple.

"What's up this weekend?" Grace asks.

"We're getting the mock trial team case tomorrow, so my hot date is with those files," I say.

"Oh come on," Grace says. "Live a little. It's the third week of school—you can't work the whole time. Let's go thrifting."

I'm tempted. "I don't need more clothes," I say.

"Need is irrelevant when it comes to cute clothes."

"Want to go into the city? Or we could do a *Swords and Sorcery* marathon before the new season drops," Max offers.

I shake my head. "I need to be Siya Kumar, attorney at law, this weekend."

"Nope. We're not going to let you work yourself to death this early in the year," Grace insists.

"Yeah, you're going to have fun, even if it kills you," Max says.

I open my mouth to start negotiating when a voice interrupts us.

"Hey, Siya."

I look away from my friends to see Lorenzo Lemon, Raj Raghavan's best friend. Lorenzo's light brown hair sticks up artfully, and a lazy smile plays on his face. I don't think he's ever said two words to me, even though we were both on the mock trial team last year.

"Hi," I say.

“I’m having a party at my house Friday night. Hope you can come.” Lorenzo looks at me for a moment, then includes Max and Grace. “All of you are welcome, of course.”

“Uh . . .” I look across the room to the table where Raj is holding court with more beautiful people. He catches my eye, turns on that smile, and nods.

My entire body lights up. This is not computing. I’m a random sophomore nobody who mocked him behind his back, and he’s, well, *him*.

“We’ll be there,” Grace says, not missing a beat.

“Sure,” Max says, like it’s normal for us to be invited to parties with the hot, rich crowd.

“Nine o’clock, okay? See you, Siya.” Lorenzo inclines his head, then glides back to his table.

“Oh. My. God,” Grace exclaims. “Raj isn’t mad at you, Siya, he’s *into* you!”

I shake my head. “No way.” I start to sweat. “He couldn’t be.”

“Why not? You’re smart, fun, and pretty.” Grace grins at me. “Right, Max?”

The bell rings and we all stand. “Right,” Max says, holding my gaze with bright eyes. Then he snatches the bag of potato chips and empties what’s left into his mouth.

As I make my way into the hall for history class, I think back to Raj’s frown this morning. And now he wants me to come to a party?

Was he lying then, or is he lying now?

Chapter 2

For this fall I've signed up for yoga to fulfill our physical activity requirement. Since the weather is late-September glorious, we are practicing outside. This, plus the fact that Grace joins me, makes the hour worthwhile. I'm not particularly flexible, but it's something I'm working on.

Our teacher, Abby Sparrow, tells me that yoga is all about practice, not perfection. That's fine for yoga, but perfect is what I need to be if I'm going to earn an attorney spot—and if I want to practice law for real someday. At the very end of class, when most of my classmates fall asleep as we're all lying in Savasana—that's "corpse pose"—I can't quiet my thoughts. I want to be a big part of the mock trial team, no matter how confusing Raj is being.

"Heading home for tea with dad?" Grace asks as we roll up our yoga mats and drop them in a bin.

Dad's job as software engineer lets him work from home, and he always takes a break in the late afternoon for tea.

"Yeah. Want to come?"

"I wish. My mom's taking me on some top secret mom-daughter bonding expedition." Grace shakes her hair out of the bun to cascade onto her shoulders.

"Right. You told me last week," I say.

Everyone thinks about me missing Mom at important times—birthdays, holidays, graduations. And I do. But sometimes I think I miss her more during small moments, like random fall afternoons. Asha used to take me out for special sister dates, but now she's away at college.

Something must show on my face because Grace blinks and a crease appears between her dark blue eyes. “Want a ride home?”

“No, it’s so beautiful I want to walk,” I say. I smile and give her a quick hug to let her know I’m okay.

“I’ll text you later,” Grace says.

The warmth of the sidewalk seeps through my thin slip-on shoes on the twenty-minute walk home. Another bonus to Bright Academy: I can walk there. For years, Asha and I made this trip together, through the posh suburban neighborhoods and the tiny town center of Plumbhurst to our house on the less fancy side of town. But this year, for the first time since I started school, she isn’t with me. And I couldn’t be happier about it.

I hope she’s found peace, contentment, and maybe even fun at college. After the last couple of years, she deserves it.

I let myself in the side door of my house, slip off my shoes, and dump my backpack onto the bench. “Dad, I’m home,” I call.

He doesn’t answer, but a lovely aroma and the clink of dishes reach me, so I know he’s probably finishing making our tea.

When I step into our little kitchen, Dad isn’t alone.

Aparna Auntie is dressed in jeans and a pretty blouse; she must have had the day off from the pharmacy. She’s not my actual aunt, but one of the dozens of Indian American “aunties” who shower us with affection and food.

“Oh, hello, Siya. How are you? It’s getting late; I should go home to start making dinner. Sahana returns from her practice at seven,” she says as she stands.

“Don’t leave because of me. You haven’t even had tea yet,” I say, eyeing the pot still simmering on the stove. Asha would want Aparna to leave, but I see the way Dad acts when she’s around. Dad’s given so much to us; he deserves someone special in his life.

“Yes, Aparna, please stay,” Dad says as he strains the tea into three cups. His hair has gone gray at the temples, but it’s still thick, and his eyes flash with humor. “I have Bombay mix and biscotti, too.” His voice is light and bouncy. Flirty, even.

Aparna sits again, but she looks stiff and uncomfortable.

“Why don’t we go to the living room? The sun is so beautiful in there.” I reach the sink and wash my hands. “Dad, you take the tea, and I’ll bring the snacks.”

“I can help,” says Aparna, but I’m not having it. Whatever cozy little conversation she and Dad were having before I came in, I want them to continue. “Go on, both of you.”

Dad arranges the cups on a tray, then smiles and inclines his head toward the living room. After a glance in my direction, Aparna Auntie gets up and leaves the kitchen.

“Thank you, Siya.” Dad kisses me on the cheek and follows her.

I bring in the snacks and stay as they talk about the usual things: Asha, me, and Aparna’s daughter, Sahana; the upcoming Diwali celebrations in our town; the weather forecast for the next few days and what that means for our garden. Aparna Auntie moved to town a few years ago, a widow with a young daughter. She’s very active in our community, organizing everything from ladies’ lunches to after-school tutoring sessions. Her daughter Sahana is my age but goes to our local public school, so I only see her occasionally. She’s more math team than mock trial, and kind of quiet, but friendly enough.

While Dad talks to Aparna, the wrinkles around his eyes fade, and he looks years younger.

I’m glad Asha isn’t here to see this. We’re both protective of Dad, but I think she takes it too far.

After a few minutes, I murmur an excuse and go out to our backyard with my cup. Dad and Aparna deserve some privacy, and the less I know, the better.

I sit on the bench again. Mom loved being here, in our yard, coaxing vegetables and flowers from our garden. When Mom died, Dad took over, planting, weeding, and fertilizing to keep Mom’s garden thriving. Asha joined him, but I couldn’t do it. I remember Mom out here in ripped jeans and an old T-shirt every weekend, wiping sweat from her brow with dirt-stained hands. The musky smell of tomato plants and the tart burst of the first blueberries on my tongue. But I can’t bring myself to work in the garden again without Mom. I only pull weeds when Dad begs me to help.

But I come here, to this bench, to this tree, where she said she’d always be. It’s the most I can do for now.

As I lean back and sip my tea, the grass tickles my feet, the late afternoon light limns the leaves in gold, and Dad's and Aparna's laughter floats to me on the breeze.

My phone startles me. It's a video call from Asha, so I swipe immediately. "Hey," I say.

"How's the mock trial prep going?" she asks. I think she looks well, although the glare of the sun on my screen makes it hard to tell.

"Pretty good," I say. "Max thinks I'm going to make attorney."

"Of course you are." Her eyes sparkle. "Tell me everything."

I fill her in, then ask, "How about you? How are classes?"

"Still getting used to them. I have plenty of work, but college is fun."

"Made some friends?"

"Yes, little mama," she says with a grin. "My roommate is awesome, and we've got a little group that eats dinner together most nights."

I can't help it. Four years older than me, Asha mothered me after we lost Mom. Until suddenly, I needed to do the same for her.

"Things are good, then?"

Asha looks right at the camera. "Yeah. Really good."

A tightness I hadn't noticed in my chest eases, and I flash her a smile. "The new rosebushes are still flowering. Red and pink."

"Ooh, show me."

I get up and point my screen at the riot of color.

"They're beautiful. All that work this summer was worth it. Is Dad around?"

I swallow. "He's in the living room, finishing tea."

"Put him on, I'd love to talk to both of you," Asha says.

"Well . . ." I don't want to tell her, but I can't lie. Not even when I know how she'll react. "He's with Aparna Auntie."

"What?" Her mouth tightens.

"Come on, Asha. They're just having tea."

"Keep her away from him," Asha says. Her voice grates, cutting through birdsong.

"But—"

"Since I can't be there to take care of things, I'm depending on you. This can't happen. Not now, not ever."

"I know you're worried about Dad. Me, too. And I think this is good for __"

“We’ve been through this before. It’s non-negotiable.” Asha blows a strand of hair out of her face. Her eyes bore into mine like she’s right in front of me instead of hundreds of miles away in Chicago.

I want to argue that Dad’s been both mom and dad to us for six long years. He’s cooked us countless meals. He learned to do our hair and choose outfits. He helped us pick up the pieces when we fell apart and taught us how to laugh again when we thought we never would. He’s all we have, so we’re more than a little protective of him. But what happens when I leave home, too? Doesn’t Dad deserve a chance at love again?

But I don’t want Asha to worry about Dad while she’s starting at college. She needs to focus on herself.

“Promise me you won’t let this continue,” Asha says.

“What can I possibly do about it?”

“You’ll figure something out. Just promise me, Siya.”

I catch a glimpse of deep despair, the endless pit that opened in the spring of Asha’s senior year. I can’t let that happen again.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll do what I can.”

Asha’s face relaxes a little, and she looks off to the side. “Hey, I’ve got a lab tonight, so I’d better go. I’ll text you later.”

“Okay. Make sure you have dinner.”

Asha laughs and sounds like my sister again. “Yes, little mama. Love you, Siya.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

I finish my tea and sit for just a moment longer. *Whenever you need me, I’ll be right here*.

I ache with how much I need Mom right now. But no matter how many times I come to this garden, Mom isn’t coming back.

If Mom were with us, Dad wouldn’t be lonely. Maybe Asha wouldn’t have gone through what she did, when her friends’ betrayal sank her into a depression so deep that she couldn’t function for a whole year. Maybe she wouldn’t always be on the lookout for something that might hurt me and Dad.

I finish my tea and steel myself to walk back into the house.

As I enter, I see that Dad has moved from his armchair to sit on the sofa with Aparna. They’re talking softly, leaning toward each other, sitting so close that their knees are almost touching.

This is going to be so awkward. But a promise is a promise.

“Hey Dad, can you help me with math?” I ask.

Dad and Aparna spring apart.

“Sure, Siya.” Dad looks at me in surprise. “You mean—you mean now?” he asks.

I nod as guilt and embarrassment flood over me. “The homework problems are so hard that they’re going to take me most of the night.”

Aparna stands abruptly. “I must be leaving anyway,” she says, and begins gathering plates and cups.

“I’ve got it, Auntie.” I take everything from her and put it on the tray.

We all go into the kitchen, where Aparna grabs her purse.

“Bye, Gopal,” she says softly to Dad.

He smiles. “Have a good evening, Aparna.”

“See you soon, Auntie,” I say. *Not if Asha gets her way*, I think.

I sigh as I get my trig homework out. I could use Dad’s help. It’s not technically a lie.

But it kind of feels like one.

Chapter 3

Max and I show up to the poli-sci classroom again during Thursday afternoon's Club Block. We're early, but the room is already half full: Raj is there, of course, and the co-president, Tessa, a senior. Lorenzo stands chatting with them at the front of the classroom. A group of four first-years lurks in a corner, talking among themselves. Adele Kim and Chris Rogers, also sophomores, wave at me and Max as they take their seats. There's another senior, Noah Grossman, who's a fave for an attorney spot. And, to my surprise, there's yet another senior: Raven Lockhart, burnout and bad boy of Bright Academy, his sleek dark hair falling over one eye, slouched against the back wall even though there are plenty of seats left. Rumor has it he's slept with half the senior class, and the other half wishes he'd sleep with them.

"What's he doing here?" I ask Max.

Max glances at Raven and shrugs. "To each their own."

Max and I were on the team last year. There's a single case per year, and every team takes turns playing the plaintiff and the defense. We learn how to argue the merits of each, and we compete against other schools in real courtrooms with real judges presiding. Although there's a jury of fellow high school students, it's the judges who assign points to each team member for their performances as attorneys and witnesses and decide which team wins.

By the time the bell rings, the room is packed with twice as many people as last year. My guess is that the combination of Raj's charisma and making it to the state semifinals last year has put mock trial on everyone's radar as prime college app material.

Raj and Tessa move to the front of the room with our faculty advisor, Lyn Tillett, who starts: “Welcome to the mock trial team. Our goal is to encourage students to think through situations logically and be able to see both sides of issues, as well as to foster an interest in our justice system. Anyone who wants to be part of the team will be able to, and everyone on the team will have a chance to contribute. Our attorney advisor, Florence Briggs, will be joining us for our tryouts next week. Now I’ll step back and leave the rest of this meeting to our student co-heads, Tessa Boyce and Raj Raghavan.”

“Hi everyone,” Raj begins.

I swear half the girls, and a fair portion of the guys, bat their lashes at him. I only just manage not to roll my eyes.

“Welcome to mock trial!” Tessa says brightly. Her strawberry blond hair is tied back in a perky ponytail with wisps framing her heart-shaped face. She’s wearing a cute summer dress that walks the line between flirty and professional. The splash of freckles across her nose makes her seem approachable, but I know she’s one of the top students in the senior class and is aiming for an Ivy League college. She and Raj stand so close their arms brush. Are they dating?

“As you know, last year, our team made it to the state semifinals for the first time ever,” Tessa continues.

“And our goal this year is to make it to the finals. And win,” Raj says. He’s wearing the Bright Academy standard for high school guys, khakis and a button-down, but he manages to make them look cooler than most. He surveys the packed room. “With the enthusiasm I feel here, I predict that’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

Everyone but me erupts in applause. What is the deal with this guy? It’s like he’s a cult leader.

Max claps twice, but then he seems to feel my glare and stops.

Eventually, the applause dies down, and Tessa smiles and looks sideways at Raj. They’re totally dating. “First things first. We’ll begin by explaining the positions.”

They both step back to either side of the SMART board. Raj presses a remote control, and a presentation pops up on the screen.

“The mock trial team consists of seven performing members, three backups, and as many researchers as we can get,” Tessa says as an animation shows four blue pens and two orange ones (representing

attorneys and their backups); three purple hands and one yellow (representing witnesses and their backup); and numerous green clipboards (representing researchers). The animation is cute yet compelling. Who made this? Are Tessa and Raj graphics whizzes, too?

"The attorneys will be lawyers arguing for both the plaintiff and the defense on alternating weeks. They will deliver the opening statement, conduct direct examinations of our witnesses, cross-examine our opponents' witnesses, and give a closing statement summarizing our arguments," Raj says. The animation goes on, showing the other side's attorneys in gray. "Attorneys need to have excellent command of the material in the case packet, as well as the ability to think on their feet and deal with the unexpected. Our two attorney alternates will be practicing each week and should be able to take on any attorney role if needed."

Tessa continues as the animation shifts: "The witnesses will give testimony for our side by answering direct questions from our attorneys, and they will be cross-examined by attorneys from the other side. Witnesses need to memorize their affidavits from the case packet like they've actually lived through these events. They can improvise within reason as long as they don't directly contradict their statements in the packet. The witness alternate will have the demanding but rewarding job of learning all the witness statements and being able to step into any witness role at a moment's notice."

Raj picks up again. "Last but not least are our researchers. They're expected to be present at every team meeting and competition, help develop strategies and arguments, and to take notes and help draft statements and examination. Researchers, do not underestimate your importance. We couldn't have a team without you."

Animated clipboards fly across the screen. Raj scans the room and looks past me like I'm invisible. Whatever. Last year, Max and I were two of the half dozen researchers. While Raj is right that researchers are essential to the team, it's essential to me that I be more than a researcher this year.

The signup sheet reaches me, and I put down my name, phone, email. Then there's the column for what I'm interested in doing for the team.

Attorney, I write. It's the only job I want. No second or third choices for me.

The animation finishes up by showing a whole team of pens, palms, and clipboards, all hopping up and down while grouped around a judge's gavel

in the center of the screen. Then they all move together to form the word "Team."

The room erupts in applause again, and this time I join in. Raj and Tessa have made every student in this room feel like they're going to contribute something important.

But regardless of whether Raj Raghavan looks into my eyes, he's not going to make me give up on my mock trial dream. I know he and Tessa have two attorney spots locked up. Noah, the senior, will likely get another, so that leaves a single spot. Lorenzo wants it, I'm sure, and as Raj's best friend and one of the attorney alternates last year, he thinks he's going to get it, I bet. I straighten my spine.

"And now, what you've all been waiting for," Tessa says. "The case packets." Tessa, Raj, and Ms. Tillett each pick up a stack of paper and plop them on a desk in the front row. "Please take one and pass the rest on. These are just the overview materials—you'll find the website and the login info for the rest of the packet on the second page, as well as the link for the shared doc for the entire team to brainstorm and take notes."

Max and I each grab a packet off the top of our stacks and turn to pass the rest back. I shut out the rest of the room as I glance at the first page. It's a civil case—fine. It's a family suing an insurance company—okay. And then I read the rest of the summary.

I shiver in the warm room.

"So what do you think?" Max asks from a million miles away.

I don't answer. The bell rings and I push past the crowd of students and out the door.

No one's in sight as I run to the bathroom, fighting the bile rising in my throat. I splash my face with cold water and stare at the floor tiles, an institutional tan. I'm okay. I swallow and force myself to take a deep breath. Again. Again, and again, until the nausea passes, and my breathing becomes normal again.

My hands tremble as I splash my face one more time. I lay a cool hand on the back of my neck and make myself breathe again. My heart slows a few beats. I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm okay.

I look at my dripping reflection in the mirror. This is just a high school mock trial case. As the materials say, *any similarities to real events are coincidental*. All the bad stuff is in the past. It's time to move forward.

I dry my face with a paper towel and try to get my head in gear for the last two periods of the day. Luckily, I won't be with Max for either of them. I need to pull myself together before he sees me again and asks me what's wrong.

I get through Spanish mechanically, keeping my head down and not volunteering to talk.

Last period is English. I dawdle on my way to class and make sure I sit on the other side of the room from Grace. Our teacher, Ms. Knight, lectures for half the class, and the other half is spent writing an essay, so it's easy to pretend not to notice when Grace tries to get my attention. When we're dismissed, I grab my bag and slip out of the room.

Nothing's wrong. And everything is.

Chapter 4

Dad calls to me from the backyard as I approach my house. He's wearing his old jeans, a Green Day concert T-shirt, and a baseball cap. He's alone—thanks to me. Guilt presses on me as I think of how I chased Aparna out of the house the other day.

"I'm just finishing up some weeding, honey," he says. "I'll make us tea in a few minutes."

"I'll join you. Let me change and I'll be right back." I may not be able to grow anything, but I can rip weeds out of the ground.

I run to my room and throw on a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. I come downstairs, step into Asha's clogs, and join Dad in the yard, where I grab a pair of gardening gloves and start pulling.

I bend and grab and yank. I plod through the dirt, sweating as I work. When I reach the end of a row, I turn around and start on the next one. For the first time since I read the mock trial case summary, my mind is calm.

Dad chats about the peppers he harvested today, the cherry tomato plants that won't stop producing, and when he'll be planting mums and bulbs. We have a common language, Dad, Asha, and me, about seeds and earth and growing things. It's how I stay connected to Mom, even after all this time, even if I can't remember the sound of her voice or the smell of her skin.

Twenty minutes later, we're done.

"Let's clean up and I'll make the tea," I tell Dad.

After quickly washing my hands and face, I get to the kitchen before him. Masala chai today, I think as I heat water in a saucepan on the stove. I slice some fresh ginger, break off a piece of cinnamon bark, bruise a few cardamom pods, and grab some whole peppercorns. When the water is

simmering, I add Assam tea leaves and the spices and stir. After a few minutes, I add milk, bring it to a simmer, then turn the flame down to just a flicker. Then I look in the fridge and the pantry to see what we can have as a snack.

By the time a freshly showered Dad comes in, I've put our two cups of masala chai on the table along with kara pori—spiced rice puffs that I've mixed with red onion, tomato, and cilantro.

Dad says, "To what do I owe this pleasure? Are we already celebrating a mock trial success?"

I laugh half-heartedly and shake my head. All the peace from being outside drains away, and my eyes start to burn.

"Siya, what's wrong?" Dad asks.

"I only read the quick description of the mock trial case . . . but it was upsetting."

He takes my hand. "What did it say?"

I let go of his hand and rummage in my bag for my folder. I open it and flip to the case materials and read out loud: "This year's case involves the family of a woman suing her insurance company to collect payment. The family claims her death was an accident, but the insurance company claims it was a suicide, which is not covered under the policy."

Dad furrows his brow. "All right," he says.

"There's more." My throat tightens, but I clear it. "The woman was a prominent defense attorney. She died in a single-car accident on an icy winter night."

Dad puts down his cup. I watch his Adam's apple move, see the beat of his pulse in his neck.

My mother was a defense attorney. And she died in exactly the same way, six years ago.

I take a gulp of my tea; the too-hot liquid burns my throat.

Dad's jaw tenses. "Oh, honey. I understand why you're upset."

I say nothing. But the memory's like a bruise that's still tender after all these years, a blow so deep it will never fully heal.

Dad waking Asha and me in the early morning, the world dim and cold and blurred at the edges.

How his voice choked when he told us what had happened.

How Mom's car had skidded off the road on an icy turn, flipped upside down, and hit a tree.

How just like that, she was gone.

"I know it's a made-up court case. It's just . . . it's hard to read that." My voice cracks.

The night my mom died, I felt a cold so deep that I thought I'd never be warm again. Over time, we found a way to go on with our lives. But that coldness persists inside me, threatening to overwhelm me again.

Dad moves next to me and puts his arm around my shoulders. "I know. It still hurts. I understand. I feel the same way." His arm is comforting, but he's trembling, too.

I lean into him. Will I ever be able to think about winter, about cars and icy roads, and not brace myself for pain? Will I ever be able to think about Mom and what happened to her, and not become nine years old all over again, shaking in the dark and cold? I think about the little things I loved about my mom: how she'd make caramelized apples with French toast, how she'd stay up late with Asha and me on Friday nights to rewatch movies we loved, how her favorite flowers were peonies. But for years now, the most remarkable thing about her was that she was gone.

"It's a fictional case. It's not about us or our lives," Dad says.

"But there are more similarities," I say. "The woman in the case left her husband and two young daughters." Reading those words, how could I not picture my own family? "Dad . . . there was never any controversy when Mom died, right? About insurance?"

Dad passes his hand over his face. "We had life insurance, of course, but we didn't have to sue anyone. It meant that I could still afford to send you and Asha to Bright Academy, even after we lost your mom."

I nod. Mom was so young when she died. But we're okay because she'd planned ahead for her death.

Dad is silent for a few moments. Then he says, "You know you don't have to do mock trial."

I pull away and look at him in surprise. "I'm not letting the weirdness of this case make me quit the team. I want to be on it. I want to make attorney this year."

"I know," Dad says. "But I want you to know that you can step away if you like. You should do what's right for you."

"It was just a shock." I shake my head. "I'm being illogical."

"No one says you have to be logical all the time."

I frown. “I need to be logical if I’m going to be on the team, and if I want to become a lawyer like Mom someday.” I know who I am. I know what I want.

“Your mom was an excellent lawyer.” Dad’s eyes go far away. “Yes, she was logical when she needed to be. But she also wasn’t afraid to feel deeply, to sometimes let emotion overrun whatever that big brain of hers might be telling her. I think that emotion, that caring—that also made her a great lawyer.” He brushes a strand of hair off my forehead. “Her passion made her arguments even more effective than cold logic. Understand what I’m trying to say?”

I nod and lift my cup again. The tea is at a reasonable temperature now, and its spicy warmth flows through my chest.

“That maybe emotion will help me see something that others can’t?” I ask, unconvinced.

“Exactly,” Dad says.

We spend a few more minutes sipping tea and eating our snack.

“Do you want to talk more?” Dad asks.

I shake my head.

“I can clean up,” Dad says. “You should take a break. Call Grace or Max.”

I bite my lip and turn so Dad doesn’t see my face. Dad always makes sure I make time for friends, but Asha wants him to be alone.

“I love you, Dad.” I kiss his stubble-rough cheek and lean my head on his shoulder again.

“I love you, too, honey.” He lays his hand on my head like a benediction.

We sit for a few more moments until he stirs and starts to pick up our dishes. “Go on,” he says. “We’re having leftovers for dinner, so let me know when you’re hungry again.”

“I’ll try to get my homework done quickly, and then we can watch a show later,” I say.

I grab my backpack, go upstairs, and sit at my desk. I finish my math problem set, double-check my chemistry work, and do some English reading. I write a travel ad for Spanish and read a chapter in my history book. And then there’s nothing left to do but face the mock trial case.

I steel myself and type in the URL on my laptop.

Mock Trial Case Overview:

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

SUPERIOR COURT DEPARTMENT

CIVIL ACTION NO. 2026–924

GREG/GRETA JORDAN, Plaintiff,

v.

ALOUETTE INSURANCE COMPANY, Defendant

STIPULATIONS OF THE PARTIES

NOW COME the parties in the above-captioned matter and hereby agree and stipulate as follows:

1. This is a civil lawsuit for breach of contract based on Alouette Insurance Company's refusal to pay death benefits claimed by the plaintiff under a life insurance policy issued to Lily Jordan. The action was timely commented within the time periods set forth in N.J.G.L. c. 124, 61.
2. The jurisdiction and venue of this court are proper and may not be contested.
3. All pre-trial issues have been resolved and are not at issue in this trial.
4. On January 16, 2024, at 11:35 p.m. a vehicle owned by Lily and Greg/Greta Jordan skidded off River Road in Ferrytown, New Jersey, plunged into a ditch, and struck a tree. Lily Jordan was the only person in the vehicle at the time of the accident.

5. Lily Jordan died as a result of the injuries she sustained in the accident.
6. Greg/Greta Jordan is the only beneficiary under the life insurance policy at issue in this action.
7. The pertinent terms of the life insurance policy are as follows:

> Policy provides a standard death benefit of $20 million;
>
> Policy includes a double indemnity clause, providing for payment of $40 million in the event of accidental death or murder;
>
> In the event that the insured dies as a result of suicide within three years of the policy's issuance, no death benefits shall be owed and the insurer shall only be obligated to return all premiums paid. The policy was issued on September 10, 2022.

8. Prior to trial, Alouette Insurance Company properly tendered payment for all of the premiums paid under the policy.
9. On November 28, 2023, Lily Jordan was notified by the New Jersey State Bar of an investigation into her conduct.
10. The fact finder in this case shall only determine whether the plaintiff is entitled to death benefits under the policy and, if so, the amount of death benefits that are owed.
11. All witness roles in this case are gender neutral.

All persons, places, and events described in the materials are completely fictional.

Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

Chapter 5

"Have fun," Dad says as he drops me off at Grace's house on Friday night. "Stay with your friends, and—"

"Be careful, I know," I say.

"If you need a ride for any reason, just call and I'll come pick you up."

"I'll be fine." I kiss his cheek. "Have fun bowling tonight. I'm going to make French toast when I get home tomorrow, so save your appetite."

Grace greets me at the door, and we only wait a few minutes before Max shows up on his bike. "Four month countdown till my license," he says.

We share a pizza and then Uber to the party.

We get dropped off at the end of Lorenzo Lemon's long driveway, which is already filled with cars. I spot Raj's black BMW, and my heart skips a beat.

We approach the mansion made of floor-to-ceiling windows and metal beams and enter through a fancy striped wooden door flanked by glass panels. The two-story entryway opens into a huge kitchen and living room area that is filled with Bright Academy kids. Despite its size, the house is somehow warm and inviting, with wooden floors and soft furniture. The kitchen island is covered in plastic cups, bottles of beer, and a glass bowl filled with red punch. The bass from the music reverberates and the place jumps with the energy of people talking and flirting and dancing.

Lorenzo is wearing jeans and a black suede T-shirt. "Hey, glad you came," he says. "Drinks are on the table, or there's soda and water in the cooler over there for your designated driver. Snacks in the living room. And feel free to use the pool."

Since the entire back wall is made of glass, we can see straight through to the backyard, where a bunch of kids are gathered around a pool that looks like it belongs in L.A.

"Thanks," Max says as he steers us toward the drinks. He grabs a beer and asks if I want one.

I shake my head. I'm not a fan of beer and I don't feel like risking the punch bowl.

Grace grabs a plastic cup and scoops herself some punch. "I'll report on my findings," she says as she takes a gulp and moves to the living room.

I head to the cooler next to the island and choose a raspberry-lime seltzer. I wipe the outside of the can with my sleeve and pop it open.

"Living on the wild side, I see."

I look up to see Raj, tall and dark, standing next to the island. I take a sip from my seltzer and blink as the bubbles burst in my mouth. "It's quite effervescent," I say. "Way bubblier than that punch, I bet." I nod at the red plastic cup in his hand.

"Oh, my beverage is the opposite of sparkling. In fact, it's quite flat. It's water." He tilts the cup toward me.

"I thought you'd be enjoying all the adult beverages this place has to offer."

Raj shrugs and smiles at me. "Lem always throws a great party. But it's soccer season, so I'm on a regimen."

"How dedicated of you." I scan the room. "Many of your teammates seem to disagree, though."

Raj shrugs again, leans closer. He smells like soap and clean laundry and musky aftershave. "They can do whatever they like. I just do what I know is right. Well, right for me, at least." His eyes are dark and liquid. There's a tiny triangular scar on the tip of his chin.

"So do I," I say, meeting his gaze. "Hence my edgy beverage choice."

He smiles and clinks my can in a toast. "Want to go outside? It's hard to hear in here." He inclines his head toward the backyard.

"Where's Tessa?"

His eyebrows fly up. "Over there, with her girlfriend."

Sure enough, I spot Tessa dancing with her arms around a beautiful dark-haired girl in the corner of the living room. "Oh," I say. So much for being sure she and Raj were dating.

I follow him through the living room, where the music is thumping and people are standing in clumps, some dancing, some trying to talk over the music, some leaning on each other, already tipsy.

We pass Grace, who is dancing with a guy I don't know, swaying her hips while taking a sip from her cup. She raises her eyebrows and gives me a subtle thumbs-up as I follow Raj to the patio.

What am I doing?

We pause at the rectangular pool, where half a dozen kids are stripped down to their underwear, swimming and splashing. I have a brief stab of fear that Raj wants—and wants me—to do the same, but he quickly strides past the pool to follow a stone path farther away from the house to a small gazebo strung with fairy lights. There's a table at its center, and Raj pulls away two chairs and sits on the table, putting his back to the house. I sit next to him and find myself looking over the hill that the house is set on. The center of Plumbhurst sparkles bright and cozy from this distance.

"Best view in town." Raj leans back on his hands.

"It looks so cute from here," I say.

"My thoughts exactly," Raj says, and I turn to find that he's looking straight at me.

Whatever witty rejoinder I might have had flies right out of my head. I swallow. "I'm looking forward to mock trial tryouts next week."

Raj nods. "Me, too. It's an interesting case."

"It's going to be a challenge to argue both sides, though."

"You think?" He raises an eyebrow.

"It's hard to argue that an otherwise healthy person with a family and a good job would kill themselves for insurance money. Especially since there's no history of depression."

"I agree," Raj says. "But one-person car accidents are always a bit suspect."

My ears start to buzz. "You think so?"

"Most serious car crashes involve more than one vehicle. When it's just a single car, there's room to cast doubt on whether it was actually accidental."

"Oh," I say. My heart drops to somewhere below my navel. There was nothing suspicious about my mom's accident. At least, not that anyone told me.

"What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I blow my breath out slowly. My heart flails like an animal trying to escape its cage. It's just a case. A fictional case.

"What is it?" Raj says as he shifts to face me completely. "I noticed you hurried out of the room yesterday."

Can I trust him? I think of his stony frown earlier this week, how he looked right through me yesterday like I didn't exist. I make myself look at him. His eyes are soft, and his face is open, like he really wants to hear what I have to say.

"The case is similar to something that happened in my family." I take a breath. "My mom died six years ago."

Raj reaches his hand toward me, then draws it back. "I'm so sorry," he says.

"It was a car accident. A single-vehicle crash on an icy road."

He lets out a breath. "Oh, Siya, I apologize. That was an ignorant thing to say to you. I didn't know."

I shake my head. "Of course you didn't. It's only your second year at our school." I look away, then continue. "Reading the case brought up a lot of difficult stuff." I feel like someone's knocked the wind out of me. Why would I admit all this to Raj Raghavan, of all people?

"I get it," he says quietly.

"It's not just that there's a car accident. My mom was a defense attorney, just like Lily Jordan, in our case. They both did pro bono work in family court. Lily Jordan had two daughters, just like my mom. She was even the same age as my mom when she died. And my mom's name was Lalita Janardhan."

"The same initials." Raj looks at me sharply. "The case is written by members of the state bar. What if someone who knew your mom used the details of her life on purpose?"

I gasp. "I knew it wasn't a coincidence. You think someone who knew her wrote the case?"

"Definitely." He chews his lip, thinking for a moment. "Maybe I can contact the lawyers who wrote it. That is, if you want me to."

I hesitate. Do I really want to dig more into this?

But then I think about how devastating it was to read the case. Whoever wrote it should understand the consequences of what they did.

"Yeah," I say. "I want to talk to them."

He nods once. “We’ll look into it right after tryouts are done and the team is set, okay?”

“Sounds good.” I thrill at the sound of *we* coming from him.

Raj leans back and looks out over the town again. “You know, about tryouts. If you need extra time to prepare, we can be flexible.”

I stiffen. So, opening up to him makes him think I’m weak and unable to get it together for tryouts. Great job, Siya. “You don’t need to do anything different for me. I’ll follow the same rules as everyone else.”

He turns to me and smiles that smile again. “I’d expect nothing less,” he says.

“Raj, you’re missing the whole party! What are you—oh.” Lorenzo’s voice arrives just before he does. “Why hello, Siya. Having fun?” His smile almost reaches his eyes.

I nod. “Great party.”

Max arrives a moment later. “Siya?”

I hop off the table. “Thanks for the information, Raj.”

Raj springs to his feet. “No problem. I’ll get to work on that after next week, Siya.”

“Great,” I say, wishing I could think of something more clever.

“C’mon, the music’s really good,” Max says, taking my hand.

As I let him pull me back toward the house, I glance back at Raj, whose brows are furrowed again.

“You okay?” Max asks as we enter the living room.

I nod. I think about doing research with Raj, and my stomach flutters.

Dancing with Max is always easy. He takes my hands and twirls me around, making me laugh. Grace joins us, and we dance in a triangle, impervious to embarrassment. No matter what happens, together the three of us are unbreakable.

I don’t talk to Raj for the rest of the night, but I’m always aware of where he is. He makes his way around the room, giving off heat like the sun, talking and laughing and dancing.

By one a.m., Max and I are tired and ready to go. We call an Uber and wake Grace, who is asleep on a sofa in the middle of everything.

I know that later Grace will ask me to recount every moment I spent with Raj. But I find to my surprise that I don’t really want to.

Like I want to keep this—whatever this is between me and Raj—to myself, just for a little while longer.

Trial Materials and Exhibits

1. Claim form from Greg/Greta Jordan signed February 10, 2024
2. Photo of stretch of road where Lily Jordan’s car went off the road
3. Photo of damage to Lily Jordan’s car
4. Letter from Lily Jordan to her daughter, found among her possession
5. Document from New Jersey Bar Association dated November 28, 2023

Chapter 6

On Saturday, Dad and I demolish a pile of French toast with apples, then watch a marathon of *Extreme Dream Gardens*, our favorite show on HGTV.

I periodically check my phone, wondering whether Raj will text me.

He does not.

What would he text me about, anyway? We're not going to do any sleuthing about the authors of the case until tryouts are done.

On Sunday, I finish my homework and look over the mock trial documents again.

Maybe Dad is right—maybe bringing emotion into what I'm saying is exactly what I need to do.

I take notes, compile them, and start drafting.

My phone buzzes that night just as I'm drifting to sleep. My heart leaps.

It's Max.

MAX: Want to meet up early tomorrow to practice?

ME: I'm OK, but I can meet if you want.

MAX: No worries, I'll be fine.

Dots move on the screen, but no words show up for a few moments.

MAX: You OK?

Once I read the whole case, I saw why you were so upset.

ME: Yeah, I'm OK. Thanks for asking.

MAX: Well if you change your mind I'm here for you.

ME: You're the best.:)

MAX: You are.

I'm about to mute my phone when Grace texts.

GRACE: Dream about Friday night!

ME: You mean about your sick moves on the dance floor?

GRACE: My moves were sick, but that's NOT what I'm talking about.

Moonlight, cute guy . . .

ME: He's wayyy out of my league.

GRACE: You mean YOU are out of his.

He's totally into you!

ME: Ha! Gnight!

GRACE: Gnight!

I turn over and go to sleep with a smile.

Monday through Wednesday pass by in a blur. I go to my classes, but I'm barely there mentally. Crafting my opening statement consumes every waking moment. My mind spins with phrases and arguments.

Asha calls on Wednesday night. She updates me and Dad on her week: she's in a study group for her chem class and is reading *King Lear* for Shakespeare. She's not sure whether she wants to declare biomedical engineering or chemical engineering as her major.

"And I got some great deep-dish pizza on Saturday."

"Don't tell me it's better than the pizza here," I tease.

"Never," she laughs. "It's just a completely different category."

This is my sister the way she's supposed to be: smarter than anyone I know, laughing with me and reminding me that working hard and having fun aren't mutually exclusive.

After we lost Mom, I didn't know what to do. Sadness overwhelmed me at times, but I wasn't always sad, and I didn't know how to feel about that, either.

One day a few months after Mom passed away, Asha came into the living room to find me watching *SpongeBob Square Pants*, one of the many things that Max had brought into my life. I laughed at something silly, then

quickly covered my mouth when I realized that Asha was in the room with me.

Asha sat next to me and watched the show for a few minutes. SpongeBob did something ridiculous, and she laughed. I gaped at her.

"This is funny, Siya. Why aren't you laughing?"

I shrugged. What could I say?

"It's okay, you know. You're allowed to find things funny."

"But . . . Mom's gone," I said, tears starting suddenly.

Asha put her arm around me. "I know. But she wouldn't want us to cry forever." She pulled me closer. "It's okay, Siya. We can be both sad and happy at the same time. They're both part of being a person. Mom would want that for us—she knows we miss her, but she wants us to reach for happiness."

"You sure?" I whispered.

"Of course I'm sure," thirteen-year-old Asha said. "I'm your big sister, and I know everything."

Present-day Asha's voice startles me. "Hello, are you still there? Can you hear me?"

"Sorry, just thinking about something."

"As usual." She laughs. "How's mock trial going?"

"Tryouts are tomorrow," I say. I haven't told her about the case, and I don't intend to. No use in upsetting her. I haven't even said much more to Dad, beyond the fact that I'm still trying out for attorney.

"I know you. You're overprepared," Asha says. "Just get some sleep and try not to worry."

"Yes, sir," I say with a salute.

But I take her advice and go to sleep early.

Thursday brings a hint of crispness in the air, reminding me that cooler weather is around the corner. My speech is on repeat in my head all the way through morning classes.

At lunch, I push my sesame noodles to Max, who immediately starts snarfing them down.

"How can you eat that after having four slices of pizza?" Grace asks.

"Growing boy," Max mumbles between mouthfuls. "And we've got a late game, so I'm going to be starving later."

"Siya, don't you want to eat anything?" Grace asks. "You need to keep your strength up."

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Any word from you-know-who?”

I shake my head and avoid looking at the table where Raj and Lorenzo sit. “Doesn’t matter.” I don’t care if Raj ever texts me as long as I do well enough to get an attorney spot.

Even if we seemed to have a connection Friday night.

“Can I have your apple, too?” Max asks.

“As long as you promise to help me with trig during study hall tomorrow,” I say.

“Do you even have to ask?”

I show up early for my tryout during Club Block and wait outside the door anxiously. I hear a guy’s voice going up and down inside the room, followed by a female voice, but I can’t make out the words. I fold, unfold, and refold my papers, then put them in my pocket.

The voices go quiet.

A minute later, Lorenzo emerges from the room with pink cheeks and a smug smile. “They said to give them a few minutes, then head in,” he tells me.

“Thanks. Things go well?”

“Well enough.”

Five minutes later, I wipe my palms on my pants, knock, and open the door. My pulse thrums in my suddenly parched throat. Raj, Tessa, Ms. Tillett, and Ms. Briggs, our attorney advisor, finish writing on notepads and look up as I enter and make my way to the front of the classroom.

“Siya, right?” Tessa asks, glancing at the signup sheet.

“Yes. Siya Kumar,” I say. My voice is breathy. “I’m a sophomore.”

“You were on the team last year,” Ms. Tillett says.

I nod, then remember to answer verbally. “Yes, I was a researcher.” I swallow. “But this year, I’m trying out for an attorney position.” I hand them a stack of papers. “Here’s what I would ask my first witness on direct examination. And I’ve prepared an opening statement.”

“Very good,” Ms. Tillett says. “You can start anytime. Remember, no more than five minutes, just like in court.” She smiles encouragingly.

Raj is still studying something on his desk.

“I understand.” I pull out my speech, unfold it. I clear my throat.

Raj still isn't looking at me. He taps his pen on his notes.

Why am I doing this? What am I trying to prove? I'm not going to make attorney this year, not when Raj's best friend and a bunch of other juniors and seniors are vying for the same spot. And do I really want to spend months reliving what happened to my mom? I fold my speech back up and shove it in my pocket.

But then I think of Mom, her tired but triumphant expression when she came home from work in her dark suit. I think about her passion for the law. I think of how she spent her days working to support our family but devoted so many nights working on behalf of those who couldn't afford their own lawyers. "The truth is like a flame that burns away lies, Siya," she told me. "Helping people tell their truth is the most important thing I do."

I know who I am.

I want to be like Mom. I want to help people get treated fairly, no matter who they are. And this is the first step on that path.

I look at the four people in front of me. "May it please the court, Your Honor and members of the jury," I say, holding the gaze of each of them in turn. "My name is Siya Kumar, and I'm an attorney for the plaintiff in this case, Greg Jordan.

"This is a simple case. A few years ago, my client and his wife planned for the future of their family, and just in case the unthinkable happened, they took out life insurance policies to ensure their two young daughters were taken care of. Lily and Greg Jordan paid their premiums on time. That is not in dispute. But then Lily Jordan passed away in a terrible accident, and instead of paying what was rightfully due to the Jordan family, the Alouette Insurance Company failed in its obligation according to the law."

I turn and walk a few steps, then address my audience again. "The defense will claim that Lily Jordan's death was a suicide simply because it was a one-car accident. They will try to confuse you with conjecture and innuendo. They will focus on a bar investigation. On the presence or absence of tire marks."

Raj locks eyes with me. His face gives away nothing about what he's thinking.

I straighten my spine and throw my shoulders back. "But as I said before, the facts of this case are simple. Lily Jordan, a successful attorney and loving wife and mother, died in a tragic accident, leaving behind a bereft

husband and daughters. She should have had years ahead of her to work at the job she loved and to raise her family. But she didn't get that chance.

"We will present witnesses who will testify about how Lily was devoted to her family and her job. How she had many things to live for, how she had no history of depression. We will present facts about the road where Lily's car spun out of control, and how it is a common site of accidents on rainy and snowy nights."

I take a deep breath.

"No one can truly know what's in another person's mind. But consider this, members of the jury: Lily Jordan was out driving on an icy winter's night, coming home from work. We don't know what exactly she was thinking, but we do know what was in her purse the night she died. The evidence will show that in addition to her usual effects, she was carrying a letter. A birthday letter for her younger daughter, who was turning nine the next week."

I swallow the lump in my throat and clasp my hands behind my back. "I want you to think about that letter, members of the jury. I want you to think about writing a birthday message for your child. How does that make you feel? Does it make you think about all the years you want to spend with this person? About all the milestones and small moments that lie ahead?

"How can we determine that a person intended to end their life on purpose when they were clearly so looking forward to the future?"

I bring my hands in front of me and clasp them again. "No insurance company should be able to deny payment by manufacturing suicidal intent. Do not reward them for it, members of the jury. The evidence will be clear, and no amount of innuendo should muddle it. The evidence will show that Lily Jordan loved her family and her job, and she had no intention of ending her life. When you see the evidence, I know you will have no choice but to find in favor of the plaintiff. I know you will do what is right and require Alouette Insurance Company to pay the Jordan family what they are owed. We can't bring Lily Jordan back, but we can make sure that her family is taken care of, as she took steps to prepare for years ago. Please let Lily Jordan do one last thing for the family she loved. Please let her thoughtfulness and planning bear fruit."

I drop my hands. "Thank you."

I nod at the four people in front of me and then walk out the door.

I wander through the school in a fugue state, thinking about my speech. About Lily Jordan. She wouldn't have killed herself, I just know it. She had a whole family who loved her and depended on her.

Just like my mom.

There was nothing suspicious about Mom's death, Dad said.

One-person car accidents are always a bit suspect, Raj said, like everyone knew it.

"Siya! Congrats on being done! Come, tell me all about it," Lorenzo calls.

I blink and focus on him. He's sitting on a faded blue couch with two other juniors.

I glance down. I've clenched my hands so tightly that my nails are digging into my palms.

How the heck did I get to the Fishbowl?

Technically, it's the Lockhart Reception Room, but everyone calls it the Fishbowl. It's the student lounge where the high schoolers hang out. It has a bowed glass window made of multiple triangular panes that looks out on the sports fields, so it's flooded with light—a place to see and be seen. It's the place where gossip starts at Bright Academy.

I don't want to be here. This is where Asha learned that her boyfriend and her best friend had been hooking up behind her back.

"Come on, don't be shy," Lorenzo says.

I can't just leave when I've only just arrived, and he literally called me over.

I trudge over to him, trying not to shuffle my feet.

"So how did it go?" Lorenzo leans back in the sofa, like this is his house. He pats a space next to him.

I sit and try not to hunch. "Okay. Pretty good," I say.

"Did you do a statement and a witness exam?"

"An opening statement. For the plaintiff."

"Interesting choice," he says. "But you didn't examine a witness?"

"I handed in my questions, but I didn't ask them, if that's what you mean."

"Hmm." Lorenzo strokes his chin.

My stomach flips. "Hmm, what?"

"Oh, nothing. In addition to my closing statement, I did a cross-examination of Tessa, who played Greta Jordan."

“Was I supposed to do that?”

“Didn’t they ask you to?”

“I don’t know. I left right after my statement.”

“Oh.” He gestures with a long-fingered hand. “I’m sure your speech gave them all they needed.”

I nod, but I feel like kicking myself. I didn’t even wait to hear if they wanted me to do more. I ran out of the room like a little kid.

“Siya!” Max’s voice carries across the room, and he practically leaps to close the distance between us in three strides as I stand.

He grabs me around the waist, lifts me, and spins me around. “That was the best tryout ever!”

Of course. There was another person after me, and then it was Max’s turn. I was supposed to wait for him.

“Oh, I’m so glad!” I say.

We plop ourselves on a hideous yellow couch and Max gushes about the witness testimony he gave (Sandy McNamara, the paralegal at Lily Jordan’s law firm) and how aggressive Raj was with his cross-examination. But Max held up.

“I’m glad Raj is on our team,” Max says. “He’s a beast in mock trial, just like in soccer.”

I’ve seen Raj in both places, and Max is right. Raj gets that same look on his face of complete concentration. My skin feels hot and tingly.

Lorenzo and the others lean forward to hear more of Max’s story.

I really am happy for him, but it only highlights what I already know.

I blew my tryout.

No way am I making attorney.

Chapter 7

The next Thursday, I'm crammed in the packed poli-sci room, bracing myself for disappointment. I didn't even put a witness role down as a possibility, which means I'm going to be a researcher. Again.

"Welcome, everyone," Tessa says. "We're excited to make the team announcements, but first we have to get through some business."

Raj takes over. "At the end of today's meeting, we're going to ask folks to commit to the team. If you commit, that means attending every practice and coming to every trial—attorney, witness, alternate, or researcher. Please don't sign up if you can't do this."

"We had to make some very difficult decisions after tryouts," Tessa continues. "We have many talented students who clearly put in a lot of time preparing. We appreciate you all, and we hope you will continue to contribute to the team even if you aren't in a performing role or an alternate."

I don't know whether I can force myself to stay on the team as a researcher again.

But I also don't think I could bear being off the team completely.

I grit my teeth.

"We'll start with the attorneys," Tessa says. "The four attorneys will be Raj and myself, Noah Grossman . . ."

I hold my breath. It's going to be Lorenzo. It's got to be Lorenzo.

". . . and Beth Shepherd."

Wait. What? How did that happen? Beth is a senior, someone who used to be on the debate team but is moving to mock trial. I glance over to where

she's sitting—she's a tall girl with short brown hair, and her face is bright red. A collective gasp fills the room.

Lorenzo Lemon's eyes narrow into a squint.

"The attorney alternates are Lorenzo Lemon . . ." I tune out as Raj continues. How can he sound so casual when Lorenzo looks like he wants to murder someone—probably him?

Everyone starts murmuring to their neighbors.

Max elbows me. "Congratulations!" he whispers.

I elbow him back. "For what?"

"For making attorney alternate?" Max's eyebrows fly up.

"Haha, very funny," I whisper.

"Don't tell me you didn't hear Raj call your name."

The other sophomores, Adele Kim and Chris Rogers, grin at me from across the room.

Oh. *Oh.* I guess I didn't completely mess up after all?

I'm an alternate! I get to be part of the team and go to every competition! And if someone has a conflict or is sick, I might even be called in!

I can barely believe it.

I glance at Lorenzo. He's smiling back, but his hands are balled into fists at his sides.

Then the witnesses are announced: Max and Adele aren't big surprises.

I elbow Max playfully. "Congratulations!"

He smiles and elbows me back.

And then the third witness is announced: Raven Lockhart.

What?

Everyone looks for him. I spot him slouched against the wall in the corner of the room. His hair falls over one eye and a slow smile curves on his face.

"I can't believe he got a spot," I say. "I hear he barely shows up to class half the time and has never been part of any club since he started high school."

"Guess he really impressed them at tryouts," Max replies.

Chris is the witness alternate. And that's the whole team. Everyone else is a researcher.

"I'm so excited," I tell Max. "We can keep practicing together."

"Can't wait," Max agrees.

“Okay, everyone,” Raj raises his voice and puts his hand up, and the room quiets. “Now we know the makeup of our team. But everyone whose name didn’t get called, we need your brains, your strategies, and your support to help this team succeed. We’re passing out the final signup sheet—as I said earlier, this is a commitment. Please join us. We can’t wait to get to work.”

Raj locks eyes with me, and my face heats.

People sign the sheet, or don’t, and make their way out of the room. Max and I stand.

“Attorneys, witnesses, and alternates, please stay,” Raj says. “We’d like to discuss a few more things with you.”

Max and I head to the front of the room, where the rest of the team is assembled. Lorenzo’s smile is stretched over a very tight jaw. Tessa and Noah chat easily. Raj and Beth are talking to each other. Adele squeals as she hugs me, and Chris straightens his signature bow tie as he high-fives Max. Raven crosses his arms and stays at the edge of the group.

“We’ll be meeting during Club Block, of course, but we’ll also need to practice after school at least once a week and probably one weekend day, with more sessions added as needed,” Tessa says, handing out a schedule. “We’ll try to accommodate everyone’s other commitments, but we need to know that this group is a priority for everyone. If you have a conflict, let us know now so we can choose alternative times. If you have too many conflicts or have thought better of being on the team, please let us know as soon as possible so we can fill your spot.”

I glance at the schedule. They want to meet *a lot*—but I’m ready for it.

Max looks at the schedule and nods.

“Okay. First practice is here this Saturday at three. See you then,” Tessa says.

Max and I start to leave.

Raj calls, “Siya, could I speak to you for a minute?”

“I’ll see you in a bit,” I tell Max, who nods and heads for the door.

Raj brings me to a corner of the room near the bulletin board with the Constitution. “Have you thought about what we discussed the other night?”

My mind races. What had we talked about? The case—and my mom. But what was I supposed to think about? “What do you mean?” I ask.

“Would you like to reach out to the lawyers who wrote this year’s case?”

“Oh, y-yes,” I stammer.

“My mom knows the head of the Mock Trial Committee. Let me try to get the names of the writers. I’ll email one of them, and if they agree to talk to me, I’ll make sure you’re on the call, too. Sound good?”

He’s going to help me get to the bottom of who wrote this case, just like he promised. He understands how much this means to me.

“Sure,” I say. “Thanks.” It’s a poor word to express how grateful I am.

Raj nods. “I’ll keep you posted. Welcome to the team, Siya.”

I leave the room and find Max waiting for me. “What was that about?”

“Attorney stuff,” I say.

“Want to hang out tomorrow night and talk mock trial strategy?”

“Sure,” I say. “I can ask Grace during English.”

“Oh—well, of course you can, but she might not be that interested, since she’s not on the team.” Max sticks his hands in his pockets.

“Come on, it’s Grace. She’s always interested in everything. We can meet at my house—we’ll order pizza, and I’ll make dessert. Sound good?”

“Yeah. And Siya—congratulations. I know how much you wanted this.”

“Congrats to you, too. I’m so glad we’re on the team together.”

Max hugs me to his chest and rests his chin on my head for a moment. I squeeze him back, and then we break apart again.

“Talk soon.” The bell rings, and he takes off for his next class.

At my locker, I swap out my mock trial notebook for my Spanish and English books and close the door. The metallic jangle reminds me of something I wish I could forget.

Two years ago, I’d seen Asha’s longtime boyfriend Grant (her *love*, she’d called him, like she was some romantic eighteenth-century heroine) and her best friend, Alice, together at these same lockers. Something had bothered me about the way they’d been standing. But it hadn’t seemed like a big deal, so I never told my sister. A few weeks later, when she realized they’d been hooking up behind her back, the betrayal nearly destroyed her.

She screamed that she didn’t want to go to college. That she didn’t want to do anything. Then she stopped talking to Dad. To me. She stopped talking, period. She sank into a pit of despair so deep I thought she’d never come out of it. She started going to therapy, and even took medication for a while. And then, finally, she was well enough to go to college this fall.

There’s no way to be sure, but I can’t shake the thought that I might have been able to prevent Asha from going through hell. I should have told Asha

what I knew, but I didn't. And I still haven't found the courage to confess to her.

I give Dad the good news as soon as I walk in the door and then run upstairs to call Asha.

"Well?" she asks.

"Attorney alternate." I grin.

"Congratulations! I knew you could do it, little mama. Mom would be so proud of you. She loved the law. She always said it was fun to find the details that could decide a case."

"Thanks. But Asha . . ." I trail off, not knowing how to ask what I want to know.

"What is it?"

"Can you tell me something about her? About Mom?"

Asha looks puzzled. "What do you want to know?"

I sigh. "I don't know. It's just—I was so little when she died. I can't tell if most of my memories are things that I actually remember, or things that you and Dad told me. So . . . did Mom ever seem . . . sad?" I am really messing this up. What do I expect Asha to tell me?

"Of course, Mom was sad sometimes. Aren't we all? But I'd say that overall, she was happy, even if she did work too hard."

"I mean . . . was she ever so sad that you were worried about her? Did she ever seem . . . hopeless?"

Asha's smile disappears. "You mean, like me? Like how I was last year?"

I nod.

"Siya, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Really. I just want to know more about Mom."

Asha sighs. "Depression isn't always hereditary, you know."

"I know. I just wanted to know if Mom had to deal with it."

"If you're not struggling, where's this coming from?"

I don't want to talk to Asha about the mock trial case. I shrug my shoulders. "I was just thinking about Mom. There were so many things I didn't get to know about her."

"I mean, I was just a kid, too. It's not like Mom would tell me everything, so I can't say for sure. But from what I remember, when something upset Mom, she'd usually be more mad than sad. At least that's how it seemed to

me. Like when something went wrong for one of her clients in family court. Or when someone implied that they were surprised at how good she was at her job despite being a woman. Then she looked like she could breathe fire."

"Hmm."

Asha glances down. "Shoot. I've got to get to my section. You sure you're okay?"

"I'm an attorney alternate! I'm better than okay." I smile my brightest, even though Asha just gave me the most simplistic answer possible about Mom.

"Good. But promise me you'll tell me if you need help."

"Yes, little mama," I say softly. "I promise."

Birth

While plowing a field, King Janaka of Mithila found a baby girl in a hollow in the ground, a gift from Mother Earth. The king named her Sita, which means “furrow,” and raised her as his beloved daughter.

In King Janaka’s palace was a mighty bow, the bow of Lord Shiva, which had been given to Janaka’s ancestor in the distant past. It was so heavy that no one in the kingdom could budge it.

Except Sita.

Even as a small child she could lift the bow easily, string it, and shoot it.

Mock Trial Case Materials

Witnesses for the Plaintiff

1. Greg/Greta Jordan: husband/wife of the deceased
2. Antonia/Antonio Goldman: friend of Lily Jordan and attorney at her law firm
3. Randall/Rachel Hawley: police officer on the scene

Witnesses for the Defendant

1. Ronna/Ron Pulaski: investigator from insurance company
2. Sandy McNamara: paralegal at Lily Jordan's law firm
3. Chris Barber, PhD: psychologist asked to render an expert opinion

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Chapter 8

The Fishbowl is packed Friday morning during my free block, and for once, I'm happy to be here. Everyone is talking about our varsity soccer teams, both undefeated. Bright Academy doesn't have a football team, so soccer is sports royalty. Amazingly, plenty of kids are also discussing the mock trial team roster. I guess Raj has given it a shine it never had before.

People I barely know congratulate me, and I murmur my thanks.

Grace beams at my side. "I'm so excited for you and Max," she says. "I might even come to one of your trials."

"Really?" I ask.

"Maybe I'll write a feature about it," she says. Grace writes for our school paper, *Bright Edition*. "Or maybe," she pitches her voice low, "I just want to see the famous Raj Raghavan in action."

I nudge her shoulder with mine. "He's just a guy."

"A very cute guy," she says. "Lorenzo isn't bad, either. Add in Raven Lockhart and it's a team full of eye candy."

We laugh and sit on a sofa to sip the iced coffees that Grace bought on the way to school.

Next, Grace and I have English, where Ms. Knight tells us more about the paper we'll be working on in the spring.

"I don't want you starting on the paper now," she says, walking back and forth at the front of the classroom. "But I'd like you to start thinking about it. This year, we're going to read a lot of books and consider many stories centering female characters, from Greek mythology to the Bible to Shakespeare, Alcott, Austen, Morrison, and others. I want you to think about what story or stories are meaningful to you, how they center or depict

female characters, what that says about the societies in which these works were written, and how it can inform how we think about our own society. I'd like for you to send me your reading list by the end of this semester so I can approve it early in the spring semester."

I fiddle with my pen. What kind of story resonates with me?

I have no idea.

Grace raises her hand. "Do we need to limit ourselves to Western literature?"

Ms. Knight shakes her head. "Not at all. But if it's not something that most people in the US would be familiar with, it would be helpful if you included a summary of the story in your paper."

Interesting. I think about the stories I've grown up with, the stories that my parents have told me.

There's one that haunts me: the story of Sita, the one I'm named after, the revered wife of Rama. But what could I possibly say about a story that's been told and retold, analyzed, and venerated for thousands of years?

I write the idea down anyway.

Max's mom drops us off at school on Saturday afternoon for our first mock trial practice.

"What a game this morning," I say. "Still undefeated!"

"Our team has really gelled this season," Max says. He stretches his arms over his head. "And I already took a nap, so here I am."

"Wish I'd taken one." I nudge him with my elbow.

The poli-sci classroom soon fills with the team, including half a dozen researchers.

"Let's get started, everyone," Tessa says. "Before we dig into the case, we're going to do an icebreaker."

Several people groan, but I only do it on the inside.

"Hang on, it's going to be fun. And short," Raj says. "We'd like to introduce ourselves and why we're on the mock trial team this year. I'll start: I'm Raj Raghavan, and I'm doing mock trial because I like thinking on my feet and I want to go to law school someday."

"I'm Tessa Boyce. I love acting, and I feel like mock trial is a great mix of theater, improv, and debate."

Nice, I think. I'd never thought about it like that.

“Siya Kumar. I love the idea of helping people get justice. That’s what I want to do, eventually. And this is the first step,” I say.

“Adele Kim.” She fiddles with a pen. “I . . . I just think mock trial is fun.”

“I’m Noah Grossman.” He leans forward and smiles. “I love teamwork. I was an attorney alternate last year, and it was incredible. I’m glad to be a part of the team again this year.”

Max says, “I wanted to challenge myself to get out of my comfort zone—which this definitely is.” He laughs. Then he looks over at me. “Besides, it’s a great way to make friends.”

Chris Rogers straightens his bow tie. The school dress code doesn’t require it, but he’s been wearing ties since seventh grade, even on the weekends. “I’m looking forward to learning more about our justice system.”

“I like strategizing,” Lorenzo says. “And thinking on my feet.”

Finally, everyone turns to look at Raven. “Not sure why I tried out.”

“And what are you looking forward to doing on the team?” Raj asks.

Raven shrugs. “My job, I guess.”

Yikes.

Raj glares at him.

“Okay, let’s keep going,” Tessa says. “First, we’ll look at the facts of the case and brainstorm our arguments for each side. I’ll put them into our shared Google Doc. By the end of this meeting, we’d also like to assign specific roles to all the team members.”

We spend ninety minutes calling out ideas and shaping arguments. Almost everyone contributes—even Raven. It’s fun being a part of this team, developing a strategy together, crafting phrases that are going to be dropped into statements and testimony in court.

We come up with preliminary lists:

PLAINTIFF: ACCIDENTAL DEATH

Evidence:

- LJ was young, with a husband and young kids she clearly loved

- She was a successful and ambitious lawyer
- She and Greg had friction, but there was no evidence that either wanted to leave the marriage
- She had a calendar full of appointments and court dates
- Birthday letter to daughter full of love and plans for the future
- No history of depression
- No history of substance use
- Bar investigation was just an investigation, not proof of wrongdoing*
    - [* look up outcomes for bar complaints/investigations]
- Site of accident has been a place with many accidents historically, including an accidental death in the past

DEFENSE: SUICIDE

Evidence:

- LJ had lots of stress at home and at work
- Loveless marriage/marriage on the rocks
- Overworked and in trouble from investigation
- Death came soon after signing new insurance policy
- LJ provided the primary income for her family; the loss of this income (if she were disbarred or forced to quit) would have been a huge blow
- Didn't need to go home in the ice storm—could have slept at work
- No brake marks on road
- Letter can be interpreted as a suicide note

I shove aside the similarities between this case and what happened to my mom. Instead, I think about my mom doing the same things in law school and in court. I can feel her close to me, encouraging me to keep going, to search for the flame of truth.

But in a mock trial case, there is no "truth"—just ways to argue both sides.

"What about the notion that there was foul play involved?" Lorenzo asks. "There are some hints in the affidavits—no snow tires, husband not knowing what she was doing most days and nights."

"I think that's a red herring," I say. "This is a civil case about insurance, not a criminal case determining the cause of her death. Only the plaintiff benefits from that argument, since they stand to get more money if her death was a homicide, and they don't want to make it."

Lorenzo raises his eyebrows. "You think so?"

"I agree with Siya," Raj says, and the tips of Lorenzo's ears turn pink.

"Me, too," Tessa says. "We wouldn't be able to prove anything, and it dilutes our real argument. What do you think, Ms. Briggs?"

Our attorney advisor nods her head. "I also think it's a distraction from the larger argument. If this were a criminal case, these would be excellent points to bring up, though, Lorenzo."

Once we're done brainstorming, Raj asks if people are interested in taking on particular roles.

"I'd like to do the opening statement, if that's okay—I'm good with prepared speeches," Beth says. "And a direct examination."

That makes sense. A direct examination of one of our own witnesses will be a lot easier than cross-examining a hostile witness on the opposing side.

"Sure," Tessa says. "Unless there are any objections?"

No one has any, so they move on.

"I think Raj should do the closing statement," Tessa says. "He was incredible last year. And no one's better on cross."

"Thanks," Raj says. "I'm happy to do that, as long as everyone agrees."

"Okay, that leaves Noah and me with one direct and one cross each. Sound good, Noah?" Tessa asks.

"Excellent," Noah replies.

"Great. Attorneys, please start separate shared docs with your statements and questions, and we'll work on editing and refining them at our next meeting. We're in court a week from today, so we need to work quickly."

Next, the witnesses divide up their roles. Raven shocks the whole room (or me, at the very least) by speaking up first. “I’d like to play Greg Jordan and Ron Pulaski.”

Those are important roles—the first witnesses for each side. Are we sure Raven can handle it?

But Tessa and Raj seem fine with his suggestion. “Okay with you, Adele and Max?”

Adele says, “I’d like to play Antonia Goldman, the lawyer, and Sandy McNamara, the paralegal.”

“I guess that leaves Randall Hawley the police officer and Chris Barber the psychologist to me. That’s fine,” Max says.

And with that, our meeting ends.

We stand to leave, and Raj asks me to stay back again.

I catch both Max and Lorenzo looking annoyed, but Lorenzo smooths his face more quickly than Max.

Raj takes me aside to a corner with some privacy. “I sent the email,” Raj says. “Now we just have to wait and see.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“I’ll wait a week, and if he doesn’t answer, I’ll email again,” Raj says. “We’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

My traitor stomach gives a thrill at the prospect of *we*. But this is all business—mock trial business. There’s nothing else going on.

“I really appreciate it,” I say. “Are you sure this won’t jeopardize the team?”

“They can’t punish us for just asking about how the case was written, right? I’m disgusted by the idea that someone who knew your mom used her story like this.”

He looks so fierce that my heart speeds up. I want to tell him how much it means to me that I’m not alone in wanting to uncover what happened, but I don’t want to be overdramatic. So, I just nod and leave the room.

Grace and I meet up at our favorite ramen place for dinner that night.

“How’s art class going?” I ask.

“Really good. I’m doing a special project that’s kind of like pointillism but using collage.”

“I don’t understand what that means, but it sounds cool,” I say.

"I'm making a lot of small pieces and then doing a lot of cutting and pasting. I'll show you when I'm further along. How was your first mock trial practice?"

"So much fun. The team's already working well together."

"Sure," Grace says. She wiggles in her seat. "Now tell me about Raj Raghavan."

I laugh. "What do you want to know? He's brilliant and organized and a natural leader."

"And hot."

"Oh, definitely. As the entire school knows. And he clearly knows himself."

"So, Mr. Perfect really is conceited?"

I consider this. "I don't think so, actually. It's more like he's super confident. Not just about his looks, but that he knows how to get things done, and is committed to doing them."

"Not a bad quality," Grace says.

"It's certainly useful as co-head of the mock trial team."

"And in a future politician."

"True."

"And in a potential boyfriend."

I snort and almost choke on my ramen. "I don't think there's much chance of that. At least not as *my* boyfriend. Like I said, he's—"

"You're an amazing person yourself, Siya," Grace says. "And doesn't Raj keep asking to have private conversations with you?"

"Yes, but that's about the case. And who wrote it, and how much they knew about my mom."

"Sure, but it's also an excuse to be alone with you."

I shrug. "Nothing's happened."

"Incorrect, counselor. Nothing's happened *yet*."

We slurp our noodles and move on to other topics.

As I walk home, I think about that word, and all the potential it holds: *Yet.*

Chapter 9

Thursday's Club Block is our last practice before our first appearance in court.

I've organized my papers and follow along as we run through the plaintiff's side of the case.

Beth's opening statement is good, if a bit argumentative.

"You don't have to go into detail about what the defense is going to argue," Ms. Tillett reminds her. "Focus more on what we're going to show."

"Sorry, debate instincts taking over," Beth says. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and finishes her speech.

Then Beth says, "The plaintiff calls Greg Jordan."

Raven slouches his way to the witness stand, a chair we've moved to the front of the classroom next to Ms. Tillett's desk, where Ms. Briggs is standing in for a judge. One moment, he's classic Raven, slightly hunched over with his silky hair falling over one eye. But as soon as he sits, he transforms.

He sits up straighter. He's no longer smirking. He clasps and unclasps his hands in his lap. His eyes are glued to Beth as she shuffles her papers.

He looks . . . nervous.

I didn't think Raven was capable of being nervous.

"Please state your name and relationship to Lily Jordan."

"My name is Greg Jordan," Raven says in a voice that's deeper than usual. "Lily Jordan was my wife. We—our daughters and I—loved her very much."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Jordan. Tell me, how did you and Lily meet?"

Raven smiles wistfully. “We were high school sweethearts. From the moment I met her, she was brilliant, a real go-getter. She’d always wanted to go to law school—no one in her family was a lawyer, but she grew up watching law dramas like *Ally McBeal*, *L.A. Law*, *Law & Order*. She got a full ride to Rutgers for college.”

Beth smiles. “Did you go to college together as well, Mr. Jordan?”

Raven shakes his head. “More school wasn’t something I was interested in, so I took some computer tech classes so I could find a job. Lily and I got married right after she finished college, and I helped support her through law school. She went to Princeton. I won’t lie—it was tough. She spent so many hours studying, writing for the law review, and socializing with fellow students and lawyers and judges. She usually invited me along, but I always felt like a fish out of water. But she loved me, and I loved her, and we were good together.

“Not only was Lily smart, she was also really hardworking. After law school, she worked at a couple of different firms, then moved to Dunham, Amato, and Rao. She made partner early. I was very proud of her.”

“What was your home life like?”

“We were happy. When our kids were born, I was the one who stayed home to take care of them. Lily took barely four weeks of maternity leave with each. Lily’s clients needed her, and she knew the girls were in great hands with me.”

“That couldn’t have been easy, taking care of two small children while your wife worked long hours.”

Raven shrugs. “Lily loved her job, but it took her away from us so often. She worked late at the office and then did pro bono work—that’s work for free—at least one or two nights a week in family court. The girls and I were proud of her, but it definitely wasn’t easy. Even when Lily was home, she was often thinking about a case. So even when she was with us, she wasn’t really with us, you know?” Raven looks around the classroom, and I see a bunch of students nodding at him like they agree. Then I realize I’m nodding, too, and I make myself stop. “But it didn’t matter. We had enough love in our house to more than make up for the challenges.”

“Now I’d like to change topics a bit. When did you purchase life insurance from Alouette Insurance Company?”

Raven rubs his hand across this face. “About a year and a half prior to her death, Lily said we needed to update our life insurance. She wanted to

make sure the girls were taken care of in case something happened to either of us. Lily had a rough childhood. Her father abandoned her and her mom when Lily was very young, so she knew what it was like to always worry about money. She didn't want that for our kids. We already had a life insurance policy, but this insured us for much more—$20 million, and $40 million in case of accident or homicide. I thought it was a little ridiculous to be insured for so much—I certainly would never make anywhere near that much money in my whole life at my job—but Lily said if something happened to me, it would take four people to do what I do for our family. She wasn't a woman to gush with words of love, so that was the closest to gushing that I got. I appreciated it. I . . . never imagined we'd need to collect on that insurance. Certainly not this soon." Raven's voice cracks, and he sounds like he's going to cry. How is he doing this?

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Jordan. Do you need a moment?"

Oh, good job, Beth!

Raven wipes his eyes. "No, I'm fine. Let's keep going."

"Mr. Jordan, can you tell us what happened the night of January 16, 2024?"

Raven takes a deep breath like he's steeling himself. "It was a Tuesday night, and Lily was working late, like she often did. Over the previous several months, Lily had been going to work earlier and staying later and later. She barely saw me and the kids. Anyway, she texted me around ten that night, saying she had at least another hour of work to do. I was upset, and I was curt with her, because she'd promised many times that things were going to change, but nothing ever had. I told her, 'I'm not surprised, but I'm disappointed.' It wasn't until later that I realized those were the last words I'd ever say to her." Raven's voice cracks, and he looks down.

I'm captivated by his performance. Glancing around the room, so is the rest of the team.

"And then what happened?" Beth asks gently.

Raven clears his throat. "I got a call around three a.m. It was a police officer, saying that Lily's car had skidded off River Road during the ice storm and hit a tree, which fell on the car, killing her instantly. I was in shock. I couldn't believe she was gone."

Goose bumps erupt on my arms.

Beth pauses a moment. "Mr. Jordan, why are we here today?"

Raven looks up, and his face transforms from anguished to angry. “We’re here because Alouette Insurance Company is refusing to pay. Lily and I paid our premiums on time, but the stupid number crunchers over there won’t pay us what we’re owed. Their inspector or investigator or whatever they’re called says that Lily committed suicide, so we’re owed nothing. That’s ridiculous.”

“Why do you think it’s ridiculous, Mr. Jordan?”

Raven clenches his jaw. “Because I knew my wife. Lily had a full life, and she was happy. She had a very successful law practice and plenty of ambition. She had lots of friends. She was stressed, but she took it all in stride. Lily loved me, and she loved our girls more than anything in the world. She’d already written our younger daughter, Sally, her birthday letter —it was in her purse. In the letter, she talked about the year ahead and all the fun things they were going to do. That’s not what you do if you’re planning on taking your own life. Lily wasn’t like that. She wanted to live.” Raven’s voice rises emphatically.

“Thank you, Mr. Jordan. No further questions at this time, Your Honor,” Beth says.

“Ready for your cross, Tessa?” Raj asks.

Tessa stands. “Mr. Jordan, isn’t it true that your wife was troubled?”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘troubled.’ Lily had problems, like you and I have problems. But nothing she couldn’t overcome.” His eyes look wounded. The grieving widower is back.

“Isn’t it true that Lily was working too hard?”

“She worked hard. Whether it was too hard was a question only she could answer.”

Tessa clicks her tongue.

“Try not to show irritation at his answers,” Raj says.

“Right. Sorry.” Tessa looks at her notes and then looks at Raven again. “Isn’t it true, Mr. Jordan, that you were angry that Lily worked so much?”

“I was upset that she was losing so much time with the girls. And with me, for that matter. We missed her. But I understood that it was because she was trying to take care of our family,” Raven says.

“But Mr. Jordan . . .” Tessa pauses. “Sorry, I’ve lost my place in my notes.” She shuffles her papers again.

“You know what you’re doing, Tessa,” Raj says. “Take your time.”

“Mr. Jordan, what did you know about the bar investigation into Lily’s conduct?”

Raven shrugs. “Nothing. Lily didn’t tell me about it.”

“She didn’t tell you about something that could have resulted in her losing her license to practice law?”

Raven shakes his head. “I’m sure it was because she didn’t want to worry me. Lily was a fantastic lawyer, so I’m sure it was some kind of misunderstanding.”

“Did she tell you why she was working those long hours?”

“No. She would never reveal anything to me about her clients.”

“But since she didn’t tell you anything about her job, maybe she was hiding her depression from you as well?”

“Objection, Your Honor. Counsel is testifying,” Raj says.

“Raj!” Tessa cries.

“That’s what’s going to happen if you ask it that way,” Raj says.

Ms. Briggs frowns. “Objection sustained,” she says. “I’m sorry, Tessa, but Raj is right. You can’t bring up the idea of depression yourself; try to elicit that from your witness.”

Tessa shuffles her papers again. “Mr. Jordan, how much money do you make in a year?”

“About fifty thousand dollars, more or less,” Raven says.

“And how much did Lily make per year?”

“About two hundred fifty thousand dollars.”

“So losing that income would have been disastrous for your family, right?”

“It would have been hard, yes,” Raven says. “And thanks to Alouette Insurance Company, it’s what we’re dealing with right now.”

“Don’t you think your wife knew that, Mr. Jordan? Don’t you think your wife would have done anything to make sure you didn’t lose the income from her job?”

Raven glares at Tessa. “If you think that Lily would take her own life in order to get money for our family, you’re wrong,” he says. “Lily would never do that. She grew up with one parent, and she knows how hard that is. She would never do that to our girls on purpose.”

“Okay, thank you, Mr. Jordan,” Tessa says.

“I’d like to say one more thing, if it’s okay, Your Honor,” Raven says.

Ms. Briggs raises an eyebrow. “Go ahead, Mr. Jordan,” she says.

Raven tilts his chin up. “I know the insurance payment is a lot of money. But I just want to say that Lily was worth more than all the money in the world. I wish more than anything that we could have Lily back. But I know that’s—that’s not possible.” His voice shakes.

I feel like a steel bolt has punctured my chest. My breath catches in my throat.

Raven looks around the classroom, addressing us like we’re the jury. “So we should at least have what she wanted for our kids. She wanted them to be taken care of. She planned for it. That’s why I’m here. That’s why I’m fighting.”

The whole classroom is silent. I feel like the case is over, and Raven was only the first witness.

Tessa sighs. “No further questions, Your Honor.”

The whole room applauds.

“Anyone have notes for Beth, Tessa, and Raven?” Raj asks.

“Great job asking open-ended questions and not leading your witness, Beth,” Noah says.

“And you did a nice job reacting to Raven’s—to Greg Jordan’s feelings,” Chris adds. “But maybe you could add the ‘do you have anything to add’ question so he can come out with that heartbreaking line?”

“Good idea,” Beth says, scribbling in her notes.

“Tessa, you have to be careful not to come off as antagonizing a grieving husband,” Raj says.

“I agree, but I’m not sure how to do that.”

“Maybe start by saying you’re sorry for the suffering that Lily’s death has caused? What do you think, Ms. Tillett?”

She nods. “I think it would be good to start that way.”

“And you don’t have to make Raven—I mean Greg Jordan—admit everything. Just sow some doubts in the jury’s mind. I think that you were on the right track talking about how Lily and Greg weren’t communicating well.”

“Got it,” Tessa says, scribbling in her notebook.

“Anyone else?” Raj asks.

The room is silent for a beat.

“You were amazing, Raven,” I blurt.

Raven swivels to look at me and smiles. “Yeah?”

Raj scowls. “We’re looking for constructive comments—”

“You went beyond Greg Jordan’s affidavit, but in a way that felt completely organic,” I tell Raven. “You looked like you were going to cry. You made me want to cry. I have no idea how you did it.”

Raven shrugs.

“You made him seem like a real person,” Adele says. “Great job. Do you have any tips for the rest—”

“Sorry, but we’re on a tight schedule,” Raj interjects. “We need to keep going.”

Raven rolls his eyes.

“Next witness.”

“Your Honor, the plaintiff calls Antonia Goldman to the stand,” Noah says, rising.

Raven gets up as Adele makes her way to the witness stand.

As Raven passes by me, he whispers, “Bet you’d be amazing, too.”

I look up, startled, but he keeps going.

My eyes follow him as he slumps into his seat in the corner of the room.

Just as I’m about to turn back, Raven winks.

Chapter 10

I wake to my phone buzzing on Saturday morning. I hold it up to my bleary eyes. It's six a.m. Is Asha okay? But then I focus on the screen and see that it's Raj. What the hell?

RAJ: Hey.

So sorry to wake you.

ME: What's up?

RAJ: It'll be easier to explain if we talk.

ME: Okay, call me.

RAJ: In person.

What the actual hell?

ME: I'm in my pajamas.

Where do you want to meet?

RAJ: I'm in your driveway.

ME: !!Hold on a sec

I drop the phone. I jump out of bed and throw on a sweatshirt and run to the bathroom, where I rinse with mouthwash and finger comb my bedhead. Whatever. Raj can't expect perfection when he wakes me at an ungodly hour on a Saturday morning.

I throw on slippers and run outside, where Raj is standing next to his black BMW in my driveway. This is so surreal that I'm ready for almost

anything—including for him to turn into a cockroach or tell me he's an alien. Or ask me out.

No, that's still too weird.

He's dressed in his Bright Academy warm-up jacket and shorts. I catch a glimpse of his muscular soccer thighs and make myself look away.

"Siya, so sorry for waking you up. I didn't want to do this by email or text, and I needed to take care of this before our game this morning."

"What do you need?" I ask.

"Can you step in as the fourth attorney?"

I gasp. "For the trial this afternoon?"

"For this afternoon, yes. But also for the rest of the year, if you want. Beth has a conflict all of a sudden, and we're in a bind."

"Beth isn't on the team anymore?"

He shakes his head. "She's going back to debate. There was some sort of emergency with their team, and that's where her loyalty lies. So she's with them again."

"What about Lorenzo?"

"What about him?"

"Shouldn't he get bumped up? I mean, he's a junior and I'm a sophomore."

Raj shakes his head. "We need the best person to take the role, and that's you."

"But—"

"If you don't want to, I understand. It really is last minute. But I think you'd do the best job."

"In that case, I'll do it."

His smile makes him even better-looking, which I didn't think was possible. "Awesome. Thank you. You'll be amazing. As you know, we're the defense this week. You can deliver the opening statement and do the first direct, just like Beth was going to, okay?"

I nod. "I have all my notes, and everything's in the Google Doc."

He takes a step toward me, then steps back again. "Thank you. You're a lifesaver. See you at the trial."

He gets in his car and drives off, and I'm left wondering if this was all a dream.

I'm thrilled. Even if I have to argue the "bad" side of the case this time.

When I get back to my room, I text Max.

ME: Um, so
I have news

The response comes right away:

MAX: What?
ME: I'm not going to be able to come to your game this morning
MAX: No big deal. You okay?
ME: Because I am going to be an attorney
NOT an alternate
at our trial this afternoon!!!!
MAX: What?!
ME: Beth flaked and is going back to debate
MAX: Not really a surprise.
I totally side-eyed her move to mock trial, anyway
But I'm glad they figured out
you're the most brilliant attorney on the team
ME: Don't be ridiculous
MAX: Just saying what I know
I'm so stoked!
ME: Raj came over this morning and asked me
MAX: He came to your house?!?!?!
ME: Yep. He wanted to explain in person
MAX: Oh, I'll bet
ME: I'm so excited! Now I gotta go prepare
MAX: You should be
You got this

I put my phone down and grab my notes. I really hope I got this.

Max and I arrive at the courthouse early that afternoon. The courtroom itself looks like it hasn't changed in fifty years, with shabby wood paneling and nondescript mud-colored carpeting. But my skin tingles with excitement because we are here in a courtroom, and I am going to argue a case in front of a judge, just like my mom did.

I'm wearing my one and only suit, and my hair is pulled back in a bun. My hands only shake slightly as I straighten my papers at the attorneys' table. Raj gives me a nod. Tessa and Noah high-five me when they arrive.

"You're going to do great," Tessa says.

Adele comes over and hugs me. "I'm so thrilled for you!"

Raven slouches over to me. "Welcome to the team," he says quietly as he studies me with stunning hazel eyes.

"Uh, thanks," I say. "But I was already a part of the team," I mutter to his retreating back.

Lorenzo shakes my hand. "Congratulations," he says.

"Thanks. Sorry we can't both be attorneys today."

"Nothing to be sorry about. A girl left, so a girl should replace her. It makes sense."

I open and close my mouth. That's not why they chose me to step in.

Right?

Lorenzo smirks and takes a seat with Chris on the bench behind the attorneys' table.

I refuse to let that obnoxious comment rattle me. I deserve to be on the team. I do.

The judge, the Right Honorable Merrill Ramsey, instructs the members of the jury, made up of fellow students from our school and those of our opponent, Plainview High.

"You are to consider the merits of each side's case, but do not worry that your decision will make any difference in who wins this today in terms of the tournament—that's up to me, based on the points I assign for each team member's performance," she says with a smile. "Now, counsel for the plaintiff, are you ready to begin?"

A slender dark-haired Plainview boy stands. "We are, Your Honor," he says.

The judge looks at our table. "Counsel for the defense, are you ready to begin?"

I stand. "We are, Your Honor," I respond in a surprisingly steady voice.

The trial starts, and the plaintiff's first attorney, the same boy who stood and spoke, makes their opening statement. He uses many of our own talking points for the plaintiff, including the fact that Lily Jordan was a successful lawyer and mother, that she had everything to live for, and that she had no history of depression. But then the argument turns to the notion that there

might have been something sinister going on, that Lily's death was not a suicide, but it might not have been entirely accidental. What? I look at my teammates and shake my head. As we discussed last week, this line of reasoning leads down a path with no proof.

Plainview has already made a big mistake.

Then I stand up, terrified and exhilarated. My face is warm, but my hands are cold. I'm finally doing what I've dreamed of for months: playing an attorney on our mock trial team.

Too bad I have to argue something that I do not believe with every fiber of my being. It's a fictional case, I remind myself. It's not about my mom. I glance back at Max, who gives me an encouraging nod. Sitting next to him is Lorenzo, still smirking. I'll show him.

"I'm Siya Kumar, representative for the defense," I tell the jury. "No one in this courtroom will deny that what happened to Lily Jordan was a tragedy. But during this trial, it will become clear that Lily Jordan, wife and mother of two, successful attorney, had been plagued by demons that were closing in on her. Her marriage was in trouble, she was in debt, and she was under investigation by the state bar. She was overworked and exhausted. She couldn't escape her peril, but she didn't want to drag her family down with her. So, she did what she needed to in order to get them financial security: she drove on a dangerous road during an ice storm on purpose, and swerved off the road on purpose, causing her own death.

"The evidence will be clear," I say. "We can feel sorry for Lily Jordan and her family, but that does not mean they are legally owed anything more than what they've already been paid."

I clench my hands and think of my own mother. I hope she understands that I'm just playing a role.

I finish and sit down next to Tessa, willing my pulse to slow and feeling grateful that I get to wait for the plaintiff to call their witnesses before we call our own.

My direct examination is of Ron Pulaski, the insurance investigator played by Raven. He plays the role completely differently from how he played Greg Jordan, exuding professionalism rather than emotion. While answering my open-ended questions, he hits every point we emphasized in practice: how in the course of his investigation, it became clear that in the weeks before her death, Lily was getting more exhausted and frazzled; how

much trouble she had at both work and at home; how she seemed to be running out of options. He manages to sound both empathetic and objective.

At the end, he improvises: “I’m truly sorry that the Jordan family is suffering. I wish I could have drawn different conclusions. But I couldn’t,” he says. “It was clear to me that Lily Jordan took her own life, and I had to put that in my report.”

And then, when the other team’s attorney cross-examines Raven, he runs rings around him.

“I have no stake in how much money the Jordan family collects,” Raven says. “All I can do is put the facts of the case together and write my report objectively.”

It’s like Raven was born to be a mock trial witness.

Adele and Max do great jobs as the paralegal and the psychologist, respectively, and then it’s time for closing statements.

The plaintiff’s side does a decent job, but their arguments are muddled by the hints that they think someone else caused Lily’s death on purpose. Tessa objects, twice, and her objections are sustained by the judge.

Then Raj gets up and summarizes all our points perfectly. “The evidence has shown that Lily Jordan took her own life on that icy winter night, and according to the contract that both she and her husband signed, her family is not due anything other than what they’d paid in premiums, which has already been paid. We’re sorry that Lily Jordan was feeling so desperate. We truly are. But based on the evidence at hand, you must find in favor of the defense.”

Raj sounds so reasonable. *One-person accidents are always a bit suspect*. But this case isn’t about my mom. There’s no reason to think she ever felt that way. Dad said there was no problem with the insurance company. Asha said Mom wasn’t depressed. And I know my parents didn’t have marital troubles.

“Thank you, Your Honor and members of the jury.”

Raj sits down, and court is dismissed as the jury goes off to deliberate and the judge returns to her chambers.

Twenty minutes later, they return.

“Foreperson, has the jury reached a verdict?” the judge asks.

“We have, Your Honor,” says a kid from Plainview. He glances at our table. “We find for the defense.”

We hold our breaths as the judge speaks. “The winner based on points for the performances of the attorneys and witnesses is . . . Bright Academy. Congratulations.”

We’ve won our first case!

My teammates and I rise and go to our opponents’ table to shake hands.

Once we’ve done that, we rush to celebrate in a group hug. I might squeal a little.

Raj is next to me with his arm around my shoulders. I’m mesmerized by how good he smells. He leans toward me like he’s going to say something.

But then the mass of our team breaks apart, and suddenly the pressure of his arm is gone.

Raj holds out his hand. “Great job, Siya. Thanks again for stepping up.”

I take his hand, and we shake. It feels bizarrely formal, like I’m at a job interview.

“Uh, thanks for the opportunity,” I say awkwardly.

Then Max is there, gently gripping my shoulders and grinning at me.

Raj steps away.

“Told you, Siya. You’re the best lawyer on the team,” Max says.

“Hardly,” I laugh. “But you were pretty amazing yourself.”

We all step out into the afternoon sunshine.

“First victory, check,” Lorenzo says. “What now, captains?”

“Tonight, Raj and I would like to invite everyone to the South Street Seaport for some team bonding,” Tessa says.

Raj continues: “We used some team funds to plan something fun, and then we can all go grab dinner.”

The team cheers. We all agree to meet there at seven p.m.

“Train partners?” Max asks.

“Of course,” I say.

Chapter 11

“Banner day,” Max says on the train. “Varsity soccer stays undefeated, and we get our first mock trial win.”

“Do you think it’s going to be paintball? I’m not sure I want to be bruised all weekend,” I say.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got your back.”

“What if you’re on the other team?”

“Then I’ll be a double agent. I’m always on your team. Don’t you know that by now?” Max’s eyes twinkle. “But don’t be upset if I accidentally hit you once or twice.”

“What? We’re not even there, and already you betray me.”

We laugh as the city draws closer and the world seems full of possibility.

The train takes us right to the World Trade Center stop, and it’s a quick walk from there to the Seaport. The sunset streaks the horizon, and a breeze stirs the air. The Seaport is dotted with lights, and dozens of tourists mill about. Max and I make our way to the address that Raj and Tessa gave us—what looks to be a huge warehouse. Behind it, a spangled Ferris wheel slowly turns near the water.

“Nice. I’ve wanted to come here,” Max says. “It’s like a carnival, only it never leaves this spot.”

“So, no paintball,” I say.

“Probably,” Max grins.

Within a few minutes, we’re joined by the rest of the team—Raj, Tessa, Noah, Adele, Chris, Raven, and Lorenzo—plus a few researchers at the entrance to a gigantic arcade.

Raj hands out plastic cards. “Here you go,” he says. “Just make sure you hang out with at least one person on the team—preferably someone you don’t already know well.”

Max grabs two cards and whispers, “Skee-Ball challenge” to me while waggling his eyebrows. As I follow him into the building, I glance back at Raj, who’s frowning—probably because we’re blatantly ignoring his instructions.

Inside, the high-ceilinged arcade reverberates with electronic noise and flashing lights. I jog to keep up with Max as he makes a beeline for the back of the huge room.

Max, Grace, and I have been challenging each other at Skee-Ball for as long as I can remember. Since we started high school, we have a running gag that whoever loses has to buy ice cream for the other two.

“I’d like mocha chip,” I say as I swipe my card and a stack of balls drops into my chute.

“You’re the one who’ll be buying me butter pecan,” Max says with a gleam in his eye. He rolls his first ball, and it drops into the 5,000-points hole.

“Can’t stop me today,” he says.

“Show-off.”

I roll my ball: 5,000. “Can’t stop me, either.”

But then my luck takes a turn, and Max wins the first game easily.

“Best of three,” I say, and swipe my card again.

This time, I eke out a win.

We’re about to start our third game when Tessa finds us. “Come on, Chris and I want to play *Mario Kart* and we need two more players.”

Max and I look at each other.

But then Max shrugs. “Sure,” he says. He puts his arm around my shoulders and whispers into my ear: “Winner takes all.”

Chris, who has finally shed his bow tie and is just wearing a button-down shirt, is saving us seats at *Mario Kart*. We start the game and I floor the pedal and fly around the track. I turn sixteen in six months and I’m not sure about driving a real car, but *Mario Kart* is fun.

Despite committing all the sabotage I can, I come in third. At least I beat Max. “You need to spend more time behind a wheel if you want to get your license anytime soon,” I tell him.

“As long as no one is shooting banana peels at me on the actual road, I should be okay,” he laughs.

“Mocha. Chip,” I remind him.

Max raises an eyebrow. “Maybe we can try for best out of five . . .”

“Hey guys,” comes Raj’s voice.

I look up to find him right next to me. “Nice job, Siya,” he says. “You completely knocked Rodriguez out.”

“I have that effect on many people,” I say coolly.

“We’ve been beating each other at games since we were little,” Max says.

Raj turns to me. “I want to show you something. Ready for a challenge?”

“Um,” I say brilliantly. Then, “Okay.”

Adele has found our group. “Come on, Max, let’s escape from some dinosaurs,” she says, taking his arm.

“Sure,” Max says. He glances back at me. “Kick his ass, Siya.”

“Later, Rodriguez,” Raj shoots back as I follow him across the floor.

We pass the award booth, where a bright orange stuffed monkey the size of a five-year-old child grins down at the arcade. We keep going until we arrive at a door in the far back corner of the building. Raj takes a key out of his pocket, unlocks the door, and ushers me into a room with plain gray walls and a rack full of goggles and other random equipment.

“What is this place?”

“It’s not officially open yet, but I convinced the manager to let us use it. It’s a VR room.”

I look around. One wall is covered by a gigantic screen. “Convinced the manager, huh?”

“I have my ways,” Raj says with a look that makes my pulse race. “What do you want to play?”

I look at the options—a shooter game, soccer, and archery.

“Archery,” I say.

“Excellent choice.” He hands me a pair of goggles and goes to the rack and returns with two plastic bows.

I put on the goggles and look at the huge screen, where I see two circular targets lit up in gold and silver with bull’s-eyes worth 100 points and concentric rings worth 70, 50, 25, and 10.

I look at the plastic bow in my hand. Through the goggles, it looks like it’s made of finely carved wood.

“Where are the arrows?”

“Watch.” Raj presses a button on the bow and pulls back the string like he’s nocking an arrow. And suddenly, a shiny black arrow appears. “You keep pulling the string back like this, aim, and then let go.” He demonstrates, and I see the arrow fly and bury itself in the 70-point zone.

“Nice,” I say, applauding.

“Thank you,” he says, inclining his head. “Now you try.”

What is this game—not just the VR game, but the game that Raj is playing? We won our first case, and he expressed his happiness by *shaking my hand*. Now he’s invited me to a private archery session?

The bow is heavier than I thought it would be. I press the button on the bow, hold it up, and draw the string back with my right hand near my cheek. I take careful aim, pull back one last bit, and let go.

50 points.

“Not bad,” Raj says, raising his eyebrows.

“Maybe it’s beginner’s luck,” I say demurely.

Raj smiles, and impossibly, it makes him even more gorgeous. “Let’s keep going.”

We shoot five more arrows each and end up tied at 400.

“We’re well-matched,” I say.

“We are,” he says, looking at me. “Do you have some experience with this, or are you some sort of prodigy?”

“My sister made me take archery at summer camp every year. I guess it paid off,” I say with a laugh.

Raj shakes his head. “And here I thought I was going to impress you with my skills.”

“You have. And I hope I’ve impressed you.”

“Always. In the courtroom and here.”

“Want to go again?” I ask.

“Absolutely. You know, the winner of each game in here gets 10,000 points for the award booth. I want to win you that gigantic stuffed monkey.”

“Just what I always wanted,” I laugh.

We play again. Each time one of us shoots, we trade the lead.

My shoulder’s getting a little sore, but I won’t let Raj know. “How’s school so far? You’ve got to be busy, between soccer and mock trial.”

Raj nods. “Junior year is no joke. And my parents are both out of town right now—Mom is in DC most of the time, of course, but Dad’s away at a conference.”

“So you’re on your own? Are you making your own meals?”

“Yes, if you call bagels and boxed mac and cheese cooking. We have a housekeeper, but most days I tell her to go home, and I eat dinner at Lem’s house. He’s practically my brother. Then I go home to an empty house.”

He passed over his “brother” to give me the attorney spot on the team. And I’d never thought about what it must be like being the kid of two high-powered people. “That sounds lonely,” I say.

He shrugs. “My parents have important jobs. But I can always reach them when I need to.” He pulls back his VR arrow and shoots wide, way off target. “Ugh. How am I going to get you that monkey now?”

In response, I bring my bow up again, pull my arm back, aim, and let go.

I barely catch the outermost ring of the target. “Whoops. Maybe we can pool our points and get it together?”

Raj smiles. “Together.”

My heart races and the silence stretches between us as he pulls his bowstring back. I hold my breath as he lets go.

A bull’s-eye. Dammit. “Only way you beat me is if you make another bull’s-eye yourself.”

“I know that,” I say shortly as I hold up the bow. I close one eye and take aim. I think of summers spent shooting at targets, glad that I could control this small thing, the flight of this arrow and where it would land. I pull the string back another inch and let go.

Bull’s-eye.

“What do you think about that?” I ask, taking off my goggles. I expect him to be at least a little annoyed. I know Raj is used to winning.

But he grins and takes off his own goggles. “Knew you’d come through in the clutch.”

I look into his dark eyes, shining with mischief and something else.

No offer of a handshake this time.

He gathers our bows and our goggles and returns them to the rack. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure,” I say.

“You and Rodriguez spend a lot of time together. Are you—”

“We’ve been best friends since fourth grade,” I say. “Max, Grace, and me.”

His face relaxes. “Good. I mean, cool.”

Good? I hope I don't look as flustered as I feel. "I won. That means we're getting that monkey for you," I say.

On the walk to the prize stand, Raj's arm brushes against mine from time to time, sending sparks through my nerves. We reach the booth and hand over our cards. Together, we've earned an astounding 51,384 tickets.

The guy working the stand hands down the giant stuffed creature. It looks even bigger up close. "I love it," Raj says, giving it a squeeze. "What should we call him?"

"How do you know it's a him?" I ask.

Raj squints at the monkey's manic face. "Something about the jawline, I think," he says, surprising a laugh out of me. "What do you think? George?"

"No way," I say. "Curious George was happy in his forest. Let's make it a monkey with some agency. Like Hanuman." Hanuman is the monkey-warrior who helped Rama on his quest to rescue Sita.

Raj grins. "Hanuman it is."

"We have over a thousand tickets left," I say. "What else should we get? A Slinky?"

"How about Tootsie Pops?" he asks.

"I love those."

The guy behind the counter reaches for the box. "How many do you want?"

"As many as we can get," Raj says.

We take the box and each grab one—cherry for me, chocolate for him. Then we spy Tessa. Max isn't with her.

Raj hands Tessa the box of Tootsie Pops. "Hand these out to anyone on the team who wants them," he says. "We'll meet you at the pizzeria at eight thirty." Then he beckons me to come out into the cooling night.

Chapter 12

The first few stars appear in the sky as Raj and I stroll through the crowd and finish our lollipops.

"Want to ride the Ferris wheel?" Raj asks.

I swallow. "Really?"

"We're going to eat at the pizza place down there in a bit," Raj says. "But if you're hungry, we can stop for something now."

"No, I'm not hungry. It's just—Ferris wheels aren't really my thing."

Raj grins and raises his eyebrows. "How are they not your thing?"

I blush. "They kind of . . . freak me out, okay?"

"What? Fearless Siya, who strides into court as a last-minute substitute without a care in the world, who shoots VR arrows like Katniss Everdeen, is afraid of the world's slowest moving carnival ride?"

I sigh. No wonder he's so good at cross examinations. "I was once stuck on one for like an hour at the state fair because of some mechanical issue. It was terrible, swaying back and forth worrying whether the stupid thing would turn upside down and make me fall to my doom."

"Oh, that sucks," Raj says. "How old were you?"

I purse my lips. "Thirteen."

Raj snickers.

"Fine. Mock me. I love roller coasters, but that slow-moving lurching really isn't for me."

"I'm not mocking you. I understand irrational fears. Just never ask me to eat a beet."

"That sounds like a fascinating story."

Raj shakes his head. “Not for today. We don’t know each other nearly well enough.”

Now I can’t stop laughing. After a few moments, I wipe my eyes and turn to him. “Okay. Let’s go ride the Ferris wheel.”

“I promise I won’t let anything happen to you. Your thirteen-year-old self can relax.” He shifts Hanuman the monkey to his left arm and reaches his right hand out to me. I take it in my sweaty one and follow him to the Ferris wheel. I can’t tell if the swoop of my stomach is due to fear or something else.

The line to get on is short, and I’m not sure whether this is fortunate or not. We sit down with Hanuman between us, resting on both our laps. We push the bar down—with way too much space to fall through, in my opinion—and I grip both the side rail and the stuffed monkey as we move up, stop, and swing as the next pod gets loaded.

“So how are your classes going?” Raj asks.

“Pretty well,” I say, trying not to look down. “Trig is fine, and so is Spanish. Chem isn’t as impossible as I thought it would be. But English is the best. I’m in Ms. Knight’s Women in Lit class.”

“I took it last year and loved it,” Raj says.

I raise an eyebrow.

“Just because I’m male doesn’t mean I’m a cretin.”

“Clearly not. A guy who enjoys Jane Austen can’t be all jerk.”

He tilts his head. “Half-jerk at the very most.”

First he’s cool with my winning our archery competition, and now he’s surprising me with his willingness to poke fun at himself.

“That paper, though . . . I wrote mine about how living under a powerful queen shaped Shakespeare’s treatment of women in his plays. Do you know what you’re going to do yet?”

“I love that you think that I’ve already thought about it.”

“Well, haven’t you?”

I nod, and the seat shakes as we move up again. I grip the rail harder. “I have. It’s just an idea, but one I can’t let go of. Or it won’t let go of me.”

“Those are the best kinds of ideas.” Raj looks at me steadily.

“Are you familiar with the story of Sita and Rama?”

Raj laughs. “You mean, the Rama that I’m named after? My name is Rajiv, *lotus-eyed one*, like Rama. Don’t you see how my eyes resemble lotuses?” He bats them at me.

I think his eyes are much prettier than lotuses—dark and shining and long-lashed in a way that makes me jealous. But I'm definitely not telling him that. "Yes, that Rama. And I'm named after Sita, daughter of the earth. My mom loved gardening, and she loved that Sita was a truth-teller."

Raj nods.

"But Sita's story has always haunted me. She's hailed as the perfect wife and mother, but her life was full of suffering." I sigh. "Anyway, I'm trying to figure out how to turn that into a paper."

"I think there's a lot to think about and say about that story."

The Ferris wheel moves again. Apparently, we're done loading passengers, and the ride gets going. Our pod starts to swing. I shiver.

"Uncomfortable?" Raj asks.

I grimace and roll my shoulders, trying to move as little as possible so I don't rock our seat. The breeze picks up as the ride turns. "A little cold."

"Here," Raj says. He plucks Hanuman from between us and puts him on his other side. He stretches his arm out and puts it around my shoulders. "That better?"

I lean back against his warm skin. "Yeah," I say. Is this really happening?

Our pod moves slowly up, then back down again, gliding through the cool night air. I look for familiar faces when we near the ground, but there's no one there from the team. It feels like we're the only two people in the world. We start to move up again, and I breathe it all in: the clear night, the crowd murmuring below us, Raj's warm arm around me.

"Can I kiss you?" Raj asks softly.

I freeze. A million thoughts run through my head, but they're all a variation of two things: *Is this real life?* And *Yes!*

He leans toward me.

"Wait," I say, surprising myself.

He pulls back immediately and removes his arm. "I'm sorry, I thought—"

I shake my head and put my hand on his arm. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead." The bright lights of the wheel are reflected in his eyes.

"These past few weeks, I thought you might be interested in me, but then you'd draw back and seem so aloof. You confused me."

He looks surprised and a little embarrassed. "I didn't mean to give you mixed signals. I noticed you last year on the team and seeing you that morning a few weeks ago in the poli-sci room reminded me of how cool

you are. You're brilliant. And really pretty." He smiles, and I blush. "But I couldn't ask you out when I knew you were trying out for the team, and I'd be one of the people deciding who'd be on it. As my mom likes to say, there are complications when you're a leader."

"Oh," I say.

"Your opening statement at tryouts earned you a place on the team, but Tessa felt we needed to give the spot to a senior, so Beth it was." He grimaces. "I spoke up for you, but I didn't want them to think I chose you because I like you."

He likes me. As in present tense. I'm so stunned that all the words fly out of my head.

He laughs, a little bitterly. "So, I kept waiting. And then it felt weird, because I wasn't sure whether you liked me like that."

I still can't think of anything to say.

"And you're always with Rodriguez—Max—and he's a good guy. I didn't want to be a creep."

I finally find my voice again. "Like I said, Max and I are friends, and that's it."

Raj nods. "I came to your house this morning because I had to see you. I knew we were asking a lot, asking you to step in at the last minute like that. But you were fantastic, like I knew you'd be. You deserve a permanent spot on the team." He takes a deep breath. "So how could I hold back anymore? I had to tell you how I felt tonight, even if you rejected me."

Who in their right mind would reject him? But I say, "That makes sense. I understand why you didn't want to ask me out before the team was set. And now I can answer your question."

His eyes lock on mine, and a thrill runs through me. "Yeah?"

I nod. "About whether you can kiss me."

He leans toward me. "What's your answer?" he asks.

"Yes," I whisper hoarsely.

He puts a gentle hand on my cheek and gazes at me for what feels like an eternity. He looks as intense as when he's questioning a witness, but his mouth is soft. His face grows closer, and I close my eyes.

He puts his lips on mine, a soft, sweet caress. He tastes like chocolate candy. Then we kiss again, and again, and again, until I forget where I am and who I am and it's just us, now. The world feels . . . right in a way it hasn't for a very long time.

He draws back. “I’ve been hoping for this for a while,” he murmurs, and I’m fascinated by his lips shaping the words.

Our pod rises again, but I don’t feel the swing of the seat, don’t look down in fear at how high we are. All I feel is the touch of his lips, the warmth of his arms, all I see is his dark eyes dancing as he looks at me. I feel like I could float right out of here and fly into the night.

Today I’ve become a mock trial attorney and argued my case in court. And now I’m kissing *Raj Raghavan*. Who knew how quickly I could rise to such great heights?

I shudder.

Raj looks at me with concern. “Still scared of the ride?” he asks.

“What ride?” I fall into his arms as we slowly move back toward the earth.

Swayamvara

When the time came for Sita to be wed, King Janaka held a huge swayamvara where his daughter would choose her husband. There was a single requirement: the prospective bridegroom must be able to lift and string Shiva's bow. Although no one else knew what Sita could do, Janaka would accept no lesser man as her husband.

Kings and princes from all over the world came to vie for Sita to become their bride. But none could even lift the mighty bow, let alone string it.

"Is no one worthy of my daughter?" King Janaka asked.

Finally, Rama of Ayodhya, the Crown Prince of the kingdom of Kosala, came forward. The tall, handsome prince lifted the bow and strung it easily as if it were a child's toy. And when he bent to offer it to the king and princess, the bow broke in two.

Rama had passed the test. Sita smiled and placed a fragrant garland over Rama's head. He was her choice.

Sita and Rama held hands, the ends of their garments tied together, and performed the saptapadi, walking around the ceremonial fire seven times, making their marriage vows.

Flowers rained down from the heavens. A new era had begun.

The newlyweds traveled to Ayodhya, where Rama's father waited with his three wives and three younger sons. Rama's family welcomed beautiful, virtuous Sita with open arms.

That night, Sita was restless.

"Why are you upset, my bride?" Rama asked.

“Because you are the Crown Prince, and the Crown Prince will always take many wives,” Sita said. “And so, you will marry again and again and forget me.”

Rama took a vow. “I will never marry again. You shall be the only one for me, just as I am the only one for you.”

Years later, through many trials and troubles, that proved to be true.

Chapter 13

Raj takes my hand after we get off the Ferris wheel, and we make our way to the pizza place where we're meeting the rest of the team.

"It's a miracle, Raj. We got three tables near each other," Tessa says as we walk into the restaurant.

"Awesome," Raj says. He looks around and seems to realize we're the last in our group to arrive. "Sorry we're a little late."

Tessa notices our still-clasped hands. Her brow furrows for a microsecond. "No problem," she says quickly.

Raj leads me to a table. While we pig out on mozzarella sticks, pizza, and salad, his hand keeps brushing mine, sending thrills up my spine.

After dinner, some people decide to stay in the city, but most of us head home after a long day.

As we wait for the NJ Transit train in a hot station that smells of sweat, steam, and urine, Max takes me aside. "So."

"So," I reply.

"Is this what you want?"

I nod. "Yes." I can barely believe it. "Like you said, he's a good guy."

He looks at me for a moment longer, then nods. "Okay, then. He'd better be good to you."

"There you are," Raj says, coming up and putting his arm around my shoulders. "What's up?"

"Nothing much," Max says. "Just making sure Siya's having a good night."

"And are you?" Raj asks, looking down at me.

"The best," I reply, smiling.

We get to Jersey City then change for the train home. “I’m parked at the station,” Raj says. “I can give you a ride.”

“Max’s dad is supposed to pick us up,” I say.

“I can give you both a ride. Okay with you, Rodriguez?”

Max shakes his head. “You two go ahead. I’ll ride home with my dad.”

We get off the train and get into Raj’s car, and soon he’s pulling into my driveway. How was it only this morning that he was parked here for the first time?

“Can I see you tomorrow?” Raj asks.

My heart leaps, but I force myself to calm down. “I have a bunch of stuff to do for class,” I say. “I didn’t get anything done today before the trial. But if I work all morning, maybe we could meet in the afternoon?”

“I have a lot of work, too. I’d ask you to come over and we could study together . . .”

“Oh, I don’t—” Dad would not be happy with the idea of me at Raj’s house with no parents.

“But I don’t think I could concentrate with you around.” Raj smiles. “So, the afternoon it is. Want to go apple picking?”

I smile back. “Sounds great. Maybe we can bake a pie together afterwards?”

“I’ve never baked a pie in my life, so that sounds amazing. I’ll pick you up at twelve thirty.”

I unbuckle my seat belt, and he leans over to kiss me. “Good night,” he whispers.

“Good night,” I whisper back, trying to stretch the moments until I have to leave the car.

Raj waits until I open the door to my house and wave at him. He backs out onto the quiet street, and I watch until his taillights disappear.

I close the door and lean against it. How is this my life?

When I get upstairs, the light is on in Dad’s room, so I knock.

“Come in,” he says. I open the door and find him in bed with his reading glasses on and a book open on his lap.

“Did you have fun?” he asks.

I nod. “It was wonderful. What did you do tonight?”

“Oh, I puttered around here. We have more eggplants than I can believe.”

“I wanted to let you know . . .” I hesitate.

Dad takes off his glasses and waits.

“I’m going apple picking with a friend tomorrow.”

Dad smiles. “Oh, I remember those days picking apples with you and Asha. Are you going with Max and Grace? They can come for dinner afterwards.”

“Actually, it’s Raj Raghavan.”

Dad sits up. “Nitya Raghavan’s son?”

I nod. “And the co-head of the mock trial team.”

Dad puts his glasses back on. “Wonderful. Do you need a ride somewhere?”

“No, he said he’d pick me up at twelve thirty. So I need to get my homework done in the morning. And—could he come over afterwards? I told him we could bake a pie.”

Dad’s smile is a little wistful. “Like you used to do with Mom. That would be lovely.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I kiss his cheek.

“There’s only one condition,” Dad says.

That’s a surprise. “What?”

“He’d better like eggplant parmigiana, because we’re sending him home with a whole tray.”

I giggle as I leave the room.

After I’ve brushed my teeth and washed my face, I climb in bed to find that my phone has blown up with messages.

GRACE: Tell me everything!

Where are you?

BECAUSE OMG I KNEW IT!!

Know what? I haven’t told her anything yet!

GRACE: It’s all over Insta! And TikTok!

ME: What?

I open Instagram to find that Tessa has posted photos of our mock trial team—triumphant after our win, at the Seaport, hanging out.

And then photos of Raj and me, holding hands in the restaurant. Laughing at something Lorenzo said. In the subway station, with Raj’s arm around me. The photos have hundreds of likes already.

Most of the likes and reposts are from friends on the team, but some are from accounts I've never seen before.

This is bizarre.

GRACE: You're famous.

ME: Am NOT.

GRACE: He's famous, and you're together.

So now you're famous, too.

ME: Haha.

I don't want to be famous.

I just want to see where this goes.

GRACE: I'll bet. I want to hear it all.

I FaceTime her and we talk. Eventually, though, I'm too tired to see straight.

"I need to go," I say, yawning. "I have to get my homework done in the morning because we're hanging out again tomorrow."

"Ooh! He can't get enough of you. What? Where?" Grace asks.

"Apple picking, believe it or not." I yawn so widely my jaw cracks. "I've got to get some sleep. Love you."

"Love you, too. Tell me all about it as soon as you're back." We blow kisses to each other and then hang up.

As I drift off to sleep, I get another text.

RAJ: Can't stop thinking about today.

ME: Same.

And I don't go to sleep for another hour.

The next day I wake up at seven a.m., committed to finishing all my homework before Raj arrives. I read my chapter for history, write an essay for English, and finish my chemistry problem set. Deciding I can put off Spanish until the next day, I bring my trig work down to the kitchen.

"There you are," Dad says. "I made some idlis, thinking it might help you get through all your work."

"Thanks, Dad," I say, putting three in a bowl.

He ladles sambhar on top. “I’m making tea. Would you like some?”

“That would be great.”

We sip our tea and eat our idlis in companionable silence for a few minutes.

“What are you doing this afternoon?” I ask.

“First, I’m going to make our eggplant parmigiana,” Dad says. “Then I’m taking Aparna to the garden center. She’s interested in getting some fertilizer.”

“That’s so nice of you, Dad.” At least if Asha asks, I don’t have to tell her that Dad’s on a date. Because buying fertilizer at the garden center could never be described as romantic.

I’m done with work and dressed at 12:15. I’m wearing jeans and a cute T-shirt that I hope conveys a kind of fun, casual vibe. I text Grace a photo and she approves, to my relief.

The doorbell rings at 12:27 and I rush to answer the door.

“Hi,” I say. He looks adorable in jeans and a henley with the sleeves rolled up.

“Hi yourself.” He smiles, and my insides flip. “Is your dad home?”

“Yeah?” I say.

“Can I come in for a minute? I’d like to meet him.”

“Sure.” I open the door wider and let him in.

Dad has just finished loading the dishwasher and straightens up and smiles when he sees the two of us. “You must be Raj.”

Raj crosses the kitchen to shake Dad’s hand. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Kumar.”

“Please, call me Gopal. Or Uncle. You’re coming back for dinner, right?”

“Dad, I haven’t asked him yet,” I say. Who knows if Raj wants to spend all evening with us?

“I’d love to,” Raj says. “Thank you, Uncle.”

“I’m making our famous eggplant parmigiana, with vegetables from our garden.”

“I’m jealous,” Raj says. “We’ve never had a garden, and I’ve never had homemade eggplant parm.”

“We were all inspired by Siya’s mother, Lalita,” Dad says. His eyes crinkle with his smile. “She was a tremendous gardener and cook. And the sauce is made from our own tomatoes, garlic, and basil, so it’s out of this world.”

“I can’t wait,” Raj says. He turns to me. “Ready to go?”

We go outside to a blue sky that looks as bright as I feel.

After forty-five minutes on the road, we reach Invincible Orchard, where we get a bushel bag. We spend the next couple of hours plucking apples by hand or using a stick with a scoop at the end. We are surrounded by families with little kids, but I don’t feel out of place. Spending time with Raj feels like the most natural thing in the world.

I lead the way, pointing out what types of apples we should get for baking, applesauce, and eating. Every once in a while, Raj hoists me up to reach a cluster of fruit or catches an apple that I’ve cut with the stick-scoop. Every time his hand touches mine, I feel like my skin is on fire. At one point we kiss while hiding behind a tree like we’re in an old Bollywood movie.

“Ahhh!” We are startled apart by the scream. It’s a little boy, no older than six, who exclaims, “Gross! Mom! There are people KISSING around here!”

I grab Raj’s hand and run to another row of trees, gasping with laughter. “Busted!”

“I don’t care how many kids are horrified, I can’t stay away from you,” Raj says seriously, then kisses me again.

When our bushel bag is bulging, we go to the farm stand, where we drink fresh apple cider, munch on cider donuts, and hold hands as we watch kids chase each other through the pumpkin patch.

“We used to go apple picking every year,” I say. “But then Asha turned fifteen and decided she was too cool to do it anymore. I’d forgotten how much fun it was.”

“We only went once,” Raj says, sipping his cider. “Between my mom’s schedule and my dad’s, there was hardly a weekend when one of them wasn’t working or out of town. That’s why it’s good that I’m busy. And mock trial is going to be so amazing this year.”

I nod. “I’m so excited to be on the team.”

“You did a fantastic job at the trial.”

“So, you didn’t pick me because—”

“Because you’re hot? No, I tried to stay objective,” Raj says.

Oh my god, did he just call me hot?

“I was going to say, because I’m a woman and you lost Beth, who’s also a woman.”

“What? Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“Never mind,” I say.

Raj looks at me and frowns.

“Come on. Let’s get home and start baking.”

We get back to my house, where the whole kitchen smells like eggplant and tomato sauce.

“Dad, we’re home!” I call.

Then I notice a note left on the kitchen table: *Be back at 6. Hope you’re hungry!*

I glance at my phone—it’s 5:20.

“We have forty minutes before he gets home.”

“Good,” Raj says, and reaches for me.

We stumble into the living room. My senses fill with the scent, the sight, the feel of him, until I can barely remember my own name. My phone buzzes, and I startle.

Running late. Be home soon, Dad texts.

Great, I reply.

But I’m groaning inside.

“Dad’s on his way home,” I say to Raj.

Raj leans his forehead against mine. “I really like you, Siya,” he says.

“I really like you, too.”

I straighten my clothes and push my fingers through my hair, and then we go to the kitchen.

We cut up apples for two pies and a big pan of apple crisp. When the baked goods are in the oven, I bring Raj outside to the backyard.

“My mom loved this garden.” I show him the vegetable plants and pick a red pepper for our salad.

He tells me about his own mom: her early career as a prosecutor, her election to the state house, the crazy days of her senate campaign, and the pongal recipe that they make together as a family to celebrate happy occasions.

“She still kills every plant we’ve ever had, though,” he laughs.

“Well, if you spend some more time here, maybe you’ll catch Dad’s green thumb,” I say. Then I hope I haven’t assumed too much about what our relationship is going to be.

We sit on the bench and kiss as the sun shines like the day was created just for us.

Dad calls from inside the house. “Siya?”

We go back inside and have dinner.

“I think this is the most delicious the eggplant parm has ever come out,” I say.

“I could happily eat this every day of my life,” Raj says.

“The garden has been particularly prolific this year. Probably because I have the best helper.” Dad smiles at me.

“Don’t look at me, all I do is pull weeds from time to time.”

We eat apple crisp with vanilla ice cream for dessert while the pies cool.

“I’m stuffed.” Raj leans back in his seat and pats his stomach. Then he glances at his phone. “Unfortunately, I have to get going. Dad’s flight is landing soon.” He stands and turns to Dad. “Thank you again for dinner, sir—I mean, Uncle.”

“Please come over as often as you like,” Dad says. He shakes Raj’s hand. “The house is quieter now that Asha is off at college.”

“I’ll be here as often as Siya will let me,” Raj says with a smile.

I take the extra tray of eggplant parm out of the fridge. This is for you. “I’ll help you load your car. And you know you’re going home with one of those pies.”

In the driveway, I slide the tray into Raj’s backseat, and Raj rests the pie next to it.

“I had a wonderful time today,” I say.

He puts his hands on my waist and draws me closer. “Me, too. What are you doing third period tomorrow? I have it free.”

I think for a moment. “I have it free, too.”

“Meet me in the Fishbowl?”

I hesitate. I really don’t like that place. But if that’s what he wants, I’m willing to deal. “Okay.”

“Can’t wait.” He leans down and kisses me. “Until tomorrow.”

“See you then.”

I go back inside and help Dad clean up.

“How was the garden store with Aparna Auntie?” I ask.

“Good. We got fertilizer, and I helped her plant a bunch of mums in her yard. Then we had tea.”

“I’m so glad, Dad. You deserve to have fun.”

“Thank you. And it’s good to see you enjoying yourself. You work very hard, and you spend a lot of time with me.”

“I like working hard, and I like spending time with you,” I say.

“Yes. But there’s nothing like seeing a smile on your daughter’s face.” His own smile grows thoughtful. He puts a hand on my shoulder. “I like Raj. He seems like a very good young man.”

“He is,” I say. “Thanks again for dinner.”

We finish cleaning up, and I stifle a yawn. “If it’s okay with you, I’m going to shower and then turn in early. I’m really tired.”

“Of course. Good night, sweetie. I’ll pack a lunch for you for tomorrow.” He gives me a hug and kisses me on the cheek.

Before I turn in, I text Grace and fill her in on all that happened today. Then Raj and I text back and forth again.

I’m so tired, but I still have trouble falling asleep. As I toss and turn, I realize why.

I haven’t heard from Max.

Hey. How was your Sunday? I text him.

But although I force my eyes to stay open for ten more minutes, I don’t hear back.

Chapter 14

The Fishbowl is a complete zoo when I get there third period on Monday. Glancing across the room, I see Lorenzo, Tessa, and a bunch of their crew, but no Raj.

No one's seen me yet, and I'm tempted to leave before anyone does. But then I hear "Hey, Siya," in a voice that sends thrills up my spine.

I turn around and focus on Raj rather than the crowd around us. "Do we have to hang out here?" I ask.

His eyebrows knit together. "Of course not. Where do you want to go?"

"I usually go to the library to get work done. But maybe outside? Anywhere but here."

"Whatever you want." He takes my hand, and we go out a side door onto a small lawn between the main building and the science building. It's a little overcast, but it doesn't look like rain yet. "I didn't know you didn't like crowds."

"It's not just that—it's . . . that place has bad vibes."

I find myself wanting to spill everything about what happened to Asha, but I stop myself. There's only so much stuff from the past I want to dredge up right now. "I'd rather spend time with you without so many people around," I say truthfully.

Raj turns his megawatt smile on me. "I agree, this is a lot better. So, like I told you, I got the list of authors of the case materials, and I sent an email to one of them. And I got a response." I brighten at this, but then he continues: "It's not very helpful." He takes out his phone, scrolls through his email, and shows me.

Dear Mr. Raghavan,

Congratulations on being part of the NJBA Mock Trial Tournament! One of the authors of the mock trial packet, Daniel Brown, forwarded an email from you asking how he contributed to writing the case this year. However, I must remind you that it would be improper for any members of the committee to discuss mock trial matters with you, as a current mock trial participant. You may contact any or all of the committee members after the season is over.

Sincerely yours,
John Ford
2026 NJBA Mock Trial Committee Chair

I sigh. “It’s so frustrating. It’s not like we’re trying to influence them or learn any secrets about the case. But I don’t want to put our team in jeopardy.”

Raj shakes his head. “It really is ridiculous to not even be able to contact them.”

Something occurs to me. “Maybe . . .”

“What?”

“All the members of the committee have work and education histories that are available publicly,” I say.

Raj grins. “You’re right. We can research them and see if there are any obvious links to your mom.”

I nod. “And then find a way to contact the ones who might have known her and ask them our questions. That is, if you think that won’t hurt the team.”

Raj thinks for a moment. “Someone used your mom’s story for this mock trial case without considering who might be hurt by it. It’s important that they learn what they’ve done. Maybe we can figure out a way that doesn’t jeopardize the team. What’s the point of being interested in the law if we can’t find a way to do what’s right?”

“Exactly. I could do the research myself, but I’m glad you’re in on this with me.”

He gazes at me. His eyes are dark brown, but lighter in the middle. “I’d do just about anything for you.”

My mouth goes dry. What am I supposed to say to that?

He grins. “After all, you taught me how to bake an incredible apple pie. Between me and my dad last night and this morning, it’s all gone.”

I tilt my face up to kiss him lightly. Then a raindrop lands on my hot cheek. “Let’s go to the library.”

The Bright Academy library is light-filled and inviting. We find an out-of-the-way table tucked into a corner near the young adult literature section. Raj reads out the names of the people who wrote this year's case, and I open my laptop and start a new doc:

Daniel Brown (avoid until after the season's over!)

Elizabeth Cordray

Anthony Diloro

Mark Holloway

Susan Ling

Natalie Rivera

Then we make a list of the places my mom went to school and worked:

Plumbhurst High School

Northwestern University

Rutgers Law School

Jensen & Hatfield, Attorneys at Law

Harlow, D'Souza & Brown

"I know my mom graduated high school in 1993, college in 1997, and law school in 2000. I'm not sure what year she left her first law firm and went to Harlow, D'Souza & Brown—I'd need to ask my dad."

"We can still look and see if these people have any of these places on their résumés," Raj says. He opens his laptop and brings up LinkedIn. "No one lists their high school, but I feel like that's a long shot."

"Right. It seems much more likely that the person who used Mom's story would have known her more recently."

We have only ten minutes left of our free period, but we find one connection: Susan Ling attended Northwestern University—she was a senior when my mom was a first-year student.

The bell rings, and we close our laptops reluctantly.

"I'll keep researching after school," I say. "I'll update our doc with what I find."

“I’ve got practice this afternoon, but I’ll look tonight.”

“And I’ll get the dates from Dad on Mom’s work history. That should help us narrow things down. Then we’ll figure out the best way to contact these people.”

“It’s a plan,” Raj says.

He kisses me on the cheek, and we go our separate ways to class.

At lunch, Grace talks nonstop about art class that morning.

“We’re doing collage, and I’m having so much fun using unusual materials. I even grabbed some grass and sticks from the courtyard.”

Max is silent.

I nudge him with my elbow. “Want some truffle chips?”

“No thanks.” He barely looks at me.

“Come on, I can’t finish this whole bag. I’ll only be throwing them away.” I push the open bag toward him.

The corner of his mouth turns up. “Fine. I can’t let them go to waste.” He takes the bag and starts crunching.

“Did you have a good Sunday?” I ask.

Max nods. “Lots of homework and lots of sister drama, but I managed to avoid most of that.” Max has an older and a younger sister who always seem to be arguing about something.

“You needed a day to rest after your mega-Saturday,” I say.

Max finishes the chips and crumples the bag. “Guess so. What did you two do?”

“We cleaned out the garage to set aside stuff for a neighborhood yard sale. So many thrills,” Grace says.

I take a bite of my apple. I’m so glad Max is talking to me; I don’t really want to tell him about Sunday and make him go silent again.

“This week is going to be busy,” I say. “Two quizzes and a huge problem set.”

“I have to finish the first half of *War and Peace* by the end of the week,” Max says. “That’s like a million pages.”

“It’s not a million pages. The whole book is under a thousand, right?” Grace laughs.

“It’s 1,296 pages,” Max says. “So half is 648. But I was rounding up.”

“Way up,” I say, laughing.

“Siya,” comes a voice. Lorenzo is standing at the table holding his lunch tray.

“Hi,” I say.

“I wanted to congratulate you on doing a fantastic job at the trial on Saturday. Raj and Tessa clearly made the right choice.”

I frown. He doesn’t sound sarcastic, but he must be. Right?

“Thanks?” I say.

He purses his lips. “I’m sorry I implied that you got the role because you’re a woman.”

“What?” Max starts to stand, but I stop him with a hand on his arm.

Lorenzo takes a breath. “I was jealous, and I said something stupid. And sexist. I apologize.”

“Well, that’s a start,” Grace says. Her eyes look like chips of ice.

“It’s okay,” I say quickly.

“I appreciate that. It won’t happen again.” He nods once and moves down the aisle to put away his tray.

“What brought that on?” Grace asks. “I mean, I can believe that he said something shitty to you, but I can’t believe he was self-aware enough to recognize it was shitty, and then actually apologize.”

“Raj must have told him to,” Max says.

I glance at Lorenzo’s lunch table. “Raj isn’t even here.”

“Doesn’t matter. He probably read Lorenzo the riot act over the weekend.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean that Lorenzo had to do anything.”

“Raj is the head of the mock trial team.”

“Co-head,” I say.

“Fine. Co-head. But he’s a leader. And now he’s dating you.”

“So?” I ask. My voice is louder than I intend. “So?” I ask at a softer volume.

“So, Lorenzo isn’t dumb. He’s better off coming clean with you and getting back in Raj’s good graces. Otherwise, he’ll never be asked to step in as an attorney, alternate or not. Not to mention the fact that he doesn’t want to ruin his friendship with Raj.”

“Maybe. Or maybe he just looked in the mirror and realized that was a terrible thing to say to a fellow student and human being,” Grace says.

Max shrugs. “I’m on two teams with Raj. What he says, goes.”

The bell rings, and we all stand.

I'd like to believe in Grace's interpretation, but somehow I think Max got it right.

That afternoon after another yoga session bemoaning the state of my hamstrings, I go home to find Dad hanging out with Aparna again. "Tea is ready, sweetie," Dad says as he takes the pot off the stove.

"Are you joining us, Auntie?" I ask with a sinking feeling. I don't see a problem with her spending time with Dad, but I don't want to have to tell Asha about it.

"Thanks, but as I already told your father, I must get going," Aparna says. "I have some running around to do for the Diwali celebration. You're coming to the party at the community center?"

I nod. "Of course. We always go."

Dad puts our cups on saucers. "It's one of the highlights of the fall."

"Wonderful. See you soon, then. Lovely to see you, Siya."

Dad shows Aparna to the door and then returns as I put a plate of biscotti on the table.

I tell Dad about my day and listen to him about his. Then I ask him if he knows the years that Mom worked at the two law firms.

"Let's see," he says. "She was at Jensen & Hatfield for two years, right out of law school. She moved to Harlow, D'Souza & Brown in September of 2002. Why do you ask?"

"Now that I'm playing a lawyer in courtrooms, I think about Mom a lot," I say. "And I find myself curious about the details of what she did when."

Dad gently cups my chin. "That's beautiful. She loved you so very much. She'd be so proud that you're interested in the law."

After we finish our tea, I go up to my room. I have so much homework, but I know I can't focus on that until I get more research done.

I open LinkedIn and cross-reference the six attorneys' résumés with Mom's. There are only three matches:

Elizabeth Cordray: paralegal at Harlow, D'Souza & Brown for two years while Mom was there.

Mark Holloway: attorney at Harlow, D'Souza & Brown, overlapped with Mom for six years.

Susan Ling: overlapped with Mom for one year at Northwestern.

I double-check everything and I'm satisfied that I haven't missed a connection. I need to contact these people, but how can I do it without getting in trouble with the mock trial committee?

I can't figure that out, so I dive into homework until Dad calls me from downstairs.

"Siya, dinner's almost ready."

"Be right down," I call back. I straighten up from hunching over my laptop and my back cracks. I close my trig binder, and my phone buzzes.

GRACE: Anything exciting going on in Raj land?

I smile.

ME: He probably scored a couple goals during practice.

GRACE: Any other scoring going on?

I snort.

ME: As if!

What are you up to?

GRACE: Working on feature ideas for the paper.

Maybe I'll interview you for a mock trial

article.

ME: OMG!

GRACE: What?!

ME: Can I call you?

GRACE: Sure

I start the video call.

"What's up?" Grace is sitting in her bed, surrounded by her fluffy pillows: two that match her gray bedspread, and one that looks like a smiling piece of avocado toast.

"I was wondering if you'd be able to contact some people for me. You could say it was for an article, but it's actually for a secret side project I'm working on."

"I'm intrigued," Grace says.

I explain Raj's theory that someone who knew my mom wrote the bulk of the mock trial case we're using this year, and how we tried to contact them

but were shut down.

"Raj or I could get the team in trouble if we reached out, but I need to get to the bottom of what happened."

"I'm on it," Grace says. "Send me the info, and I'll email them tonight. I'll say it's for an article I'm doing for the school paper."

"You're the best," I say.

"Happy to help. The whole situation is crazy."

I hang up with Grace and get ready to go downstairs to eat dinner. But first I send one more text.

I've narrowed our search and I've found a way to contact people that won't involve the team.

No answer. Raj must still be at practice.

Call me later!

As I go downstairs, I think about how I felt when I first read the case.

And I know now that I'll find out who wrote it.

Chapter 15

The next Saturday, we face the Liberty School in a trial where we play the plaintiff. Raven does a fantastic job as Greg Jordan. Then Adele is called to the witness stand as Antonia Goldman, an attorney colleague of Lily Jordan.

"Ms. Goldman, can you tell us how you met Ms. Jordan?" Noah asks.

"I met Lily during the interview process for our firm about ten years ago when she was an applicant and I was an associate," Adele replies. "She was brilliant, ambitious, and hardworking. She had graduated with honors from Princeton Law and came with excellent recommendations from her law school professors, her previous internships, and her first job. She was looking to switch to a larger firm with more chances for advancement, and we were thrilled to have her join us."

"What was it like to work with Lily Jordan?"

"Lily was a shrewd negotiator and a great colleague. Her job was clearly a high priority, and she never hesitated to put in extra hours.

"Lily made partner before age thirty-five, something that was rare at our firm. She was going places and was going to be one of our firm's leaders. She also spent a lot of time helping people pro bono in family court. It's possible she was looking to get involved in politics. Although she obviously cared about her family, she never shirked any work responsibilities because of them."

"Did you know Lily outside of work?"

"We socialized occasionally," Adele says. "I've met her husband, Greg, a few times—he's a great guy and takes excellent care of their daughters."

“Do you know anything about a bar investigation into Lily Jordan?” Noah asks.

“I only heard about a state bar investigation a few weeks before Lily’s death. I don’t know what it was about, but I’m sure it would have come to nothing.”

“Objection, Your Honor,” the opposing counsel, a guy with a blond buzzcut, interrupts. “The witness is offering an opinion.”

“Your Honor, Ms. Goldman is a fellow attorney and colleague of Ms. Jordan’s with direct information about how she worked. Her opinion is relevant here,” Noah counters.

“I’ll allow it,” says the judge. “You may proceed, Ms. Goldman.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Adele says. She turns back to Noah. “Lily and I worked on several cases together, and she was always detail-oriented and forthright. A bar investigation is just that: an investigation. It didn’t necessarily mean that she had done anything wrong or would lose her license to practice law.”

“How do you know that?” Noah prompts.

“Well, there are over one hundred thousand attorneys practicing in the state currently,” Adele says, going over the information our researchers found. “In the past year, there were about nine thousand complaints filed with the bar. Of those, the vast majority were dismissed by the New Jersey State Bar Ethics Committee, with only about a thousand that warranted an investigation. Of those, only one hundred fifty resulted in formal charges being filed, and of those, only ten attorneys were disbarred rather than being disciplined in another way. So knowing Lily and how she worked, the chances of her being disbarred were exceedingly small.”

“Thank you, Ms. Goldman. Anything else you’d like to add?” Noah asks.

“Just this: I can’t imagine that this person who had so much going for her—superstar attorney, partner, married with two kids—would take her own life. It just doesn’t make sense. We all miss Lily very much at the firm. My heart goes out to her family.”

“Thank you, Ms. Goldman. No further questions at this time, Your Honor,” Noah says.

The blond kid from Liberty stands. “I have a few questions on cross, Your Honor,” he says.

He looks at Adele. “Ms. Goldman, if the bar investigation found that Lily had done something wrong, couldn’t she have lost her law license and her

job?"

"That's only one possible outcome," Adele says, like we've rehearsed. Here's where having a lawyer coach really helped us. "If they found her guilty of intentional malpractice, or being unethical, they could have disbarred her. They could also have suspended her license or issued a formal reprimand. It's also possible that they could have found she'd done nothing wrong at all."

Don't ask why she was one of the 9 percent of lawyers whose complaints get investigated, I think.

Blond boy isn't even thinking along those lines. "But if they found her guilty—"

"It's not a matter of guilt. She was not on trial. Lily always held herself to the highest standards. She wouldn't have done anything intentionally unethical or illegal. I'm sure the investigation would have found proof of no wrongdoing."

"That's just your opinion," the attorney sneers.

"True. But I knew Lily Jordan, and you didn't, so I think my opinion is more valuable," Adele says sweetly.

Go, Adele!

The lawyer changes topics. "Isn't it true that Lily Jordan worked very long hours?"

Adele nods. "Yes. Just about everyone at our firm does. We take our responsibilities to our clients very seriously."

"Isn't it true that Lily Jordan was having marital difficulties?"

Adele shrugs. "I don't know anything about that."

"Have you had marital difficulties, Ms. Goldman?"

Noah stands. "Objection, Your Honor. Irrelevant to this case."

"Goes to the state of mind of Lily Jordan, Your Honor. If many attorneys in the firm worked so much that they had marital troubles, it's relevant."

"Objection overruled. Please answer the question, Ms. Goldman," the judge says.

"Well, when you work as much as we do at our firm, it's pretty commonplace to have some friction in a marriage."

"Isn't it true you've been married and divorced twice?"

Noah's on his feet again. "Objection! The details of the witness's personal life are definitely not relevant, Your Honor."

"Sustained. Ms. Goldman, you don't need to answer the question."

“Are you sure you didn’t notice any problems with Lily’s personal life?”

Adele sets her jaw. “I know that Lily cared a lot about her family. Her parents split up when she was young, and she grew up poor. She said she wanted her girls to have a good childhood and was committed to making life good for them—being the best mom she could be.”

The Liberty attorney frowns. “No further questions.”

I flash Adele a thumbs-up as she leaves the witness stand.

Tessa calls Max, who’s playing Randall Hawley, to the witness stand. “Can you tell me your occupation and where you were on January 16, 2024?”

“I’ve been a member of the Ferrytown, New Jersey, Police Department for fifteen years,” Max replies. His hair is cut short and he’s sitting very straight, like he is a police officer. “I was on duty the night of January 16, 2024. I was the first one on the scene.”

Tessa nods. “Can you tell me what happened that night?”

“A radio call went out around midnight that a neighbor saw unusual lights off River Road near a group of trees. There was a terrible ice storm that night.”

I shudder to myself. It’s exactly like the night my mom died.

“That stretch of River Road, where it curves around a bend, is particularly dangerous,” Max continues. “As I approached the scene, I had to be careful not to run off the road myself. I saw that the guardrail along the curve was bent, so I pulled over,” Max continues. “I made my way past the rail onto the steep slope down to the river and saw a car a dozen feet away. It had flipped over and struck a tree, which had fallen on top of it. I called for backup and an ambulance and went down to the scene of the accident. Practically the entire car had been crushed, and I didn’t see how anyone could have survived. Nevertheless, I went to the driver’s side to see what I could do.”

I close my eyes, trying not to think of Mom.

“The airbag had been deployed. However, the top of the car had been crushed. Lily Jordan had suffered severe head trauma. I felt for a pulse in her neck, and there was none.

“By the time my backup and medical services arrived, there was nothing to do but remove Lily Jordan’s body from the car and notify her family. It was tragic.”

“Can you tell us again what the road conditions were like that night?”

“It was the worst ice storm of the winter—probably in several winters. Poor visibility, treacherous roads. After the ambulance left, I went back and examined the ground where the car had left the road. The ice had to be at least three inches thick. It was easy to see how someone could have slid off the road in those conditions.”

“And was it unusual to have accidents on that stretch of road?”

Max shakes his head. “Not at all. That part of River Road is the site of dozens of accidents every year. This was the second fatal accident on that curve since I’ve been on the force. And if you ask me, that’s two too many deaths. I hope the town council takes it upon themselves to increase the height of the guardrails and to put up warning signs on that road to be extra careful during dangerous conditions.”

“Thank you, Officer Hawley. No further questions, Your Honor,” Tessa says.

A curly-haired Liberty attorney stands. “Mr. Hawley, aren’t single-car accidents suspicious?”

“Not always. Especially not on a road like that in bad weather,” Max says calmly.

“I see. When you examined the scene, did you notice any skid marks?”

“No, but—”

“Thank you, Mr. Hawley.”

Max turns to the judge. “Your Honor, may I finish what I was trying to say?”

The judge smiles. “Please do,” he says.

“Thank you. I was going to say that there were no skid marks on the road, but that wasn’t surprising, given that the ice was several inches deep. Even if Ms. Jordan had hit her brakes hard, the ice could have prevented there from being any marks.”

“Anything else, counselor?” the judge asks the other attorney.

“No, Your Honor,” she says, frowning.

Max killed it, I think. If we win, he’ll be a huge reason why. He really seemed like a credible witness, and he held the line and didn’t admit anything.

After the defense presents their case, Raj cross-examines Liberty’s last witness: Chris Barber, the psychologist.

“So, Ms. Barber, is it true that you never met Lily Jordan?”

“That’s true,” says the witness, a tall girl with horn-rimmed glasses and her hair in a bun. “But as I’ve stated, I’m a clinical psychologist licensed in the state of New Jersey with a specialty in treating patients with depression. I have seventeen years’ experience in this field, and I was able to review all the available materials and form an opinion on her state of mind at the time of her death.”

She sounds like she’s reading verbatim from the mock trial case packet!

“You were asked to review these materials by Alouette Insurance Company, correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And based on your review, you concluded that Lily Jordan took her own life.”

“Yes. She had evidence of significant stress—marriage trouble, work trouble, and the risk of losing her job because of the bar investigation. Because of that, I believe she took her life to help her family financially.”

“You believe,” Raj says. “Tell me, Dr. Barber, in your review of the chart, was there any evidence that Lily Jordan had a substance use problem?”

“No.”

“Was her blood alcohol level high on the night of her death?”

“No, it was zero.”

“Was she being treated for clinical depression?”

“No.”

“Was there any evidence that she was being disbarred?”

“Well, no, because the bar investigation had not actually taken place yet,” says the girl, squirming.

“So what you’re saying is that upon reviewing the records of someone you’ve never met, you found that a forty-two-year-old woman, a prominent attorney, wife, and mother with two young daughters, a woman with no history of depression or substance use, and with no restrictions to her practice of the law, decided to kill herself in a horrific accident in order to get her family insurance money. Doesn’t that seem a little far-fetched to you?”

Yeah, Raj, go in for the kill! I think.

The witness blinks. “I . . . no, it doesn’t seem far-fetched,” she says. “I reviewed the documents—”

“That were provided to you by Alouette, yes, I understand. One last question. If Lily Jordan’s death was an accident, how much would Alouette

Insurance owe her family?"

"That's not really my area of expertise," the witness says.

"Oh, then, I'll tell you, Dr. Barber. Not paying the Jordan family what they're owed is saving Alouette forty million dollars. Don't you think that's a lot of money?"

"Objection, Your Honor." An opposing attorney jumps to their feet. "Counsel is testifying."

"Withdrawn, Your Honor," Raj says coolly. "No further questions."

He might have withdrawn his question, but he got his point across.

Then Raj starts his closing argument.

"As my esteemed colleague told you at the beginning of this trial"—Raj smiles at me, and electricity jolts my spine—"no one can truly know what's in another person's mind."

My own mind starts to wander, and I find myself musing about what was on Mom's mind that night six years ago. Why *was* she on that winding road in an ice storm so late at night?

I refocus on Raj. "But consider all the evidence that has been presented today, all the testimony you've heard. Lily Jordan loved her life. She loved her job and her family. No matter what stress she was under, there is no evidence—no evidence at all beyond conjecture and innuendo—that she was depressed enough to take her own life. We know that on the night of Lily Jordan's death, there was a horrific ice storm. The facts have shown that Lily Jordan died in a terrible accident in a place where many accidents have happened in bad weather. Lily Jordan was just trying to get home to her family that night and had no intention of hurting herself. Please, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, please honor Lily's wishes and award her family what they are due according to the law. Please do not make the tragic death of a beloved lawyer, wife, and mother more painful than it's already been."

The jury and judge take fifteen minutes to deliberate, but it feels like fifteen hours. Raj squeezes my hand under our table.

"Don't worry," he murmurs. "We got this."

"What if we weren't good enough?"

"Watch the jury members and the judge when they come back in," Raj says. "If they look over at us, then we've won."

"Really?"

"It's challenging to maintain eye contact when you've decided against someone," Raj says. "Nonverbal communication is hard to disguise."

The judge and jury return. The jury's made up of six students from our school and six from Liberty, but the foreperson is our team member Anita. She looks at our table and doesn't smile, but she holds Tessa's gaze for a few beats.

Maybe it's just because she's our classmate.

But the jury finds in our favor.

Then it's the judge's turn. He glances at the papers in front of him and talks about how both teams did well. He looks at Raj and tilts his head the slightest bit.

Raj squeezes my hand under the table.

And then the judge says that we've won on points.

We shake hands with the Liberty students. Our team assembles for a photo with our arms draped around each other's shoulders.

Raj whispers in my ear, "We make a great team."

I look up at him. "We do."

Exile

Rama's and Sita's happiness in Ayodhya did not last long. Even though Rama was the eldest son, his father's second wife, Kaikeyi, convinced the king to send Rama into exile in the dangerous Dandaka forest for fourteen years and name her own son, Bharata, as the Crown Prince in his place. The king was brokenhearted, but he had made a promise to Kaikeyi, and so he was bound to do as she asked, much as it grieved him.

Rama agreed to his father's request without question.

"Stay here at the palace, my love," Rama said to Sita. "You need not follow me into struggle and danger. I am the one to be exiled, not you."

"I am your wife. Where you go, I will go," Sita said.

And so Sita shed the grand clothing and jewels of a princess, dressed in simple cotton, and followed Rama into exile in the forest. Rama's brother Lakshmana would not be separated from his brother and went with them.

Rama built an ashram for Sita, a small place of peace where she did not need to worry about wild animals or demons. And in this rustic setting, they were happy.

But one day, the demoness Shurpanakha came upon Rama walking through the forest and instantly loved him. She put on the guise of a woman and tried to seduce him. Rama refused her, saying he was married and devoted to his wife, and the demon-woman became enraged. She traveled to the ashram while Rama was away and tried to kill Sita. Lakshmana defended Sita and cut off the demon's nose and ears as punishment.

Shurpanakha ran screaming to her brother Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka.

And Ravana swore to avenge his sister’s humiliation.

Chapter 16

Grace has sent emails to the three lawyers on my list, and one responds very quickly: Susan Ling, who overlapped with my mom at Northwestern.

I set up a phone call with Susan during my free period. Unfortunately, Raj can't be there, but I promise to tell him what I find out.

I lock myself in a gender-neutral bathroom while I make the call with my phone number blocked. I remind myself that I'm pretending to be Grace.

"Ms. Ling, thanks so much for agreeing to speak with me," I say.

"My pleasure, Grace."

"As I mentioned in the email, we're doing a behind-the-scenes look at the state mock trial tournament as a feature for the school newspaper. We're interviewing team members as well as our faculty and attorney advisors. But we also wanted to talk to some people who run the tournament. How long have you been involved with the mock trial committee?"

"This is my first year," Susan replies. "It's been a lot of work, but very rewarding."

"You're part of the group that wrote the case, correct?" I ask. "How did you come up with the idea, and how did the writing happen?"

"The writing committee members met briefly on Zoom last summer to brainstorm. Once we determined what kind of case we wanted to write, we split up the work to write all the documents. Then the committee chair—that's Natalie Rivera—put it all together. I was very busy with work, so I put in less time than I'd wanted to, but I helped fine-tune a few of the affidavits."

"I see." I pause and try to keep my voice light. "One last question. The mom of one of my classmates also attended Northwestern as an

undergraduate. Did you know Lalita Janardhan back then?"

Susan Ling pauses. A second ticks by. Five. Ten.

Has she found me out?

"Hello? Ms. Ling?"

Nothing. I check the phone, but the call is still connected.

"Grace, I'm so sorry. Someone came into my office, so I muted myself for a moment. What were you saying?"

My heart starts beating again. "Oh, I was just wondering if you knew my friend's mom while you were at Northwestern. Her name was Lalita Janardhan, and she was a first-year when you were a senior."

"Lalita . . . hmm." Ms. Ling pauses again. "I can't say that the name rings any bells. I'm sorry. I hope she's doing well, though."

I swallow. She clearly didn't know Mom and definitely doesn't know that Mom had died. "Thank you so much for your time, Ms. Ling. I hope you have a great day."

"My pleasure, Grace. Good luck with the article."

I hang up and feel guilty lying about my identity and real motive for contacting her. But I need to do it to get to the truth.

At least that's what I tell myself.

I spend almost all my free time with Raj. When I'm not with him, I can't stop thinking about him—the warmth of his skin, the touch of his lips. It's like there's a part of my brain that is always spinning in circles when he's not nearby. I memorize his face; the feel of his arms; the smell of his cologne.

But I make sure to set aside time for Grace. During one free period, we hang out in the art room at school, where she's working on her collage project.

She's got dozens of small pieces of paper laid out. They're painted with symbols, tiny drawings, and colors. A few contain photos.

"What are these for?" I ask.

"I'm doing a self-portrait," she says. "I'm making components with things that matter to me. Then I'll assemble them into a bigger image."

"I love the way your brain works." I shake my head. "I could never do anything this creative."

“You’re creative in your own way,” Grace says. “Your writing is always amazing. And your desserts.”

I laugh. “Fair enough.”

“Feel free to use the art supplies—you know Ms. Munroe says it’s fine.”

I take a piece of sketch paper and draw a line with a pencil. It reminds me of the curve of Mom’s hair.

I wish I could draw her face. At moments like this, I can barely remember it. I resist the urge to find her photo on my phone.

I put down the pencil and just try to enjoy Grace creating art that I could never make.

Between his packed schedule full of advanced math and two science classes and soccer, Max and I don’t have that much time to hang out. But when I do see him at lunch a few times a week, there isn’t any weirdness between us and Max still happily eats half my lunch.

The next Saturday, the mock trial team plays the defense against Elm Park High School. The jury finds in favor of the plaintiff, but the judge awards our team the most points.

It seems like Bright Academy cannot lose.

But at every practice, Raj pushes us to be even better.

“Tighten up your questions so they pack more of a punch, Noah,” he says. “Don’t forget that you’re allowed to lead your witness as much as you want on cross.”

“Do you have specific suggestions?” Noah asks.

Raj hands him a piece of paper. “Here. Let me know if you want to talk more.”

“Will do,” Noah says.

“Adele, let’s go over your testimony as Sandy McNamara again. I think we can plant more seeds of doubt in the jury. I’m glad we won on points, but I’d like the jury to be on our side, too.”

After we all contribute to honing Adele’s testimony, we’re almost out of time.

“One last thing,” Raj says. “Remember that we all need to show up to court fifteen minutes early. We can’t risk forfeiting because our whole team isn’t there.”

Everyone nods. Lorenzo practically rubs his hands together.

“That means you, too, Raven,” Raj adds.

Raven looks up from his phone. “I’ve been showing up on time.”

Raj purses his lips. “You’ve been showing up just in time for the trial to start. We’re supposed to be there fifteen minutes early.”

“Dude, just relax, okay?”

“It’s important that we’re all held to the same standard. Anyone who’s not there on time won’t get to participate in the trial.”

Raven rolls his eyes. The bell rings. “Whatever, dear leader,” he mutters as he leaves the room.

Raj eats dinner with me and Dad a few nights a week when his parents are out of town. Sometimes, he helps us cook. Often, he surprises us by bringing something fun.

“Mocha chip. Your favorite, right?” he says as he puts the ice cream in the freezer.

“How did you know? I don’t believe we’ve discussed ice cream.”

“I notice everything about you. And I overheard you and Rodriguez the other day.”

We daydream about going to law school together someday.

“You’re going to change the world, Siya, I know it,” he says one night while we’re saying good night in his car. “You’re brilliant and strong, and you care about people.”

“I want to follow in my mom’s footsteps,” I say. “I want her to be proud of me.”

“I know she is. And I’ve already told my mom all about you, and she can’t wait to meet you.” He starts to kiss down my neck.

I pull away and stare at him. “Really?”

Raj dazzles me with his smile and leans toward me again. “Really. Both my parents will be at the Diwali celebration, so you can meet them then.”

I pull away again. “Wait. I’m going to meet *both* your parents in a few weeks? I better start figuring out what I’m going to wear!”

Raj laughs. “You could wear a sack and they’d still love you.”

I side-eye him. “Thanks, but I’m not meeting your parents for the first time wearing a *sack*.”

The light flips off in my living room.

“That’s Dad’s signal that I’d better get in the house. Good night. See you tomorrow in court.”

“Good night.” He kisses me one last time, slow and sweet. “Can’t wait until tomorrow.”

The next day, we go to our fourth trial facing Garden City High on a blustery day that blows almost all the leaves off the trees. Raj, Max, and I arrive at the courtroom early, ready to play the plaintiff’s side. The rest of the team trickles in, but at five minutes before start time, Raven still hasn’t arrived.

Raj glances at his phone. “Well, that’s it. We’re going to have to go with our witness alternate. Chris, are you ready to step in?”

Chris straightens his tie. “I’m ready.”

Raven shows up right before the trial is due to start.

Raj strides over to talk to him, and I hurry behind, hoping they don’t start yelling at each other.

“You’re late.”

“Sorry, I—” Raven stops and squints at Raj. “Actually, it looks like I’m right on time.”

“I meant what I said. You should have been here fifteen minutes ago. Chris is playing your part today.”

Raven’s eyes flick to me. “Fine,” he says. “Guess you don’t need me after all.”

And he turns around and exits the courtroom.

“Raven, where are you going?” Tessa asks.

“He was late, so Chris is taking over,” Raj says brusquely as we return to the attorneys’ table. He scowls at the now-closed courtroom door.

I’m nervous. Raven was one of the best members of our team. The judge isn’t even in the courtroom yet. Was that a good call on Raj’s part, or not?

I shake my head to clear it. Our team is great. We’re going to be fine.

I give my opening statement and conduct my direct examination of Chris as Greg Jordan. His voice is a little shaky at first, but then he seems to get more comfortable on the stand.

“Thank you, Mr. Jordan. Your Honor, I have no further questions.” I give Chris an encouraging smile as I take my seat at the attorneys’ table.

Then comes the cross-examination.

Garden City’s attorney is a short girl with her hair in braids. “Mr. Jordan, did you think your wife was depressed?”

“No, she never told me she was, and she never acted like she was.”

“Weren’t you having marital troubles?”

“No more than any other couple,” Chris responds, like we’ve practiced.

“I see. But isn’t it true, Mr. Jordan, that you hadn’t been going to social events with your wife for quite some time?”

“Objection, Your Honor,” I say, standing. “What does this have to do with the case?”

“It goes to Lily Jordan’s state of mind, Your Honor,” the lawyer responds.

“I’ll allow it,” the judge says. “But be careful, counselor. We’re not here to litigate the Jordans’ marriage. Mr. Jordan, please answer the question.”

“I didn’t really enjoy the lawyer events, and Lily didn’t need me there. So I took care of the girls and let her enjoy herself,” Chris says.

“Thank you. So, Mr. Jordan, you noticed that your wife was working more and more in the months before her death, correct?”

“She always worked hard, but yes.”

“Did you ever ask why?”

Chris raises his eyebrows. “I used to ask, but Lily could never tell me. Attorney-client privilege, you know.”

“I’m not wondering whether you asked about the details of her cases. Did you ever ask her why she was putting in so many hours?”

Chris looks confused. “No.”

“And were you aware of the bar investigation?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“So, in summary, your wife was working many more hours, had an investigation into her conduct that she never told you about, and was going to social events without you for months leading up to her death.”

“I . . . I guess so,” Chris says, his voice uncertain.

“It doesn’t sound like you knew your wife very well, Mr. Jordan,” the lawyer says.

I leap to my feet. “Objection, Your Honor. Counsel is testifying!”

“Sustained,” the judge says. “Wrap it up, please, counselor.”

“Sorry, Your Honor, I’ll rephrase. Mr. Jordan, it sounds like you and your wife weren’t communicating well in the months leading to her death. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Chris says warily. “I’m pretty sure it was just a phase.”

“I’m sure,” the lawyer sniggers. “But Mr. Jordan, since you and your wife weren’t talking about much of anything—not her stress at work, not

even the bar investigation—how could you know whether she was depressed?"

Chris opens and closes his mouth a few times.

Come on, I think. *Say you'd known her for decades. Say she was acting fine at home. Say something!*

"I . . . I don't know," Chris says.

"Thank you. Your Honor, I have no further questions." The attorney turns in a triumphant way and takes her place at our opponents' table.

Our team never quite recovers. Garden City's lawyers are excellent on cross, and even Adele and Max seem timid. In contrast, our attorneys can't get their witnesses to budge at all—even when they read out seemingly crucial parts of their affidavits, Garden City's witnesses manage to weasel their way out of admitting anything important.

When the judge and jury return, Raj looks at them and shakes his head. "We've lost," he whispers.

"We had a rough trial, but you don't know that," I say.

"No one wants to look at our team," Raj says. "It's over."

The judge asks the jury chairperson whether they have reached a verdict.

"We have, Your Honor," says Carolina, a first-year Bright Academy high school student. "We find in favor of the defense." Now she glances at our team and shrugs her shoulders as if to apologize.

"Thank you, members of the jury. I've tallied the scores, and the winner of this trial is Garden City High School. Congratulations."

We congratulate our opponents, but Raj keeps clenching his jaw.

"Win some, lose some," I murmur to him as we gather our papers at our table.

"We shouldn't have lost," he says. "We really need to work on some things in practice on Tuesday."

Raven doesn't show up to that practice. We run through testimony with Chris, but it doesn't go well.

"I'm sorry," Chris says, playing Ron Pulaski, the investigator from Alouette Insurance. "I don't remember what I'm supposed to say there."

"That's okay, Chris. Take a few minutes with your notes. Siya, when Chris is ready, just take it from the top."

I nod. "Got it."

But Chris barely manages to put together two coherent sentences. And when Raj grills Chris in cross, he completely falls apart.

“No, Chris, you can’t admit that all your conclusions come from circumstantial evidence!” Raj roars.

“Raj, that’s enough,” Ms. Tillett interrupts. “Why don’t we all take a break?”

Raj frowns as he sits down. He doesn’t say anything for the rest of practice. Tessa takes over for him.

“You okay?” I ask as practice wraps up.

He presses his lips together. “I’m fine. But we learned something today.”

“What?”

“If we want to keep winning, we need Raven back.”

Raj texts me that night just as I’m about to go to sleep.

RAJ: We’re dead.

ME: What do you mean?

RAJ: I’ve been texting Raven

ME: And?

RAJ: He won’t even respond.

ME: Maybe he left his phone somewhere?

RAJ: No, he left me on read.

ME: Ugh.

RAJ: I even apologized.

Told him I shouldn’t have kicked him out.

ME: I’m sorry.

RAJ: If we don’t make it to the state finals, it’ll be my fault.

ME: No, it won’t. And we’re still good enough to keep winning.

RAJ: Not without Raven.

ME: Let’s see what happens.

RAJ: Yeah. All we can do. Good night.

ME: Good night.

Tessa comes up to me sitting by myself at lunch on Wednesday.

“Mind if I join you?” she says.

"Sure," I say. Raj and Max have class, and Grace is at a school newspaper event. I was looking forward to reading more of the *Ramayana* and thinking about my paper, but I like Tessa.

Tessa scoots her chair in and starts eating her salad. "It's been great getting to know you on the team," she says. "You were so quiet last year."

"Well, it was my first year of high school, and I was a researcher, so I wasn't sure if anyone wanted to hear anything from me," I admit.

Tessa smiles. "I'll bet. But it's great having you on the team. We women attorneys need to stick together." She rolls her eyes. "The male egos can get to be a bit much."

"Are you referring to what's going on between Raj and Raven?"

She raises her eyebrows. "You said it, not me."

I laugh, and so does she.

"But seriously, can you try to get Raj to calm down about it? The more he goes at Raven, the more Raven's going to run away."

"So we should just accept that Raven isn't returning?"

Tessa shakes her head. "I'm just saying to give him a little time to reflect. Maybe he'll realize how much he's missing."

I frown. "I'm not sure that's going to happen."

"You never know," she says. "Also, if Raj takes a step back, I can try to work on Raven myself. I'm co-head, after all."

"Sure, I'll try. But Raj might not listen to me."

"He'll probably listen more to you than to me," Tessa says, and I'm surprised to hear a note of resentment in her voice when she's always come off as the consummate professional. "I've been asking him to back off of Raven for a while now."

The bell rings for class, ending our conversation.

Later that afternoon, I'm in the library during my free period when I spot Raven reading a magazine in a corner. I hesitate for a moment, then go up to him.

"Hey," I say.

Raven pushes his hair out of his eyes. "Yeah?"

"We missed you at practice. And of course, at the trial," I say.

"Yeah?"

"Chris got roasted on cross."

Raven shrugs. “I’m sure he’ll get better over time.”

“So does that mean you’re not coming back?”

“At least then I wouldn’t have to listen to your boyfriend ordering everyone around all the time.”

“But you committed to the team.”

“Guess I changed my mind.”

“Come on. We’re counting on you. You’re letting everyone down.”

But Raven just looks amused.

I’m messing this up. I need to convince him to *stay*, not shame him into doubling down on leaving. I take a breath.

“I’m not trying to be harsh. I just . . . we need you on the team. I’m pretty sure we lost last week because you weren’t there. And practice didn’t go well.”

“Siya,” Raven breathes, pupils large in his hazel eyes. “Are you saying that Raj Raghavan can’t make our team win all by himself?”

My face heats with embarrassment. “Yes,” I say with as much dignity as I can muster. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. The team needs you.”

“That includes you, right? *You* need me?”

I nod.

“Then say it.”

I purse my lips.

“Say it, Siya, and I promise I’ll never miss another practice or trial. I’ll even show up twenty minutes early.”

I glare at him. But it’s a small price to pay for getting him to return to the team.

“How do I know you’ll stick by your promise?”

“I will,” he says seriously. “C’mon, it’s not a big deal. Three little words.”

I sigh. “I need you, Raven,” I say. “Please come back to the team.”

“You got it.” He stands and leans over me. “I’d never return for your boyfriend. But I like you, Siya. I like you a lot.”

I make myself as tall as I can and look right at him. “You swear you’re coming back to the team like you promised, right?”

“Of course,” he says, looking down and holding my gaze.

“Then get over yourself,” I say.

Raven pauses for a moment, then breaks out in laughter. “Nice.” He returns to his usual slouch.

“See you at practice on Monday.”
“You got it,” he says, sitting down and opening the magazine again.

Chapter 17

"Siya, are you ready?" Dad calls up the stairs.

"Be right down," I say. I check that my bindi is straight and the pallu of my sari is pinned correctly. I look good, I think. The sari is light blue silk with gold and pink embroidery in the shape of birds. Most people wear new clothes at Diwali, but I'm grateful to have something of Mom's to wear. I'm also wearing her earrings—golden bells that jingle on my earlobes. My hair is half up, and my curls are smooth and shiny. I highlight my cheeks with shimmery powder, and I'm ready.

I go downstairs and find Dad dressed in a brand-new rust-colored kurta edged in gold. "Very handsome," I say, and kiss him on his clean-shaven cheek.

"Thank you, sweetie," he says. He stops to take in my whole outfit. "You look so much like your mom."

I'm grateful I look like her. But more importantly, I want to *be* like her.

We grab the tray of cashew barfi—our contribution to the Diwali feast—and Dad slides it onto the backseat of the car. It's late afternoon, the air is crisp, and the light is clear as we drive to the community center for the annual Diwali celebration.

On our way, I text Raj.

The answer comes immediately: So are we. See you soon!

The Plumbhurst Community Center is a nondescript one-story brick building that looks like it should house offices filled with cubicles, but tonight it's decked out with string lights. Electric candles in colored paper bags illuminate the pathway to the entrance.

The inside is just as bedazzled with fairy lights, electric diyas, and kids' artwork depicting Diwali scenes. Dad and I head to the back of the large lobby, where Aparna and a bunch of other aunties stand behind a row of tables, organizing the food for dinner. Aparna is looking pretty in a dark purple sari with a gold border in a mango design. Her purple bindi sparkles in the lights.

"Hello Gopal—oh, you didn't need to cook," she says when Dad hands over the tray of sweets.

"Siya made them," he says, smiling at her fondly. "Is Sahana here?"

"She already went off with her friends," Aparna replies.

"Then you'll need help serving the food. Allow me," Dad says, moving behind the table to stand next to her.

Why can't Asha see that Dad is happy when he's around Aparna? Being alone might keep his heart safe, but what's the point of safety if you're lonely?

I won't intervene tonight. If Asha asks, I can just tell her Dad was helping out with the food, which is true.

"That sari is stunning," says a voice behind me.

I turn to find Raj looking amazing in a perfectly fitted navy silk kurta bordered with silver. Next to him are Lorenzo, looking surprisingly at home in a gray kurta, and Tessa in a pink salwar kameez.

"Mind if we borrow her for a little while, Uncle?" he asks my dad.

"Go and have fun," Dad replies.

"You two look great," I say to Tessa and Lorenzo. "I didn't know you were coming."

"Any excuse to get dressed up is fine by me," Tessa says. "And we know the food is going to be incredible."

"When Raj asked us, we couldn't say no," Lorenzo says, smoothing the front of his kurta.

"Haha bro, you're making it sound like I made you come." Raj shoves him gently on the shoulder.

"No of course not," Lorenzo says quickly. He looks at a table on the far side of the room. "Want to get a soda or something?"

"Sure," Raj says. "Ladies, what can we bring you?"

"A seltzer, please," I say. Wow, does he look good tonight.

"Raspberry-lime it is," he says. "How about you, Tessa?"

"I'd kill for a Diet Coke," she says.

“No need to get violent,” Lorenzo says. “I got you.”

We watch the boys make their way across the room, and Tessa says, “I’m glad we have a couple of minutes together. I’ve been wanting to touch base again. You’re doing a great job on the team.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I wasn’t sure I’d make attorney, but I really wanted it, so I went for it.”

“And I wanted to get something out in the open. I chose Beth for the spot initially because—well, she’s a senior, and had quit the debate team because of a breakup, and . . . anyway, it was a bad call. I’m sorry.”

I hope my face doesn’t look as shocked as I feel. “No worries, I understand.”

“I wanted to tell you because I think it’s important that women support each other, and I didn’t want you to feel undermined.”

“Oh, that’s not—” I start.

“Anyway, it’s clear you were the right choice for attorney. And I’ll keep working on Raven so we can put our best possible team forward.”

“So, about Raven—”

“Should’ve known that guy would never last. Wonder why he even joined the team.” Lorenzo has returned. He hands a cup to Tessa and sips from his own.

“Breaking news, Lem. He’s back.” Raj grins.

“So, you somehow convinced him?” Tessa asks.

Raj hands me a cup and then puts his arm around me. “Not me. Siya.”

A tiny crease appears between Tessa’s eyebrows for a second. She turns to me. “How did you manage that? I thought I’d have to corner him in the Fishbowl next week.”

“Oh, I just ran into him in the library and talked to him.”

“You just *talked* to him?” Lorenzo asks incredulously.

“So he’s coming to practice Monday?” Tessa asks.

“That’s what he promised.”

“He *promised*? Did he cross his heart and hope to die?” Lorenzo sprays me with some of his drink.

“Ew, Lem, that is not a good look,” Raj says, handing me his napkin. Luckily, it looks like Lorenzo is only drinking seltzer.

“I just don’t get how she convinced him. He probably just said that to get her to stop bugging him,” Lorenzo says.

“Siya believes Raven, and I believe her,” Raj says.

Lorenzo closes his mouth.

Tessa looks to the other side of the room. “Hey, that’s Divya. I haven’t seen her since the summer! She’s waving us over.”

“You two go ahead. I need to talk to Siya about something,” Raj says.

“See you in a bit,” Tessa says.

Lorenzo smiles by just baring his teeth.

Raj takes my hand and leads me to an empty meeting room away from the milling crowds. It’s a small room, but one whole wall is made of windows looking out onto a little park. Dry leaves flutter lazily to the ground in the dusk.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“More than okay. The sari is stunning, and so is the girl wearing it,” he murmurs, bending to kiss me. “I had to get you alone.”

“You look amazing,” I say, glancing to make sure we’re still hidden and running my hands down his chest. “And our outfits kind of match.”

“We go together perfectly,” he murmurs as he holds me closer.

He kisses me for a long time, then trails kisses down my neck to the opening of my blouse. He playfully undoes one hook.

“We can’t,” I whisper.

“Why not? No one’s going to miss us for a few minutes.”

I force myself to step back from him. His cheeks are flushed, and his mouth is so tempting that I want nothing more than to make out with him all night.

“There are like two hundred people here. Including my dad,” I say, refastening the hook and guiding his hands back at his side.

“Oof,” Raj says with a laugh.

“Come on,” I say. “Aren’t you supposed to introduce me to your parents?”

“They can’t wait to meet you. But I’d much rather be alone with you.”

“Me, too. But we can’t hide forever.”

“Just a few minutes longer.”

I shake my head, laughing, and pull him back out the door.

“Where are your parents?” I ask.

“Just look for a big crowd.”

Sure enough, as we move away from the food and toward the auditorium we meet an almost solid wall of people. At one corner of the room, I see Raj’s mom, Senator Nitya Raghavan, in a bold red sari with a thick gold

border. She's wearing just enough makeup that it looks like no makeup, and her straight, glossy hair falls gracefully to her shoulders. Raj's dad Anand, a neurosurgeon, stands tall and straight next to her looking distinguished in a black silk kurta.

My mouth goes dry as we linger at the edge of the crowd. "Do I look okay?" I ask. "I'm sure my lipstick is gone, but did my hair get messed up, too?"

"You look perfect," Raj says, staring at me again in a way that makes my stomach drop like we're back on the Ferris wheel. "Come on."

He leads me by the hand through the crowd, which readily parts when they see who's trying to get through.

Raj's dad sees us first and breaks into a smile that looks almost exactly like Raj's. Then his mom looks over and her whole face lights up. "There you are, Raj. And this must be Siya."

We finally reach them. "Mom and Dad, this is Siya. Siya, Mom and Dad."

Raj's mom immediately takes my hands in hers. "We've heard so much about you. So delighted to finally meet you."

"I'm so happy to meet you, too," I say.

"You've been feeding Raj, I hear," Raj's dad says in a deep, resonant voice. "And I have to say, that was the best apple pie I've ever eaten. I didn't believe it when he said he made it."

"I said I helped make it," Raj clarifies. "I mainly tried to stay out of Siya's way."

"If only all men got that message so early in life," Raj's mom says with a raised eyebrow, and I laugh.

We chat for a while like it's only the four of us at a party, ignoring the crowd milling around us.

"Can we get a photo?" someone calls.

Raj's mom looks at me. "Is that okay with you?"

At my nod, Raj and I step forward to line up with his parents, then turn and smile. I'm standing between the senator and Raj, and I try not to blink at the flashes from phones.

"Just a couple more," Raj's mom murmurs.

And I realize that one of the photo takers is a professional photographer, a blond woman wearing black and taking photos with a real camera, with a

second strung around her neck. I smile as she snaps dozens of shots in rapid succession. Then she switches cameras.

"Let's get some more candid shots," she says. "Talk amongst yourselves."

I freeze, but Raj turns to me and says, "What's your favorite lunch at school? My fave is breakfast for lunch day."

I cringe. "Those pancakes always taste like cardboard. I'm on Team Tomato Soup and Grilled Cheese."

"Not a chance. That soup is way undersalted," Raj retorts. "And the sandwiches are soggy."

"It sounds like you might be discussing worst school lunches," says Raj's mom. "The burgers at my high school were like hockey pucks, and the fries were so limp we could have tied our shoes with them."

"I had mac and cheese every day in high school. Now even the thought of it turns my stomach," Raj's dad offers.

It's surprisingly easy to talk to Raj's parents, and the photographer captures our banter.

When she's done, she brings out a piece of paper.

"Could you bring this photo release to your parents?" she asks. "Please have them sign if it's okay for us to use the photos publicly."

"Only if you're okay with it," Raj says.

I glance at Raj's mom; part of the reason she's here, I'm sure, is to get some photos for her reelection campaign.

"Sure," I say, and tuck the paper into my purse.

Eventually, Lorenzo and Tessa find us, and we make our way to the buffet line, where dozens of aunties serve their delicious homemade creations. Nitya and Anand go first, and their plates are heaped with more food than anyone could possibly eat in one night. They get to the end of the line, speak briefly with Dad, and are then whisked away to enjoy their dinner with the members of the committee who planned this celebration.

Many people make comments as Raj and I get our food.

"You look lovely together," says Kamini Auntie.

"Rajiv and Siya, just like Rama and Sita," says a grandma-like figure whose name I don't know. "May God bless you both."

Aparna Auntie offers us jalebis and Dad gives us each a cashew barfi.

"Dad, this is Lorenzo and Tessa, friends from the mock trial team."

"Nice to meet you both. What a team you have!" Dad says.

“Siya’s a huge part of our success,” Raj says as a muscle in Lorenzo’s jaw jumps.

“She really is something,” Tessa agrees.

“Gopal, go and eat with them—I can take care of this,” Aparna says.

“I should stay here and serve,” Dad protests.

“Go on—the Raghavans are waiting to talk to you more,” Aparna says. Then she looks at me. “Take him away, Siya. He should enjoy himself.”

Aparna seems to really care about Dad’s happiness. I give her an extra big smile to combat the guilt I feel that Asha wants to keep her and Dad apart.

We join Raj’s parents at their table, and Dad immediately starts chatting with them.

Everywhere we look, people smile and nod at us. Even Lorenzo and Tessa are joking and laughing.

“I’m used to people being interested in my mom, but tonight I feel like they’re all staring at us,” Raj murmurs.

I laugh. “I’ve lived here my whole life, but I never imagined getting this much attention and praise because of my boyfriend.”

“I like the sound of that word—boyfriend,” Raj’s voice reverberates through me.

“That’s what you are, right?”

“Most definitely,” he says.

“Asha took months to work up the courage to tell Dad she was dating someone. But our parents and the entire Indian American population of Plumbhurst seem thrilled for us.”

Raj squeezes my hand. “It’s easy to see when something is right.”

After eating, we go to the auditorium, where we sit in the dark holding hands and watch performers young and old dance and sing to celebrate the Festival of Lights—the triumph of goodness over evil, of light over darkness.

After the performances, Dad bids goodbye to Raj’s parents and asks them to come to our house for dinner the next time Nitya is back in town. Then he disappears into the crowd—probably to find Aparna.

Lorenzo and Tessa leave, and I reluctantly say good night to Raj and his parents.

“Siya, please come over for brunch tomorrow morning,” Raj’s mom says. “And please, if he’s free, bring your father. We’d love to get to know him

without the crowd around us."

"I'll ask Dad, but I'm pretty sure we're free," I say. "What can we bring?"

"Please come at ten, and just bring yourselves," she says.

"It's our turn to feed you," Raj's dad says.

I nod. "Thank you, I can't wait," I say.

"Me neither," Raj says with a look that's just for me.

I find Dad waiting alone at the building entrance. We drive home under a clear sky illuminated by bright stars, and I'm as happy as I can ever remember being.

"Did you get to spend some time with Aparna Auntie tonight?" I ask.

"We got to talk for a bit while we served dessert, and then I caught up with her again right before we left," Dad says.

I decide I'm going to encourage this relationship, no matter what Asha thinks. "Raj's parents invited us to their house for brunch tomorrow at ten. Is that okay? And then maybe we can have Aparna and Sahana over for dinner?"

"Of course I'll come to brunch. But Aparna is working tomorrow night," Dad says. "Maybe another time. Thank you, sweetie, you're so thoughtful."

My phone blows up on the way home. I check Instagram, and it's full of photos of Raj and me with his parents. Most of the posts focus on the senator's visit to the community center and her reelection campaign. But some, I find to my shock, are all about Raj and me.

Senator Raghavan's hot son finds love, one post reads. It's from a name I don't recognize and features a shot of the two of us, our faces close enough to kiss.

Another says, *Young love at the Plumbhurst Diwali celebration*.

The photo is of Raj unhooking my blouse. I can just make out the ugly wallpaper of the meeting room.

Someone followed us there and took photos of us without us realizing.

A chill runs through me. Someone violated my privacy in a truly hideous way. Who the hell would do something like that? I close the app and put my phone away.

Grace was right. Thanks to Raj, people I don't know are talking about me and taking photos of me. That's the definition of famous.

But I don't want to be famous like this.

Chapter 18

On Sunday morning, Dad and I make our way up the long driveway to Raj's house. In contrast to Lorenzo's modern mansion, Raj's place is constructed of brown cedar shingles, warm wood beams, and rustic stone. It looks like a mountain chalet that belongs out west instead of in suburban New Jersey.

I've visited Raj's place exactly twice in the weeks we've been dating. Both times, we stopped briefly for him to pick something up before heading out again. Now I'm seeing the house through new eyes, and it's intimidating.

"What a beautiful place," Dad says as we approach the massive front doors.

I glance at the homemade banana bread I'm bringing—it feels kind of humble compared to our surroundings.

"They certainly have great taste," I say.

"Especially in terms of the company they keep," Dad says, and I laugh.

Raj's mom greets us at the door before we even ring the bell. "Welcome," she says. "Everything is ready. I hope you brought your appetites!"

"I hope you didn't go to too much trouble, Nitya," Dad says. "Please take this banana bread. Siya baked it this morning."

Raj's mom accepts it graciously and leads us through a soaring entrance past the living room, study, and music room to the cavernous kitchen at the back of the house. It continues the post-and-beam theme, with natural wood and slate countertops. Raj's dad offers us drinks—coffee for Dad, OJ for me. Raj comes over to put his arm around me and kisses my cheek.

"We should talk," I whisper. "Have you seen Instagram?"

“Yes. Later,” Raj says.

“Just bring your drinks and that bowl of berries,” Raj’s mom instructs as she lifts a tray of French toast. “Everything else is already in the breakfast room.”

Just off the kitchen is an alcove that holds a round dining table, complete with a curved window seat bench, that overlooks the backyard. Raj’s house is set on a hill, and the view of Plumbhurst from here might be even better than at Lorenzo’s.

The parents take chairs, and Raj and I slide onto the bench. Our thighs touch under the table, and I flush.

In addition to the French toast, there is a platter of scrambled eggs, sautéed tomatoes and mushrooms, popovers, and, from the delicious smell rising from the serving dish, a familiar South Indian breakfast dish.

“Is that pongal?” I ask.

“Yes. I hope you like it?” Raj’s mom says. “I couldn’t figure out what to make, so I made everything.”

“I love it,” I say. “The black peppercorns are my favorite.”

Raj’s mom smiles. “You’re after my own heart, now.”

Raj puts a hand on my knee, and I blush again.

We spend a few minutes loading our plates with food, then start eating. Everything is delicious.

Raj’s parents ask Dad about his work. “I’ve been lucky to work from home, so I’ve been able to be there for the girls,” he says.

“You’ve clearly done a remarkable job raising them,” Raj’s dad says. “I don’t know how you managed alone.”

Dad smiles, but I can see the bleakness in his eyes. “I guess because I didn’t have a choice.”

“Well, we’re so glad Siya—and you—have been here for Raj while we’ve both been away this fall,” Raj’s mom says. “We know he’s all grown up now, but it made us feel better knowing he’s not alone.”

“Raj is a fine young man,” Dad says. “And you and Anand are doing such important work. Your patients and your constituents—all of us—need you to keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Thank you, Gopal. That means so much to us.” She sighs. “I often worry about the choices I’ve made, and what I’ve had to sacrifice for them.”

“Mom, I’m fine,” Raj says.

“I know. But I still miss you. I can say that, right? And it’s hard to not only live my life but know that I’m making my family live theirs as if their every move could be scrutinized.”

I squeeze Raj’s hand again. I only glanced at Instagram and TikTok this morning, and the posts are still there.

The conversation turns to lighter topics: movies, restaurants, and Thanksgiving plans.

“Asha’s coming home. It’s the first time we’ll see her since she left for college. I can’t wait,” I say.

“We’re going to Ohio for Thanksgiving to visit our cousins, but we’ll be back on Saturday. Right, Mom?” Raj asks.

Raj’s mom nods. “We land in the late morning.”

“Maybe I could come meet Asha, and then we could go out?” Raj murmurs to me.

“I’d love that,” I say. “We usually go to the Plumbhurst tree lighting on Saturday night. Are you interested?”

He nods. “I’ve never been. I bet it’s almost as exciting as the one in Rockefeller Center.”

I laugh. “Oh, definitely.”

We eat until we can’t fit any more, and then after a short break, we start in on the desserts—including our banana bread.

Raj’s parents give Dad a tour of the house and yard, and I get a few minutes alone with Raj.

“This social media stuff is insane,” I say. “Who was lurking outside that window taking photos of us?”

“There’s always someone looking to capitalize on clicks,” Raj says. “I’m sorry it happened. I should have warned you. And your dad doesn’t have to sign that photo release, you know.”

I shake my head. “He already signed it, and I’m sure he’s giving it to your mom now. It’s not that kind of photo that I’m worried about. It’s the weird spy shots. I don’t really post much.” Especially after what Asha went through. “My account is set to private. But how do you deal with it?”

Raj shrugs. “I don’t look if I can help it. You know I barely post anything.” He puts his hands on my waist and looks me in the eyes. “I’m sorry that being with me exposes you to all this.”

“I can deal with it. You’re worth it,” I say.

But I keep thinking about what Raj's mom said: about living your life as if every move could be scrutinized. That's a lot of pressure for anyone. And Raj, even though he's more mature than most people in high school, is still just a kid.

So am I.

On Monday, I avoid going anywhere near the Fishbowl on my way to class, but I imagine I can hear the school buzzing about the photos of Raj and me.

"It's disgusting," Grace says. "What kind of nutjob spies on two teens?"

I shake my head. "I'm so freaked out. And I'm glad Dad isn't on social media at all. It would be so embarrassing."

"You didn't do anything wrong," Max says. "You were kissing your boyfriend, so what. But taking photos without you knowing and posting them publicly?" He makes a fist. "I wish I could get my hands on that guy." He glances around the cafeteria.

"Siya," Grace says. "Do you think Lorenzo took those photos?"

I sigh. "I thought about that, too. Do you really think he'd do something like that to Raj? Especially since he's Raj's best friend?"

Max scowls. "I wouldn't put it past him. He really wants that attorney spot. And didn't you say he was all cranky about you getting Raven back on the team?"

"Yeah, but if he did do it and Raj finds out . . ." I argue.

"No one says it has to be logical to be true," Grace says.

"Exactly. Be extra careful around him," Max says. "And I'll keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't do anything sketchy."

"I'm going to do more than be extra careful," I say.

I leave my study hall early and race to Club Block that afternoon, hoping to get there before Lorenzo. I sigh with relief when I realize the room is empty except for Ms. Tillett.

"Siya, I'm going to run to the restroom, but I'll be back before our meeting starts," she says.

"Sure, Ms. Tillett," I reply.

Let Lorenzo get here early, too, I think. He's usually one of the first people to arrive.

Someone appears on the threshold of the open classroom door and for once I'm delighted to see Lorenzo's light brown hair and big blue eyes.

“Hey, can I talk to you?” I ask.

Lorenzo looks momentarily surprised, but he answers, “Of course. What’s up?”

I look around. No one else is here yet. I take a breath. “So, I’m sure you’ve seen the social media posts from Saturday night?”

“Yes. Great shots of you, Raj, and his parents,” Lorenzo sneers.

“I don’t mean those photos. It’s the other ones I’m worried about.”

Lorenzo raises his eyebrows. “Those were nice shots, too. What about them?”

“Did you take them?”

His ears turn pink. “Did I what?”

“Did you take those photos and post them to embarrass me?”

Lorenzo laughs. “You are so full of yourself.”

“You didn’t answer the question.” I glance behind him; still no one here.

Lorenzo moves past me and puts his backpack on a desk. “Of course not. I have better things to do with my time than spy on my friend and his latest conquest. But don’t worry, he’ll forget about you soon. He always does.” He unzips his backpack and removes his mock trial binder.

My heart speeds up. I want to stalk across the room and slap him. Instead, I gather myself and move to the front of the room, where all the performing attorneys and witnesses sit.

“I hope you’re telling the truth,” I say, trying to keep my voice even. I put my backpack down, but I don’t dare try to open it because I’m pretty sure my hands are shaking. “Because if you’re not, I swear I’ll—”

“What exactly are you going to do?” Lorenzo scoffs.

“I’ll make sure it’s the end of your friendship with Raj. And your mock trial ambitions,” I say with a sincere smile.

Lorenzo reddens again. “Like I said, I didn’t do anything.”

Someone else enters the room. “Wow,” says Raven. A slow smile spreads on his face. “It was worth coming back just to see that.”

I continue to stay off social media and feel much better.

But when the *Plumbhurst Chronicle*, our local paper, gets delivered on Tuesday, it features a huge photo of Senator and Dr. Raghavan standing with Raj and me at the Diwali celebration. I gasp and look more closely.

Raj and I look so happy together. And how am I standing next to our senator? The whole thing feels surreal.

In the article underneath the photo, they talk mostly about the senator's reelection campaign, but they also name me and mistakenly state that Raj and I are the co-heads of the Bright Academy mock trial team.

The boys' varsity soccer team makes it to the finals in our league—comprised of other small private schools like ours. The championship game is on a Sunday in mid-November, and the Bright Academy team wins in a nail-biting game against our archrivals, Cartwright Academy, that ends in penalty kicks.

Max scores the winning goal.

The whole field erupts in cheers.

After the game, Grace and I run up to Max and hug him ferociously. He's been working toward this since we were in grade school.

"Congratulations! What a shot, and against a really tough goalie!" I say.

"You are the GOAT!" Grace squeals.

His eyes dance as he smiles down at us. "Thanks. I was in the zone."

Max has an arm around each of us as we walk toward the school parking lot.

"Want a ride? I aced my driver's test, you know. You're looking at a fully licensed guy right here."

"As you've mentioned a million times," I tease.

Max looks shocked. "Not a million times," he says. "More like 1,296." He winks at me, and I giggle.

"I'll take you up on the ride," Grace says.

"Yessss," Max says, and gives her an extra squeeze.

"Amazing job, Rodriguez," Raj says from behind us.

I let go of Max and step back to hug Raj. "Congratulations!" I say, and he hugs me and lifts me up.

"Thanks, man. You did a pretty amazing job yourself," Max says. "We don't even get to penalties if not for your goal."

"The goal that everyone is going to remember is the one that won us the league championship," Raj says.

"Maybe." Max grins.

I take a breath. "So, what are the celebration plans?"

"Well, the team dinner is Tuesday, but we all agreed that win or lose, we'd go to Giacomo's tonight at six for pizza. Right, Rodriguez?"

Max nods. “I’ll be there.”

“You’re coming, right?” Raj asks. “You, too, Grace?”

“I can’t. My grandparents are coming for dinner.” She looks at her phone. “Still good for a ride home, Max?”

“Always.” Max extends his arm, and Grace takes it.

“I’ll come tonight,” I tell Raj. “I’ve got to get some work done at home first, though.”

“I can take you. Just need to get my stuff from the locker room,” Raj says.

“Have fun with Granny and Grampy,” I tell Grace as I give her a quick hug.

“See you tonight,” I say to Max. I give him one last hug, and he squeezes me extra tight.

Raj and I spend a good ten minutes kissing in his car in the parking lot. He smells like sweat and aftershave and him, and I am completely captivated.

“Congratulations again,” I say. “Now please get me home, because I’ve got to get some work done before tonight.”

“Wish we could just stay here,” he groans.

I touch my forehead to his. “Me, too,” I say. “But I’ll see you tonight.”

“I’ve got work to catch up on, too,” he admits. “But you can’t blame me for dreaming.”

“I can’t, because I feel the same way,” I say, kissing him again.

A few moments later, he pulls away. “I’m calling it,” he says as he puts the car in gear and starts driving. “Before we get carried away.”

I’m already carried away, I think.

But when I get home, before I can even open a textbook, I get a text from Grace: Check your email!

Grace has forwarded an email from Mark Holloway, the second person from the mock trial committee who had some overlap with Mom:

> Dear Ms. Delaney:
>
> Thank you so much for your interest in my role in writing the case for this year’s New Jersey Mock Trial Competition. I’m always happy to help a young journalist. I apologize for the delayed reply—I’ve been traveling a great deal and I’m only now catching up on email.
>
> I understand that you would like to do a phone interview. In that case, I could speak after 5 p.m. on the Monday or Tuesday before Thanksgiving.
>
> Please let me know how you would like to proceed.

Yours,
Mark Holloway

Thanksgiving week! This is going to be a challenge, since Asha will already be home, and I won't be in school after five p.m. And I'm not sure whether Raj can be with me. But maybe I can sneak off and call Mark Holloway? I chew my lip.

Then I reply to Grace's email.

Chapter 19

On the Saturday before Thanksgiving, we win our eighth trial, making us tied for the best record in the state, eight and one. Everyone is giving the team their best—including Raven.

That afternoon, Dad and I pick up Asha from Newark airport.

I jump out of the passenger's seat. "Asha!" I cry as I run to her.

Asha throws her arms around me.

"Missed you, little mama," Asha says.

"Missed you, too." I squeeze like I never want to let her go.

I grab her suitcase, put it in the trunk, and open the back door of the car. "You can sit up front," I say graciously. I feel like half our childhood was spent arguing this point, and now I'm old enough to cede it to her. For a week, at least.

"That's okay," Asha says, slipping into the back.

I shrug and return to my seat.

"Welcome home, Asha," Dad says, and reaches back to pat her leg.

"Thanks, Dad."

Dad pulls away from the curb and makes his way to the airport exit.

"How was your flight?" Dad asks.

"Fine," Asha says.

"How did midterms go?" I ask, twisting to look back at her.

"Nothing I couldn't handle." Asha smiles at me. "It's been a good semester so far. I'm pretty sure I'm going to go for biomedical engineering."

"That's great, Asha. But it's only your first year. Surely you don't have to declare your major now?"

“No, but the sooner I figure it out, the sooner I can get my class schedule set,” she says.

We talk some more about her classes and then shift to focus on Thanksgiving dinner plans.

“Who’s coming?” Asha asks.

“We thought since it’s your first visit home since August that we’d keep it cozy,” I say. “Just the three of us.”

“I won’t get to meet the famous Raj Raghavan?”

“He’s out of town right now, but they’re coming back next Saturday. He wants to stop by our place and then we can all go to the tree lighting.”

“Oh, good. Sounds like a great idea. Maybe I’ll ask some folks to join us.”

“Awesome. Max and Grace are coming, too.”

We arrive home to a dinner featuring all of Asha’s favorites: lemon rice, okra, and chana masala with chapatis.

“Want to catch up on *Mystery at the Monarch* tonight? We’re two episodes behind, and the newest one airs on Tuesday,” I say.

Asha glances at her phone. “I’m going out with friends tonight,” she says.

“Oh, okay,” I say. She only just got home, and she doesn’t want to spend more than a few minutes with me and Dad?

“Have fun,” Dad says.

“I’ll be back by eleven,” Asha tells us as she runs upstairs with her bag. Before we know it, someone picks her up, and she’s gone again.

“We barely saw her,” I complain to Dad as we sit in front of the TV with bowls of (at least to me) consolation ice cream. “And I’ve waited for months to spend time with her.” I try unsuccessfully to keep the whine out of my voice.

“I know she’ll make time for you. She loves you. But to be honest, I’m glad she wants to go out with friends,” Dad says.

I think back to last year at this time, when it seemed like nothing would ever be normal again. Asha didn’t want to see anyone or do anything for so long. She barely ate unless we reminded her to.

We’d been at our cousins’ home in Buffalo for Thanksgiving, but Asha hadn’t wanted to be with everyone else. She’d gone to the guest bedroom we shared and just lay on the bed for hours.

I'd crept to the room and talked to her in the dark. "Don't you want a vote on what we're making for dessert?"

Silence.

"Dad says pumpkin pie is traditional, but I pointed out that so is pecan pie."

More silence.

"Come on, Asha. It's Thanksgiving. Naveen and Manavi want to see you." Our younger cousins kept asking if Asha was sick and how they could help her.

Still no answer.

"I know you're hurting. I can't even imagine how you feel." Stupid boyfriend, stupid best friend. How could they betray her like that? "But . . ." I search for the right words. "You once told me that I could hold sadness and happiness at the same time. That it didn't need to only be one or the other. So, I'm asking you to try to find a little happiness again, even in the middle of your sadness. For me. Because I need you. I've already lost Mom. I can't lose you, too."

I left the room.

Twenty minutes later, Asha came downstairs and weighed in on the dessert decision.

"Pecan pie is just as traditional," she said. "And it tastes way better."

"Pecan pie it is," Dad said with hope in his eyes.

After the pie was in the oven, Asha whispered to me, "How'd you get to be so smart?"

"I take after my big sister," I'd whispered back. "She knows everything."

So, I decide to be grateful that Asha is choosing to spend time with friends tonight, that she's healed enough to have fun again, even if it's without me.

Dad and I turn on *Mystery at the Monarch* and binge two episodes before watching the newest one. By the time we're done, it's 11:30 and Asha hasn't returned yet. I yawn.

"Go to sleep, sweetie. I'll make sure she's home safely before I turn in."

I stand and stretch. I am tired. And since Asha didn't have any problem taking off without me, I don't have a problem going to sleep before she returns.

I get into pajamas and climb into bed when my phone lights up with a text.

RAJ: How are you?

I grin and answer immediately, my sleepiness gone.

ME: Good. You?
RAJ: Waiting to see you again.
ME: Me too. But aren't you having fun?
RAJ: My cousins are like ten years younger than me.
ME: Well, Asha came home and barely said two words before she went off with friends.
RAJ: Wish I were there to make you feel better.
ME: Wish you were too.
Hey, I'm going to talk to Mark Holloway on Monday.
RAJ: Awesome! Too bad he only gave you
times during Thanksgiving week.
ME: He actually knew Mom, I'm sure.
Bet he has more to say about writing the case.
RAJ: Call me as soon as you're done.
ME: Will do. Good night!
RAJ: I'll be dreaming of you.
ME: ♡

I fall asleep and dream of his arms around me.

Asha stays home on Sunday, and we go to the grocery store to prepare for the week. It's just the three of us for Thanksgiving, so we buy a small turkey and all the ingredients for our favorite holiday foods: fresh cranberries, potatoes, sweet potatoes, Brussels sprouts, beets, and more.

"Let's make an apple tart as well as our normal pecan pie," Asha says. "I saw a new recipe that I want to try out."

"Sounds good," I say. "Or we could make an apple pie. Raj and I made a great one together."

"Whatever you want," Asha says. "Tell me more about Raj."

"He's wonderful," I say, suddenly conscious of how my skin tingles when I talk about him. "He's smart, and kind, and ambitious—but in a good way. He wants to become a lawyer and help people. His parents are super

busy and rarely home, but he handles all that without being resentful. He loves them a lot. And he's thoughtful and good to me."

Asha puts an arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. "He sounds like the perfect guy."

"He is," I say. "An actual Mr. Perfect."

Asha holds my gaze. "You deserve this kind of happiness."

"Thanks. I want you to be happy, too."

"I am," Asha says simply, and I can see it's true.

"Tell me about everything," I say.

And as we wind through the aisles of ShopRite, Asha tells me about her roommate, Sarah, who's an English major. "She's from Massachusetts, and she's really sweet. And we're both taking Intro to South Asian Art."

"Ooh, how's that?" I ask.

"It's fascinating. We visit a museum every other week and look at sculptures, paintings, and architecture. We're also learning about the intersection with colonialism. Lots to think about."

"Wow. That's so awesome. I wonder whether Mom ever took anything like that."

Asha grabs a bag of all-purpose flour. "I wish I could talk to her. It feels strange to be on the same campus where Mom was an undergrad. Obviously, the place has changed since she was there like twenty-five years ago, but I can't help thinking about her and what it was like for her when she was on campus."

"I know. I felt that way when we went to visit."

Even though Mom has been gone for years, at times it feels like she's walking right next to us.

We finish getting butter, milk, yogurt, and eggs and roll our very full cart to the checkout.

"Oh, wait, I wanted to get some fun cheese for appetizers," Asha says. "I'll be right back."

"Don't forget the truffle cheese!" I call to her back, and she gives me a thumbs-up.

I look at my phone while waiting for Asha to return. The line is barely moving, so she's got plenty of time.

"Asha?"

I turn and my blood runs cold.

It's Grant. He's wearing worn jeans and a flannel shirt like he's just some guy and not the one who broke my sister's heart.

I look behind him, preparing to leave everything in the cart, grab Asha, and take off, but Asha still hasn't returned from the cheese counter.

"Oh, it's you, Siya. Hi."

"What do you want?"

Grant blinks. "I . . . just . . . is Asha back from school yet?"

"Yep."

He's acting as if it wasn't his fault that Asha's senior spring and the whole year afterward were wrecked. As if he wasn't the reason she lost a year of her life to grief. Well, he and Alice, her former best friend.

"Shopping for Thanksgiving?" he asks.

"Obviously," I say.

Grant looks around, but Asha still isn't back. "So, a couple of us are getting together on Friday since we'll all be in town."

"We're busy," I say.

"Okay," he says. "Let Asha know I asked about her?"

I say nothing as he walks away.

He better not find Asha and upset her. I grit my teeth.

"I got the truffle cheese and the stinkiest soft cheese you'll ever taste." Asha returns just as I reach the front of the line. Her cheeks are pink; she's practically glowing.

I force myself to smile. "You and Dad can have the stinky one."

We pay and go to the parking lot. I keep glancing around to make sure Grant isn't lurking.

"How did we buy this much food for just three people?" Asha asks.

"No worries. Leftovers are the best," I say, trying to seem nonchalant.

As Asha pulls out of the crowded parking lot, I say, "It's really good to have you home."

Asha glances at me. "It's good to be home, little mama."

I look at her profile, and her jaw is relaxed, her hands loose on the steering wheel. Maybe she really is okay.

I release a breath.

Maybe the bad times are actually over.

At 4:55 p.m. on Monday, I put on my headphones and head out the door. I step into the brisk twilight and zip my jacket all the way up, bracing myself against the wind. I press star 67 on my phone and dial Mark Holloway's number.

"Mark Holloway."

"Hi, Mr. Holloway. It's Grace Delaney. Thanks for agreeing to talk to me."

"Hello, Grace. How can I help you?"

"As I mentioned in my email, I'm doing a behind-the-scenes feature on the New Jersey high school mock trial tournament and I wanted to interview some of the attorneys involved with writing the case this year. My understanding is that this year's case is a civil suit involving a family suing an insurance company over failure to pay. The fictional person who passed away was a female attorney. How did you come up with the idea, and how did you decide that the deceased person would be a fellow attorney?" I hold my breath.

"Well, as practicing attorneys, we've seen scores of scenarios," he says. "Last year's case was a criminal one, so we decided by consensus to go with a civil suit this year. And then we had a brainstorming session. We came up with a few ideas for the central problem and then voted on them. Once we decided the core of the case, we hashed out the general outline, then split into groups to write the affidavits and documents for the plaintiff and defense sides. We had fun throwing in clues for each side and leaving plenty of ambiguity. And making the fictional decedent a lawyer allowed us to fictionalize details from our own lives."

"Interesting," I say, pretending to write things down.

We go back and forth for a few more minutes as I ask him questions about himself—was he on his high school mock trial team (he didn't do mock trial until law school); how long he's been an attorney (twenty-one years); and what the most rewarding part of the process was for him (getting to help high school students become interested in the law).

"Thanks so much, Mr. Holloway. That's all I need for my article."

I take a breath and ask the only question I'm interested in.

"I was wondering whether you know my friend's mom? I think she was an attorney at Harlow, D'Souza & Brown in the past."

"It's not a very large firm," Mr. Holloway says. "I probably do know her. What's her name?"

"Lalita Janardhan."

There's a pause.

"Oh." Mark Holloway sounds surprised. "Well, yes, I knew Lalita. She was a fantastic attorney. And she—she had some struggles. And she died tragically . . . ," he trails off.

"Yeah. My classmate is her daughter," I say, hoping my voice doesn't shake too much.

"I'm afraid I need to get going, Grace. By the way, I didn't mean to imply that I was a major contributor to writing the mock trial case. Due to my commitments at work, I was mainly a proofreader."

"I see. May I ask who the main writer of the case was, then?"

"I couldn't say, exactly. You'd have to ask the other members of the committee."

"Thanks, Mr. Holloway."

"Have a good evening, Grace."

I hang up. My fingers are cold, but it's nothing compared to the coldness in my chest.

Mark Holloway knew my mom. He knew that she had died, and how she died.

He said Mom "had some struggles."

What does that mean?

You know who you are, Mom used to tell me.

But who was she?

The Golden Deer

One day in the forest, Sita saw a deer of unparalleled beauty. Its coat was golden with silver spots, and it was bedecked with gemstones.

Sita asked Rama: “Please follow that beautiful deer and bring it to me.”

“As you wish, my beloved,” Rama said. He set off into the forest to pursue the deer, leaving Lakshmana to keep Sita safe.

But when Rama slew the deer with a golden arrow, it cried out in a loud voice that resembled his own: “Oh, Sita! Oh, Lakshmana!”

Sita heard this cry, and, convinced that Rama was wounded, she told Lakshmana to go and help Rama.

“I am to stay here and guard you from danger,” Lakshmana said.

“Your brother is hurt! Now go!” Sita ordered.

Lakshmana agreed to find Rama and help him. Before he left, he drew a circle in the dirt around the ashram. “Do not step outside this circle, and you will be safe, sister,” he said to Sita.

“I will be careful,” Sita agreed.

While Rama and Lakshmana were gone, Sita heard a quavering voice outside.

“Mistress, will you help me? I am hungry and thirsty.”

Sita looked outside and saw a poor beggar. Pity stirred in her heart. “Of course I will help you.”

She brought a bowl of food and clean water outside.

“Hand them to me, mistress, I do not have the strength to move even one more step.”

And Sita stepped outside the protective circle to bring the food and drink to the beggar.

The beggar transformed into the demon-king Ravana, with ten heads and twenty arms. He grabbed Sita. She screamed and struggled, but he was too strong.

Ravana called his flying chariot, and Sita took off her bangle and threw it to the ground, hoping that Rama would see it and understand what had happened to her.

As she was flown to Lanka against her will, Sita worried that she would never see Rama again.

Chapter 20

I think about Mom all the time, but especially on holidays, when we're surrounded by the aromas of all the things she used to cook.

The onions and sausage I'm sautéing for our stuffing are just beginning to brown. I remember standing on a step stool next to Mom, stirring the same pan.

I want to ask Asha and Dad about Mom's "struggles." But how do I even begin—especially now? How do I throw that into the few days we have to spend together before Asha goes back to college?

So I don't ask questions. We chop and stir and bake and roast. We make the meal we always used to make.

But the biggest ingredient is missing.

After we're done eating, I link arms with Dad and Asha, and we walk around our neighborhood in the cold. We wave to neighbors who are strolling off their own big meals—older people, young families pushing kids in strollers, people out with their dogs. I came home to this house as a baby. I grew up here. I remember going trick-or-treating, playing musical chairs at block parties, playing kickball at the park.

We are okay. My family has experienced a great loss, but we are still okay.

Every step I take is a step I once took with Mom.

I hear Mark Holloway's voice again. "She had some struggles." What hasn't Dad told me? Does Asha know?

How can you truly know someone when they left you so long ago?

Our faces are flushed with the cold when we get home.

“Hot chocolate or tea?” Asha asks as I put the pies in the oven to warm up.

“Let’s make both. I invited Aparna and Sahana to have dessert with us. They should be here any minute,” Dad says.

Asha stiffens next to me.

“That’s great,” I say bracingly. “It’s been such a quiet day, it’ll be nice to have some company.”

The doorbell rings, and I rush to open the door.

“Hello, Siya,” Aparna says. “Happy Thanksgiving.” She’s holding a large, clear dish that looks like it’s full of whipped cream and cake.

“Hi,” Sahana says, pushing up her glasses.

“Happy Thanksgiving! Please come in. Tea and hot chocolate will be ready in just a few minutes,” I say, opening the door wide and waving them in.

Dad can’t wipe the smile from his face as he tends to the pots of tea and hot chocolate simmering on the stove. “So lovely to see you both,” he says.

Aparna places the heavy dish on the counter. “Sahana wanted to try a new recipe. We’ve brought a pumpkin trifle.”

“Oh, that sounds amazing,” I say, looking at Sahana. Her glasses have fogged up from the warmth of the kitchen, and she takes them off to wipe them.

“Are you enjoying Northwestern?” Aparna asks Asha.

“It’s fine,” Asha says. “Auntie,” she adds half-heartedly.

“Let’s dig in,” I say, eager to make up for Asha’s coldness.

We set the now-warm pies and the trifle on the table as Dad fills two teapots with tea and hot chocolate. I put out our special holiday dessert plates along with forks and spoons. It all looks quite festive, but Dad’s the only one who seems happy. Asha scowls, Aparna bites her lip, and Sahana keeps her eyes glued to the table like her life depends on it.

“This pumpkin trifle is amazing,” I say, digging in. And it is—it’s full of pumpkin bread, custard, pecans, whipped cream, and caramel sauce.

“Sahana baked the pumpkin bread herself,” Aparna says proudly. “And we made the caramel sauce together. Right, darling?”

“Mm-hmm,” Sahana says to the tablecloth.

“Siya and I made the pecan pie, and Asha made the apple pie,” Dad says.

“They’re our favorites,” I say. “But now I have to add this trifle to our list. Would you share the recipe, Sahana?” I smile encouragingly.

“Sure,” Sahana says, looking at the threshold like she’s trying to will herself out of the house.

We spend the next half an hour awkwardly eating and sipping. Asha keeps looking at her phone. Eventually, she announces, “I’ve got to go. I’m seeing a movie with friends.” She stands and leaves the kitchen.

“Be right back.” I smile through my gritted teeth as I follow my sister out.

“Asha, wait,” I splutter as I run upstairs after her. “I thought we were spending the whole day together.”

“Haven’t we had enough togetherness today?” Asha asks. At the top of the stairs, she turns around and crosses her arms, staring me down as I stand a foot beneath her. “I told you to keep her away from him,” she whisper-shouts.

I shake my head. “I tried, but come on, Asha. Can’t you see she makes him happy?”

“I can’t see anything except that you couldn’t do what I asked. I’ve got to go.” She turns again, stalks to her room, where she pulls on a sweater and grabs her bag. She passes me in the hallway without a word and then scoots out the door.

I return to the kitchen to find Aparna helping Dad load the dishwasher. Sahana has moved on to looking at her own phone.

“Are you staying for movie night? We usually vote on which rewatch we’d like to do,” I say to the room at large. “Right now we’re deciding between *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Shakespeare in Love*, but we’re open to other ideas.”

“Oh, we must be going, Siya,” Aparna says. She’s making a good effort at smiling, but her whole face seems to sag. “I’ve got to be at work early tomorrow.”

“That’s too bad. I guess pharmacies aren’t closed all weekend,” I say.

“We weren’t closed today, either. But I got someone to cover my usual shift.”

And she spent some of her day off making this dessert, only to be treated like this.

Aparna grabs her bag and Sahana leads the way to the front door.

“Thank you for joining us,” Dad says.

Aparna raises a hand. Her mouth twists wistfully.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Sahana says as she walks out the door wearing her first smile of the evening.

Dad sighs as he watches the two of them get in their car and pull out of the driveway.

“I forgot to get the mail yesterday. Do you mind getting it, sweetie?” he asks. There are lines around his mouth and weariness in his eyes.

“No problem,” I say. I throw on my boots and coat and scurry to the end of the driveway to open the mailbox.

There are a bunch of catalogs advertising for the upcoming holidays and a couple of letters from charities.

There’s also an envelope addressed to me.

I flip it over. There’s no return address.

I open the letter in the driveway and squint in the dim light from the garage.

Ms. Kumar, I’d like to talk.

Please call me at 828-555-1151.

It’s unsigned.

I look at my phone. It’s not Mark Holloway’s number. It’s not any number I recognize.

I examine the envelope again. There’s no stamp. Someone put this in my mailbox.

I glance around. There’s no one on the street.

I shiver, not just from the cold, and hurry back to the house. I run upstairs and shove the letter under a stack of books on my desk.

Chapter 21

At eleven a.m. on Saturday, Raj texts me.

RAJ: Just landed.
ME: How soon can you come over?
RAJ: I thought the tree lighting was at 6?
ME: It is. But I want to see you sooner.
RAJ: Me too.
ME: And I have to get out of here.
RAJ: Isn't Asha home?
ME: She is right now. But wait a minute, and she'll be gone again.
RAJ: Catching up with friends?
ME: Catching up with everyone except Dad and me.
RAJ: Yikes. Sorry.
ME: But if you're coming soon, I'll tell her to stay put
RAJ: Haha. Hope I don't drive her away
ME: Not a chance. She can't wait to meet you.
RAJ: It'll take an hour to get home,
and then I'll come right away.
ME: Your parents are okay with it?
RAJ: My parents already have a very busy day scheduled.
Why do you think we're home early?
Can't wait to see you.
ME: You have no idea how glad I am that you're back.
RAJ: Be there ASAP.

The dots of his text fade away, and I find myself wanting to cling to them.

Asha is thrilled when I tell her Raj is coming over. We ignore the Thanksgiving leftovers and make homemade tomato soup from our own canned tomatoes and oozy grilled cheese on thick, salty bread.

I keep checking my phone and looking out the window for Raj's car.

"You're completely head over heels," Asha says, nudging me with her elbow.

"Maybe I am," I say.

Her face grows serious. "Be careful with your heart," she says. "I hope he's good enough for you."

"You'll see," I say. "He's one of the best people I know."

"What smells so delicious?" Dad asks, coming into the room.

"Lunch for everyone. Raj is joining us." I feel like I'm floating.

Dad brightens at this and sets the table. Four bowls, four plates, four spoons, four napkins. Just like it used to be when Mom was still around.

Does Asha really want Dad's life to shrink down to just one place setting?

Here. Come out to the driveway and help me with something? Raj texts.

ME: Be right there.

I throw on my jacket and boots and meet him at his car, parked in the turnaround of our stubby driveway.

He unfolds himself from the driver's seat and I gasp a little because he looks so good. How is this guy with *me*?

"You need my help?" I ask.

He crosses the distance to me in two strides and puts his arms around my waist. He leans down to kiss me, and fireworks explode across my closed eyes.

"Mmm," he whispers in my ear. "That's just the help I need."

I laugh. "So you don't need me to carry anything?"

He goes back to the car and grabs a bag from the passenger's side. "I brought some fruit."

"That's sweet of you," I say. "But you didn't need to bring anything. You can imagine how much food we have, right?"

"Oh, I'm well aware of what it's like to eat at the Kumar house." He smiles, holds my hand, doesn't let go.

We step inside, where Asha is waiting. “The famous Raj Raghavan of mock trial team fame,” she says. “Hi.” She beams at him.

“The famous Asha Kumar of fierce sister fame,” Raj says, flashing his most charming smile. “Hi, yourself.”

“Raj, please sit and eat,” Dad says when we reach the kitchen. “You must be starving after traveling all morning.”

“Thanks, Uncle.” Raj picks up a spoon and soon we have plowed through the entire pot of soup and pile of sandwiches.

“Oh,” I say, finishing off my last crust. “And I thought I couldn’t be fuller than I was on Thanksgiving.”

“How can you say you love the soup and grilled cheese at school when you make this deliciousness?” Raj asks.

“Fair enough,” I laugh. “But it’s still better than the other lunches.”

“Hope you saved room for dessert,” Raj says. As it turns out, he’s brought extremely fancy fruit—the loveliest perfectly ripe mangoes, guavas, pineapples, and passion fruit, all peeled and cut into fantastical shapes. “I know you hate papayas, Siya, so I left those out.”

I bite into a luscious piece of mango. “These are perfection. Thank you!”

“You’re very welcome.”

“You literally just came from the airport. I have no idea how you managed this,” I say with my mouth full.

“I have my secret methods.” His look makes my stomach flip pleasurably.

Asha has discovered a small box of chocolate-covered strawberries. She bites into one. “You cannot be serious,” she says. “These are the best thing I’ve tasted in my life.”

“Siya might have told me that you love them.”

“Oh, so they’re all mine!”

“Nice try,” I say. “But you have to share.”

“You’ve been saying that your whole life,” Asha laughs.

“Yeah, but now I’m old enough to make sure you do.” I look at my sister, and she grins. Just like that, she’s the old Asha again, the one who stays up too late with me watching movies we’ve already seen, makes sure I don’t look dorky on the first day of school, and laughs with me at the stupidest memes we can find. All the resentment that’s been building up in me this week dissipates.

Raj is here, and somehow, miraculously, he’s made everything better.

We laze away the afternoon, chatting and playing cards: hearts, rummy, twenty-eight. When it gets dark, we motivate ourselves to get up and get going to meet Max and Grace like we promised. Dad's going to a friend's dinner party.

I secretly hope Aparna is there.

When we get to the tree lighting, we find Max and Grace in front of Massey's Hardware on Main Street, like we'd planned.

"Great to see you, Grace, Rodriguez," Raj says, nodding at them.

"Hi Raj," Grace says. She looks super cute in a white wool coat and light blue fuzzy hat.

"Hope you had a good Turkey Day," Max says.

"Hey Max. Hey Grace," Asha says. "Max, is it possible that you're still growing? You look taller."

"I've been eating everything in sight, so maybe." Max grins. "Good to see you, Asha."

We chat about how none of us wants to return to school on Monday. Grace shivers, and Max moves to stand behind her and rubs his hands over her arms to warm her up.

It's a small gesture, one that we've all done a hundred times.

But between Max and Grace, it suddenly feels new.

I search my best friends' faces. Is there something more going on than friendship?

And if it is more, how do I feel about it?

I think of Asha, Grant, and Alice. How that triangle caused her so much pain.

"You okay?" Raj murmurs.

But Max isn't my boyfriend. The three of us are friends. Sure, it might be awkward if he and Grace are hooking up. But it's none of my business. And I have Raj.

"Fine," I say, smiling up at him. "Better than fine."

"Oh," Asha says suddenly. "Here are my friends, so I'll say goodbye for now. Great to see you all." She waves at someone in the crowd.

"I thought we were hanging out tonight," I say.

Then I spot who's coming toward us through the crowd, and my mouth falls open.

It's Alice.

As in Alice, the former best friend who hooked up with Asha's boyfriend, Grant, and sent Asha into a tailspin her senior year.

Alice is moving toward us with a big smile, as if she can't wait to see Asha and rekindle their friendship. I turn to look at my sister.

Asha raises her hand and waves again. A small smile plays on her mouth.

Alice reaches Asha and pulls her into a hug.

What is happening?

And then behind Alice is the last person I expect.

Grant. I gasp as he hugs Asha, too. He kisses her cheek. How dare he?

Raj feels me trembling. "What's going on?" he whispers.

"I'll tell you later," I mutter.

After Grant finally lets go of her, I pull Asha aside.

"I'll be just a minute," Asha tells them.

"What is going on?" I practically hiss. "How can you be going anywhere with those two tonight? After they—after all they did?"

The look my sister gives me is one I've never seen from her before, hard and cold as the winter wind that whips through us.

"Mind your own business," she says. Her eyes flick to the side, where her former (?) friends wait. "I'll be home late tonight. Don't wait up."

I'm numb as the large pine tree blooms with festive lights and the town chorus sings a bunch of holiday songs, officially opening the season. Some in the crowd sing along, but all I hear is a roaring in my ears. How could Asha bear to be with Alice and Grant?

After the crowd starts to break up, we stay in the town center, window shopping in little stores that've all tried to outdo themselves in decorating for the season. Max and Grace keep shooting me looks—they clearly want to talk about what's going on with Asha since they know the whole story—but I avoid looking at them. I don't want to go through everything while we're supposed to be out having fun.

Raj seems to know I need cheering up. He holds my hand as we continue to stroll in the dark evening, with people all around us laughing and shopping. We squeeze into Giacomo's Pizzeria for dinner. But the pizza tastes like cardboard, and I only manage to eat a single slice. I can feel Max and Grace looking at me, but I still don't want to talk about it.

Eventually, the stores start to close, and the crowd thins out.

"Want to go somewhere else and hang out?" Max asks. He has his arm around Grace, and she's leaning against him.

Raj looks to me. “What do you think?”

“I’m tired,” I say truthfully. “I think I need to go to sleep.” I shiver.

Raj and I part ways with Max and Grace and walk home.

“Can I come inside?” Raj asks.

I nod. He’s going to ask me about Asha, and I’ll tell him the whole story, even though the thought of going through it all makes me want to weep.

We go in through the garage. Dad’s car isn’t there—he must still be at the dinner party.

We take off our boots and coats and enter the kitchen. “Want some tea?” I ask.

“I’ll make some for you,” Raj says.

I plop myself down at our kitchen table, where we’d just had a lovely Thanksgiving meal two days ago, where we’d played cards and laughed like a normal family just this afternoon. I put my head in my hands.

“Chamomile with honey, just what the doctor ordered,” Raj says, plunking a steaming mug in front of me. “Are you coming down with something?”

“I don’t know,” I say. I hold the mug, which warms my freezing hands. I look at the kitchen table and suddenly don’t want to be in this room anymore. “Let’s bring these to the living room.”

We snuggle on the sofa, holding our mugs. “Do you want to talk about what happened out there with Asha? It’s okay if you don’t.”

I sigh. Might as well get it over with. “Asha dated this guy Grant from sophomore year through the middle of senior year. She really loved him.”

Raj nods.

“And then, in the spring of senior year, she found out through the Fishbowl rumor mill that he’d been hooking up with Alice. Her best friend.”

“Whoa,” Raj says. His eyebrows fly up.

“Yeah. And then she became really depressed—like couldn’t-get-out-of-bed depressed. Like didn’t-want-to-eat depressed. It was like watching someone you love waste away from a horrible illness. It took nearly a year of meds and therapy, which she fought every step of the way, to pull her out of it.”

Raj takes my hand. “I’m so sorry.”

I squeeze his hand and go on. “Even though she finally went off to college, I’ve been worried about her. I just want to make sure she’s all

right." I swallow. "Then she comes home for the first time in months, and although at times she's been like the old Asha, sometimes she's acted so distant and just disappeared for hours on end."

Raj stays silent, watching my face.

"And tonight, she leaves us to hang out with *Alice and Grant*, the people who hurt her so bad that we almost lost her. That's who came up and hugged her." I shake my head. "I just don't understand."

Raj looks at me thoughtfully. "Maybe she's trying to finish healing," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe she's forgiving them."

I pause.

I hadn't thought about it like that.

We sit together for a few moments, sipping our tea. Raj puts his arm around me, and I rest my head on his chest.

"So, I've been waiting to tell you about my call with Mark Holloway."

"What happened?"

"He knew my mom. As soon as I mentioned her, he said . . ." I close my eyes and try to remember the exact words. "He said, *I knew Lalita. She was a fantastic attorney. She had some struggles. And she died tragically*."

"He said all that?"

I nod. "I can't get that phrase out of my head. *She had some struggles*. But I haven't figured out how to ask Dad and Asha so they tell me something real. All I know about Mom is the cheerful stuff that we talk about all the time. No one ever talks about her struggles."

"Is there any other way to figure out what was going on?"

"I don't know. Mom didn't keep a journal. Anything from work was locked down on her laptop, and that was probably wiped as soon as it was turned in. She didn't post on social media because of her job. And even if she did, I doubt she would have put anything out there other than happy family photos."

"Photos! Maybe that would give us a clue?"

"I told you, she didn't post anywhere."

"But what about your family photos? Maybe there's a clue in there?"

I go to one of the end tables and pull out an album—the one filled with photos of Mom, the one that Dad made for me and Asha not long after Mom died.

The first pages are filled with images of Mom as a baby and little kid.

We turn the page and see Mom in grade school, then high school and college.

"Wow, you look so much like her," Raj says, looking back and forth between me and the photos.

Dad is in a few shots with his arm around her shoulders.

"Believe it or not, my parents met when they were Asha's age. In a poetry class. Dad is a very math and science guy, but he decided to take advantage of the liberal arts offerings . . . he said it was the best decision he ever made."

Raj smiles. "I bet."

Then there are photos of Mom in law school—hanging out with friends, dressed in a suit and going to court, looking radiant in a graduation gown.

"Mom told me she'd always wanted to be a lawyer. No one in her family, no one she had ever known, had gone into law, but she knew she wanted to help people protect their rights and find justice. She said she wanted *to wield the flame of truth that burns away lies.*"

"Sounds like someone I know." Raj squeezes my hand.

We flip more pages and see a picture of Mom looking exhausted but elated, holding newborn Asha.

The next page shows Mom holding me as a newborn. She's looking into my eyes, and I'm looking back. I wipe tears from my face.

We keep flipping through photos: Mom at Parents' Night at Bright Academy, pointing to Asha's drawing, or my finger painting; Mom with dirt on her face, laughing in our garden; Mom in a suit, working at her desk. So many different sides of the woman who raised me and loved me.

The last page is filled with photos of Mom in the last months of her life. She looks thinner, and her hair is stringy. There are dark circles under her eyes.

"Oh, Raj, something was bothering her. How did I not notice?"

"It's not like our parents tell us about all the stuff that's bothering them. You were nine. What were you supposed to do about it?"

I rest my head on his shoulder. "I don't know. Something."

I close the album, and he holds me for a while. I turn to him.

He is so very beautiful.

"Thank you," I say. "You've saved this weekend for me."

"Anytime," he says, brushing the hair from my face.

He kisses me tenderly, then holds me for a long time.

Asha gets home after I'm asleep and leaves for the airport very early Sunday morning. I sit in the back, bleary-eyed, as we drive her to the airport.

"The time went by so quickly," Dad says.

"I'll be home in less than a month for winter break," Asha says.

I close my eyes and lean my head against the window. I couldn't wait for Asha to come home, and some of our time together was wonderful. She's been gone a few months and returned a completely different person. She's not the fragile person who didn't want to leave her room for a year. But she's not the way she used to be, either.

We reach the airport, and I get out of the car to hug my sister. "Take care of yourself," I say. "Love you. Can't wait to see you again."

"Thanks, little mama," Asha says. "I love you, too."

Asha stands stiffly as Dad hugs her. Is she still mad at him about Aparna? Then Asha goes through the glass doors and into the airport.

I stand there, watching her walk away.

Will Asha ever be the sister I remember? Do I want her to be?

We never got any time alone together. Never got any time to talk about Mom.

She had some struggles, Mark Holloway said.

"Come on," Dad says, putting an arm around my shoulders. "We missed our movie rewatch. What's your vote?"

Chapter 22

We only have a single mock trial case before winter break, in which we play the plaintiff and appear to win easily. But Raj isn't happy with our performance, and as winter break approaches, he's come up with an idea to reenergize the team.

"How many team-bonding things are we going to do?" I ask him. We're in the Fishbowl, and he's lying on a sofa, resting his head in my lap and looking up at me.

"As many as it takes to keep our team functioning at the highest level." His lashes are so long they cast shadows on his face. I run my hands through his soft hair, smoothing it back from his forehead. I could do this all day.

"Mmm, that feels nice," he murmurs.

"Yikes. Get a room," comes Lorenzo's voice.

My body stiffens. I can't figure out what to do with my hands, so I place them awkwardly next to my thighs.

But Raj just laughs and sits up. His hair is mussed like he just got out of bed. I tear my gaze away from him and glare at Lorenzo.

"We're all set. We have special permission to use the main building of the school for our lock-in next week," Lorenzo says.

Raj grins. "And they said okay to the last night before the holiday break?"

Lorenzo nods. "I argued that we'll be done with all our assignments and exams and could use a little send-off. And amazingly, Ms. Tillett agreed to chaperone."

Raj reaches out, and they clasp hands in a complicated shake. “Bro, you really came through. I couldn’t have done it better myself.”

I finish my history paper on the Wars of the Roses and study for my trig, chemistry, and Spanish exams. I write an essay for English on the main character’s feminist take on matchmaking in *Emma*.

I also turn in my topic for my big paper with a list of print and digital references. I’m going to discuss Sita’s story from the *Ramayana*, but I still don’t know what conclusion I should draw from it. I’m hoping I’ll figure that out in the next few weeks.

As I struggle through my work in the last few days before winter break, I’m not really looking forward to the lock-in—I’d much rather get started on vacation and spend time with Raj alone. But I can’t let him down. Besides, Asha isn’t coming home until the Monday after we start break.

Twenty members of the team are participating in the lock-in. We’re staying overnight in the main building of the school from eight p.m. to eight a.m. the next morning. Raj and Tessa have all kinds of team-bonding activities planned, including a game of Assassins.

“But how are we bonding when we’re split into two different teams?” I ask.

“The spirit of friendly competition will make us appreciate each other’s skills even more,” Raj says.

I shake my head, but it’s clear there’s no changing his mind.

The mock trial team lock-in begins with pizza for dinner. The whole team is arranged around the Fishbowl. Everyone is looking to blow off steam now that we’re done with the semester. Personally, I’m so tired from all the work I just finished that I want to go home and take a nap.

“First game: Untie the Knot,” Tessa announces.

All but two of us stand in a circle, put our hands in the middle, and grasp hands with two other people at random. Then the two players on the outside of the knot—Adele and Lorenzo, in this case—give the rest of us instructions on how to untangle ourselves.

I’m holding hands with Max and Raven. Max grins as we weave, jump, and duck under other people’s arms.

Somehow, Raven ends up standing behind me. “Bonded,” he murmurs to me.

“Stop it,” I whisper back.

“Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“You’re annoying me.”

We are almost completely unraveled when Lorenzo gets impatient. “What do you mean, your arm doesn’t bend that way? Figure it out,” he snaps at Tessa.

Tessa scowls and lets go of Chris’s hand. “I think we’ve had enough of this game,” she says.

Next, we break up into groups and play games of hearts, or Jenga, or Carcassonne. I’m spending time with people on the team I don’t know as well, but is this really making us a stronger team?

“It’s eleven thirty. I’m going to sleep in the faculty lounge,” Ms. Tillett announces. “I trust you won’t do anything irresponsible. Call me if you need me,” she says. “But honestly, don’t call me. And don’t need me.” She gathers her pillow and sleeping bag and leaves the Fishbowl.

I can barely keep my eyes open. I just want to cuddle up with Raj. “Can we skip Assassins? We’re all bonded now. And I’d like to do some bonding with you,” I whisper to him.

“That is seriously tempting, but we promised the team that we’d end the night with Assassins,” Raj says. He kisses me on the forehead. “It’ll be done before you know it, and I’ll hold you all night.”

Then he goes into attorney mode. “Listen up, everyone. It’s time to get ready for the final game of the night.”

“We’re playing Assassins,” Tessa says. “Everyone put your phones in this bag.” She holds out a grocery bag.

Kids groan as they drop in their phones.

“Come on, we can live without them for just a little while,” Raj says. “No messages going between teammates. We’ll play this the old-fashioned way.”

“Old-fashioned would be outside in the woods,” Max points out.

“Yeah. Since it’s December and freezing, we figured we could compromise on that,” Tessa says.

We’re divided randomly into two teams: the Plaintiffs and the Defense. Disappointingly, I’m not with either Raj or Max—I’m on the Defense team with Tessa, Lorenzo, Chris, Noah, and a bunch of the researchers. Raj leads the Plaintiff team with Max, Adele, and Raven. Tessa hands out armbands to identify ourselves—red for the Plaintiffs, and blue for the Defense. We also get red or blue water guns and tiny flashlights.

“The goal is to seek out and shoot everyone on the other team with our water guns,” Raj says.

“This hurts my pacifist sensibilities,” Raven drawls.

Raj glares at him.

“Why can’t we just use the flashlights on our phones?” a freshman asks.

“Your phones are gone until this game is done,” Raj says.

“Once you’re shot, you have to come back here to the Fishbowl, which is the hospital,” Tessa says. “If two other ‘non-dead’ members of your team tag you, you’re healed and can rejoin the game. Your team wins once they’ve eliminated all ten members of the other team.”

“What if neither team wins?” Max yawns. “If you can heal fellow team members, ten dead don’t stay dead.”

“Then we keep playing until one team wins, or it’s eight a.m. and we all need to leave,” Raj says.

Ugh. With the number of type A personalities on this team, we’ll be up all night.

“Okay, teams, gather up!” Tessa calls from a corner of the room.

I drag myself up to Tessa.

“What do you think our strategy should be?” she whispers to our group.

“It seems like we should have some people who roam around trying to shoot others, and others who stay hidden,” Noah suggests. “That way, the Plaintiffs will have a hard time knocking us all out.”

“I like it,” Tessa says. “Anyone have any other ideas?”

“Maybe we leave a couple of people here to take out any Plaintiff members who are trying to heal their teammates,” I say.

“Great idea. Who wants to hide?” Tessa asks.

I raise my hand immediately. It sounds like a much better idea than trying to run around and shoot people. Maybe I can even sneak in a nap?

Noah raises his hand, and Tessa asks three researchers to hide as well. She and Lorenzo are going to stay in the Fishbowl and pick off Plaintiff team members if they show up.

“On your marks, get set, GO!” Raj calls, and we all take off in different directions out of the Fishbowl and into the dim hallways of the school.

I know exactly where I’m going.

I make my way to the old auditorium. The lights are off, but moonlight shines through the small square windows near the tall ceiling. I stop and listen, but I don’t hear any unusual noises. My footsteps echo in the

cavernous room as I tiptoe toward the stage. At one point, an old floorboard lets out a tremendous squeak, and I freeze in place and hold my breath.

I don't think anyone's followed me.

I keep sneaking along until I finally reach the stage and climb the three stairs leading up, wincing as they groan with my steps. The moonlight doesn't reach here, and I feel my way in the dark, reaching for the velvet curtains and following along the wall of stage right to the doorway I know will be there—the entrance to the old dressing room.

I take two steps down to the heavy metal door that leads to a place where ancient sets and moldering costumes are still stored. The metal handle is cold to the touch; I push it, but the door doesn't open easily. I have to set my shoulder against it and use my legs, but I finally manage to open it.

I step inside the room and click on my flashlight. There's the rack of old costumes. I focus my light at one end. Is that my fairy costume from second grade? I reach out to touch the gossamer and lace. In the corner, I find a box full of green clothes, and I guess that these are the "invasive plants" from our fourth-grade play. I smile to myself as I remember that eco-disaster production and the moral at the end to be careful about what kind of species people plant in their yards.

I poke around more and see props with painted trees and a wall of what looks like a log cabin. I wish Raj were here; I could tell him so many stories about the things in this room!

I shiver in the cold and realize that I've left my sweatshirt behind in the Fishbowl. Maybe I use some of these costumes like a blanket? Or I could just give up on trying to win this game of Assassins, get caught on purpose, and go back to where it's warm.

I hear a noise behind me. I should have remembered that I'm playing a game in which someone wants to "kill" me.

And Max knows all about this place. I fish in my pocket for my squirt gun and turn around, ready to face him.

I'm hit in the chest by a stream of icy water.

"Bang," says a male voice.

And then the door shuts with its own *bang*.

Abducted

Ravana took Sita to his island of Lanka, where he put her in a grove of ashoka trees, guarded by demon-women.

The next day, Ravana came to Sita. She was afraid, but she looked him boldly in the eyes.

"How dare you abduct another man's wife! Shame on you! Release me!" Sita cried.

"Shame upon Rama for not only refusing my sister, who loved him, but for maiming her in the most terrible way."

"Your sister tried to kill me. She deserved her punishment," Sita replied.

Ravana smiled. "Despite my sister's injury, I mean you no harm." He spread his hands. "I am a good king. My subjects love me. I am educated and scholarly. And thanks to my devotion to Lord Shiva, I am very powerful. Come, my beauty, live with me in my palace and be my treasured queen."

"You already have a queen," Sita said coldly. "Rama is my husband. He is the only one for me."

"All Rama has done is force you to live in the forest like a commoner. And he will never find you, for my kingdom is well-hidden."

But Sita turned away from him.

Every day, Ravana tormented Sita, saying that Rama would never come, that he had forgotten about her.

Every day, Sita refused Ravana's advances.

"I do not wish to harm you, but my patience has limits. I will give you one year to come to your senses. After that, I will force you to become my

queen," Ravana said.

Sita refused to eat. She shivered in cold nights with only the shelter of the ashoka trees and tried to shut her ears to the taunting of her demon guards. While her body suffered, Sita stayed steadfast and kept Rama in her mind—how good and brave he was, how kind and strong, how much she loved him. She knew that Rama would find and rescue her.

No matter how long it took.

One night after Sita had endured nearly a year of captivity, a tiny monkey clambered down the tree where she was resting.

The monkey reached the ground, and lo! It grew before Sita's eyes into a powerful monkey-warrior.

"I am Hanuman, sent by your husband, Rama, to search for you." He showed Sita Rama's ring as proof. "Ride upon my back, and I will free you from this place, my queen."

But Sita knew it would be wrong to steal away in the night like a thief. And she knew that leaving evil alone would only allow it to grow stronger. She lifted her chin. "Let my husband, Rama, come and defeat this villain himself," she said. And she gave Hanuman her necklace to prove to Rama that she had indeed been found.

Promising to bring Rama back with his army, Hanuman took a mighty leap over the ocean, back to where he had left Rama.

Sita waited. And believed.

Chapter 23

“What the hell?” I cry, and shine my light in my attacker’s face.

“I assassinated you. Isn’t that the game?” Raven says. He pushes his hair out of his eyes and smirks at me.

“Fine. I’m dead. Let’s get out of here.” I push past him to flip on the light and then try the door. I turn the handle, push, and pull, but it won’t budge.

“It’s stuck,” I grind out.

“I’ll get it,” he says.

I step back and watch with increasing frustration as he tries the door and fails.

“The door is busted. We’re trapped!” Panic starts to rise into my throat.

“We can just text—oh,” he says, his eyes widening.

I’m so furious I stomp my foot. “Yep. We don’t have our phones. We don’t have any way of telling people where we are!”

Raven crosses the room and sits on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting comfortable. Looks like it’s going to be a long night.”

I bang on the door with my fist. “Help!” I cry. “We’re in here! HELP!” But several minutes of banging and yelling gets me nothing but a sore hand and a splitting headache. I stand on my tiptoes and peek out the window into the blackness of the area behind the stage. I cross my arms and start to shiver.

“You should take off that shirt.”

“What?” I whirl to face him. He looks smug, sitting with his legs crossed and his back to the wall.

Raven shrugs. “Your shirt’s wet from the water gun. And it’s cold in here.”

I look down at the front of my tee. Sure enough, it’s soaked through. My shaking isn’t just from incandescent rage.

And then it dawns on me that I’m trapped in a room with a guy.

“Did you do this on purpose?” I put my back against the door and cross my arms in front of my chest.

Raven stands. “What? No, of course not.”

“Sit back down,” I say quickly.

I’m grateful when he listens. He holds his hands up. “I didn’t get us stuck in here on purpose, promise.”

I exhale shakily. My pulse is racing. “You better not try anything, Raven, or I swear—”

His hands are still up. “Calm down, Siya. We’re friends, remember?”

I’m not convinced.

“Remember I promised that I’d return to the team? I kept that promise, right?”

I nod.

“I promise I won’t do anything but sit over here. You can stay over there.”

I let out a shaky breath. “Okay. You stay there, and I’ll find something to wear.” I go to the racks of costumes and start shoving aside hangers. But every piece of clothing in here is meant to fit kids under age ten.

“Never mind. Raj is bound to come looking for me. I’ll just sit here and wait.” I have a sports bra on under my shirt, but I’m not taking off my shirt and sitting in just that.

“I don’t think anyone’s looking for us anytime soon,” Raven says. “As long as we’re both gone, neither team has lost. And if people keep going to the Fishbowl and getting reincarnated, they might not even notice we’re missing.”

I lean my back against the door and sink to the floor.

Star witness or not, right now I hate Raven Lockhart more than any human on earth.

After a few more minutes, he says, “Your teeth are chattering. You might actually get sick because you’re so stubborn. Here—take my sweatshirt.” He removes it in a smooth motion, accidentally exposing some of his rather well-muscled abs, and holds it out to me.

I shake my head, still shivering. “I’m fine.”

Raven laughs. “You don’t look fine. And I don’t think our team would appreciate it if our best lawyer got hypothermia at this team-bonding event.”

I open my mouth to argue with him, but I have to admit that he’s right. I’m half-frozen already, and I don’t want to get sick at the beginning of winter break.

“Fine.” I hold out my hands, and Raven throws me the sweatshirt. “Turn around. No peeking.”

He laughs, but he turns around dutifully.

I turn around myself and face the door, where I still hope to see a human. No luck. I strip off my sodden T-shirt, drop it to the floor, and pull on Raven’s sweatshirt. It smells like pine deodorant and immediately starts to warm me up. I rub my arms and turn around again to find him still facing the wall.

“Thanks,” I say. “This is a lot better. But won’t you be cold?”

“Nah, I’m never cold,” Raven says matter-of-factly. He looks perfectly comfortable in his short-sleeved Led Zeppelin T-shirt, even though it looks to be made of thin cotton.

He peers at me with his mysterious eyes, swirling with shifting colors. “What is this place, anyway? I saw you sneaking around in the hallway and followed you here. But I never knew this room existed.”

“It’s the old lower school theater dressing room, now used to store costumes and props,” I say miserably.

“You’re a weird chick.”

“I’m not a chick,” I say scathingly. “What I am is serious. I wanted to hide someplace where no one would find me.”

“I know you’re serious,” Raven says. “Even about stupid stuff that only your boyfriend cares about.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snap.

“Calm down, okay?” He spreads his hands apart. “All I mean is that he’s the one who came up with this dumb night and this even dumber game. We should all be at home, or at least out having fun. Your boyfriend is an overbearing pain in the ass.”

“Why do you keep calling him ‘my boyfriend’? He has a name.”

Raven rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Raj Raghavan, golden boy. Whatever. It’s his fault we’re both stuck here.”

“It’s your fault! You followed me here and let the door slam behind you!”

“We wouldn’t be playing this stupid game if it weren’t for him. And how could I know that we’d get locked in here?”

I’m so angry and frustrated that I can’t speak.

I detest Raven Lockhart with the heat of a million suns.

I spend another few minutes banging on the door and yelling until my voice is hoarse and my hand is throbbing. Finally, I give up and sit on the floor again. It’s dusty, and I look around suspiciously, hoping there aren’t spiders lurking.

“Want to turn out the light so we can sleep?”

“Then no one will ever find us,” I say.

“No one’s going to even come looking until the morning when they realize we’re still not back.”

“I don’t care. I want to keep the light on.”

“Suit yourself.” Raven closes his eyes and leans his back against the wall.

I do the same and try to get comfortable, but thoughts swirl in my head. Will Raj really wait until morning to come looking for me? I wish I had my sleeping bag. Actually, I wish I weren’t here at all. Why is the door stuck closed? When will we get out of here and back to the land of the living? I glance over at Raven, who has his eyes peacefully closed, and I’m enraged.

“Why are you here, Raven?”

He opens one eye. “I was trying to assassinate you. Lot of good it did me.”

I blow out an impatient breath. “You think this lock-in thing is stupid. So. Why. Are. You. Here?”

Raven opens his other eye and sits up more. “I guess I thought . . . maybe it was part of our deal?”

“Wait, what?”

“I told you I’d come to every practice and trial.”

I shake my head. “You also committed to the team when we all signed up. Then you let us all down by being late when Raj warned us not to.”

“God, why is everything about Raj? I wasn’t even late. And anyway, I didn’t do it to offend your boyfriend.”

“Why’d you do it, then?”

He crosses his arms. “Forget it.”

“We’re stuck in here all night. Might as well tell me.”

Raven sighs. “Not everyone has three cars like Raj Raghavan.”

I blink in surprise. “You had car trouble?”

“My mom had to use the car. We only have one. So I had to take three buses that day. And before you tell me about planning ahead, she headed out last minute. Like, without telling me.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot you don’t know.”

“Why didn’t you just tell us?”

“I tried. But Raj just shut me down. And then I got pissed. You and your boyfriend should stop judging people without knowing what they’re dealing with.”

I think about what he said. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” I pause. “I’ll tell the truth, you know.”

Raven smirks. “What truth?”

“I’ll tell everyone that you got me, fair and square. I’m dead. If it comes down to it, your team will win.”

Raven laughs. “No one cares about that. No matter what you say, people are going to think whatever they want, and we’ll just have to deal with that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shakes his head wearily. “You’ll see.”

“I want to be a lawyer—not just on our team, but in real life. It’s going to be my job to convince people.”

“Sure. But you can’t always do it.”

“I can if the facts are on my side. And the truth.”

He gives me a pitying look. “Not even then.”

“What do you want to do, then? After high school?”

He shrugs again. “Not sure. I like skateboarding. And I’m pretty good at video games.”

“You can’t make a living doing that.”

He snorts. “Plenty of people do.”

“Aren’t you going to college?”

“I’m applying to a couple to make the olds happy. But more school isn’t my thing.”

“But why . . .” I don’t finish my sentence, realizing what I was about to say and how insulting it was.

“Why what?” He looks like he’s about to laugh again.

“Why are you on the mock trial team if you’re not interested in being a lawyer and you don’t care about getting into college? Were you trolling us the whole time?”

“Why would I spend hours and days with this group just to troll you?”

“Fair enough. But why are you on the team?”

“My grandfather made me,” he says quietly.

“Your grandfather?”

Raven leans against the wall again. “My grandfather, Raven Lockhart the second. Scion of Bright Academy and Cranky Rich Old Man.”

“But why would he care what you do?”

“Because he likes controlling people as much as your dear boyfriend.”

I scowl. “Come on, Raven, I thought we were past that.”

He sighs. “My dad’s been gone for like five years.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He gambled away all our money and then left.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what to say to that.

“Mom’s been trying, but she’s not exactly good at having a job, never having had one before. But that’s where ol’ Grandpa Lockhart comes in. He agreed to keep giving Mom money to live on.”

“Well, that’s nice,” I offer.

“Not nice. He has conditions, and they keep changing according to whatever he wants at the moment. One, I have to keep going to Bright Academy.” Raven rolls his eyes. “Two, I have to make C’s at the minimum in all my classes. And three, this year, I have to participate in a team.”

“So . . . he made you join mock trial?”

“He didn’t care what it was, just as long as it was something.”

“Seems like there were other teams that would have been easier to deal with.”

“Maybe. I picked this team to rub things in my grandfather’s face. He’s a lawyer.” Raven scoffs. “But it hasn’t been easy. Mainly because of the high and mighty Raj Raghavan.”

“So why’d you stick with it? With us? Especially since you already quit once?”

“Can’t you guess?” Shadows put his face in sharp contrast so he looks like a portrait that Grace might make.

Hairs rise on the back of my neck, and I shiver. “I don’t know.”

“For the same reasons you are, Siya. And it’s not to look good on college apps, or because I’m trying to save the world.”

I hold my breath. “Why, then?”

“Because we’re good at it,” he says simply. “And it’s fun. If my grandfather is making me join something, it might as well be something I enjoy. Maybe you need to stop being so serious for just a minute and start focusing on the fun. There’s enough fucked-up shit in the world, anyway.”

“Something can be fun and meaningful,” I say. “It doesn’t have to be one or the other.”

“So why are you so into mock trial? Why the big ambition to be a lawyer? Is it just about lover boy?”

I scowl. “I’m not going to answer if you keep insulting me and Raj.”

“Sorry. Really. I want to know.” He leans forward.

“My mom was a lawyer, and she loved helping people in family court. For free. So I want to be like her.” I wince as the familiar ache starts in my chest. “She died in a car accident a few years ago.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, it does.”

We sit in silence for a few moments.

“You’re a good kid, Siya.”

I bristle. “I’m not a—”

He puts up his hands. “No offense. What I mean to say is, sorry I got us into this situation.”

I let out a breath. “I’m sorry, too.”

“Now can we sleep?”

I look longingly at the door. “We can try, I guess.”

He closes his eyes and leans his head back against the wall.

I grab a few costumes to use as a blanket. Then I pile them on myself and try to fall asleep.

Chapter 24

I wake to a banging on the door and a voice yelling, “Siya! Are you in there?”

I jump up and limp to the door, stomping to bring circulation back to my numb left foot. I knew Raj would find me.

But it’s Max that I see through the window. “Can you call someone? The door is stuck.”

“Thank god. We’ve been looking for you everywhere.” Max tries the door himself but quickly admits defeat.

He holds his phone to his ear. “Ms. Tillett, I found Siya. She’s stuck in a closet under the old stage. No, I don’t know where Raven is.”

“He’s here, too,” I call through the door.

Raven stands and waves at Max, who narrows his eyes.

“How—” Max interrupts himself. “Are you okay?” he says to me.

I nod. “I’m fine. I’d love to get out of here, though.”

It’s half an hour before they can get ahold of Mr. Smith, the custodian, and another hour before the door finally creaks open. By that time, most of the mock trial team has gathered outside the storeroom.

“I’m taking this door off its hinges right now,” Mr. Smith says. “I’m so sorry this happened. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I say.

Raj rushes to hug me, surrounding me with his warmth. “I was so worried you were hurt,” he whispers into my hair. “Thank goodness you’re okay.”

I nod, but I still can’t stop the tremors that shake me.

“Siya and Raven, I haven’t called your parents yet,” Ms. Tillett says. She glares at Raj. “Because I wasn’t aware you were missing until a little while ago. What happened?”

Raven glances at me. “Let’s get somewhere warmer, and we’ll tell you everything,” he says.

We all head to the Fishbowl, where the rest of the team is waiting. It’s 7:30 a.m., and we have to be out of the school by 8:00.

I sit next to Raj. He covers me in a blanket and puts his arm around me, and I finally stop shaking.

“I made a dumb mistake,” I say, explaining how I decided that the abandoned costume storage room would be the perfect hiding place.

“And then I came in and the door shut, and we couldn’t get it open,” Raven says.

Ms. Tillett nods, but Raj shoots Raven a glare that would strip paint.

“I banged on the door, but no one could hear me. No one could see us, either.”

“And we couldn’t call or text anyone because we’d left our phones in here,” Raven adds. He glares back at Raj.

“So, we were stuck,” I say. “And we had to wait until someone came looking for us.”

“When you didn’t show up by five, I worried that something had happened to you,” Raj says. “We looked everywhere.”

“And then I thought about all the places in the main building where you might hide. I remember our ridiculous plays,” Max says. “And I figured I should check out the auditorium.”

“Thank goodness you did,” I say. “I really had to pee.”

Everyone laughs half-heartedly. Raj won’t let go of my hand.

“Nice sweatshirt,” Lorenzo puts in. I hadn’t noticed that he was part of this conversation.

“Oh—”

“Her tee was wet. Because I assassinated her,” Raven says, holding up his squirt gun. “So I loaned her my sweatshirt. Here, Siya.” He hands me my forgotten shirt, still damp.

“How thoughtful of you,” Raj says, clenching his jaw.

“It was,” I say. “I was freezing. You know how I get.”

“Happy to help anytime.” Raven’s eyes dance dangerously.

Raj tenses, and Max makes a fist at his side.

“You can wear my sweatshirt,” Raj says. “As soon as we’re done here, take that off.”

Raven smiles to himself.

“Are you sure you feel all right?” Ms. Tillett asks. “Maybe we should get you checked out by a doctor?”

I shake my head. “All that happened was I spent the night in a cold room. No injuries.”

“I’m fine, too,” Raven says gruffly.

Ms. Tillett gives a small, definitive nod. “Okay. I’m going to call your parents now, both of you.”

“Please tell Dad I’ll be home soon—Raj is giving me a ride.”

“My mom’s out of town,” Raven says. “She probably won’t pick up.”

She’s out of town on the first day of winter break? I think.

I text Dad to let him know that I’m okay, but that Ms. Tillett is calling him.

Raj hands me his sweatshirt, and I swap it out for Raven’s in the bathroom. Raj’s sweatshirt smells like cedar and spice, like a hug from him.

I hand Raven back his sweatshirt. “Thank you,” I say sincerely.

“No worries,” he says quietly. “Sorry I got us stuck in there all night.”

I shrug. “Sorry I made the dumb decision to go there in the first place.”

“If you need to talk—”

“I’ll be fine,” I say quickly.

“Sure you will.” He flashes me a look. “Eventually.”

I go back to Raj, who winds his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. “Let’s get you home,” he says.

We say goodbye to the team and walk out into a gray, frigid day, and the wind blows through me like I’m made of cardboard. Luckily, Raj’s car is already warm. I slide onto the heated seat and sigh with relief.

“Did you get any sleep?” I ask.

Raj shakes his head. “At first, I stayed up waiting for you to return. But then it became clear you weren’t coming back, and most of the team spent the rest of the night looking for you. It was like you’d disappeared into thin air.”

I nod, feeling fatigue descend on me like a blanket. “I closed my eyes. But I sat against the door with the lights on in that freezing room, so I’m not sure how much sleep I got. It’s my fault for picking that place to hide. Thanks for looking for me.”

He glances at me as he drives. “How could I not look for you? You know how much you mean to me, right?”

My body warms even more. “I think I have an idea,” I say.

He grips the steering wheel. “Raven. It’s his fault you both got stuck. He didn’t try anything, did he?”

“Absolutely not. He just lent me the sweatshirt. He even turned away while I put it on. He was perfectly fine.”

“Perfectly fine isn’t how I’d describe him,” Raj says. “If you’d been hurt . . .” His knuckles grow white on the steering wheel.

“I told you, I’m good. Just slightly frozen.”

Raj nods grimly. “I’m glad because I’d really hate to have to kill him. It would ruin my plans for the rest of high school and college.”

“No need to go criminal. I really am okay.” I grab his free hand and squeeze.

He squeezes back and visibly relaxes.

All too soon, we pull into my driveway. “Want to come in?” I ask.

Raj shakes his head. “Mom’s coming home this afternoon, so I need to get some sleep now.” He leans over and kisses me softly. “You should get some rest, too.”

I lean my forehead against his, sharing breath for a few more moments. “Text you later.”

I make my way to the front door, where Dad is waiting for me. I wave to Raj as he pulls back out of the driveway.

“You’re really okay?” Dad asks. He touches my face, searches my eyes.

“Yes, really,” I say with a sleepy smile. “I’d just like to take a hot shower and a long nap, if that’s okay with you.”

Dad hugs me. “Of course, sweetie. Get some rest.”

The shower finally warms me up for good. I dress in sweatpants and my softest T-shirt and fling myself into bed, where I snuggle under the covers and fall into a dreamless sleep.

I wake to a watery sun shining dimly through my curtains. I stretch languidly and smile to myself as I think of two whole weeks of vacation ahead, two weeks with nothing to do but bake and shop and binge-watch shows with Asha. Of days with Raj with no pressure to complete assignments or practice for mock trial. Of our annual neighborhood cookie swap. Of time laughing with Grace and Max.

I grab my phone from where it lies charging on my nightstand. It's after noon. I turn off Do Not Disturb on my phone as I get out of bed and prepare to stuff my growling stomach.

But I don't make it out of my room before my phone blows up with messages.

GRACE: What the hell happened?

MAX: Are you okay?

Let me know if you want to talk.

RAJ: Call me as soon as you wake up.

My mouth goes dry as I open Instagram. I'm tagged in dozens of images of me looking exhausted with Raven's sweatshirt on. There's one of me with my head in my hands.

There's a picture of me taking off my shirt in the storage room. Raven's got his back turned, but he's in the shot.

Cold night, but too hot for her?

Raj and I are both tagged. So is Raven.

And so, I realize as the blood freezes in my veins, is Raj's mom. Her actual US Senate account.

I look at the account that posted the photos—it's no one that I recognize. They're trying to make me seem like an ungrateful slut who betrayed Raj Raghavan.

And they took photos of me and Raven in the storage room.

Someone knew we were there and didn't get us out.

What the hell?

I call Raj, and he picks up immediately. "This is insane," I say. "Someone knew we were stuck in there and didn't get us out. I don't understand—"

"Someone took photos and gave them to some scumbags. It's disgusting clickbait."

"What should I do?"

"Don't respond to anything online. Turn off your notifications. Stay off Insta and TikTok. In fact, you should probably just delete them for now. In the meantime, my mom's PR people are working on it."

"What?"

"Since she's tagged, she says it's fair game for her to help manage this situation."

“Um, okay. You really think I—”

“It’s going to save you a lot of pain, Siya. I’m so sorry.”

“But Raj . . . you believe me, right? You know that what happened was an accident, right? And you know that nothing happened between Raven and me. And we’ve got to figure out who left us in there all night.”

“Of course,” Raj says quickly, and I shudder with relief. He pauses. “Look. I’ve got to go. Just stay off social media, okay?”

“Okay,” I say.

“Good. I’ll call you later.”

“Raj, I—”

But he’s already hung up.

Next, I call Grace.

“What the hell, Siya? What kind of creep would take pictures of you instead of getting you out of there?”

“I know, it’s crazy. Hey, Max is calling. I’m going to add him, hold on.”

I add Max to the call.

“I’m going to kill him,” he says.

“Who?”

“Raven, of course. What a stupid stunt. First, trapping you in that dungeon with him, and now posting this stuff everywhere. What the hell is wrong with him? I’m going to tear him apart.”

“Max, calm down. Raven didn’t do this. Remember, he didn’t even have his phone while we were in the storeroom. Besides, he’s in most of the photos—he couldn’t have taken them.”

“Well, then who took the photos? I don’t know the account that’s posting them.”

“I don’t know, either, but I do know one thing,” I say.

“What?”

“Whoever sent these photos to them is on the mock trial team with us.”

We have a traitor in our midst.

Chapter 25

Grace and Max come over that evening and we go over everything while eating some of Dad's spaghetti carbonara.

I explain what's happening to Dad, and he's confused. "So tell me again how you ended up wearing that boy's shirt?"

"Sweatshirt," I correct. "I was freezing because my shirt was wet."

"Why?" Dad looks baffled.

"Because Raven—this other guy on the team—hit me with a squirt gun."

Dad opens his mouth, but I cut him off. "It was a game we were playing. It's called Assassins. It's like capture the flag, only we assassinate each other with . . . never mind. It was just a game."

"The point is, none of this is Siya's fault, Mr. Kumar," Grace says. "She didn't do anything wrong."

Dad nods. "I know that. But how did these photos get sent to people who aren't even from your school?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out," Max says. "We think someone on the team sent them in."

Dad sighs. "Well, I guess this is what comes from dating the son of someone so famous. I'm sure it will blow over quickly. There's nothing more to discover, after all."

I appreciate Dad's optimism. But with the looks that Max and Grace are giving me, the rest of us are not so sure. We help clean up dinner and then the three of us go up to my room.

"Raj thought Raven sent the pictures. But Raven didn't have a phone."

"True," Max concedes. "Then I bet it was Lorenzo, that snake. He's been after that attorney spot since last year, and it would help him to get you out

of the way," he says.

"Maybe? But Lorenzo only started at Bright Academy in high school. I don't think he even knew about the storeroom under the stage. Besides, I think I scared him when I accused him of posting those photos after Diwali," I say.

Grace looks thoughtful. "Even if it's not Lorenzo, someone wants to embarrass and hurt you."

"I get along with pretty much everyone on the team," I say. "Adele and Chris are our friends, and Noah and Tessa are great."

"What about the researchers? Could one of them have a secret vendetta?" Max asks.

"But why?" I say.

After going around and around like this for a few more minutes, we get no further in figuring out who would have sent the photos.

"When does Asha come home?" Grace asks, finally changing the subject.

"Monday night. She's done with finals already but is spending a few extra days finishing a research project."

"Oh my god," Grace says, looking at her phone. "You won't believe this, Siya."

"More posts?" How many more photos could there be? Who was taking them without anyone else noticing?

"No, nothing about that trash." Grace waves her hand. "I just got an email from Elizabeth Cordray—the paralegal who worked at Harlow, D'Souza & Brown while your mom was there."

I stand. "Oh wow, I'd figured she was never going to respond. What does she say?"

"'Dear Ms. Delaney,'" Grace reads. "'I apologize for the delayed reply. I've been out of state working on a case for an extended period. I would love to talk to you. I can speak any weeknight after six p.m. next week. Please let me know what is best for you. Cordially, Elizabeth Cordray.'"

"Cordially? Who even uses that word?" Max asks.

"Someone writing a formal letter," Grace says.

"Maybe," I say. "Or maybe someone who has something to hide."

E. Cordray wants to talk to me! I text Raj.

When he doesn't answer, I ask Grace to reply she'd love to speak with Elizabeth on Monday at six. I'm supposed to go with Dad to pick up Asha from the airport at that time. I'm torn—I want to be there to pick Asha up,

but I'm willing to skip it so I'll have the house to myself when I make the call.

Elizabeth responds immediately with her office number and says she'll expect my call.

Hours later, after Max and Grace have left and I'm trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep, I still haven't heard from Raj.

Sunday's brightness belies freezing temperatures and a wind that blows through the walls and makes me shiver. I bundle up in sweats and thick socks, but I still can't seem to get warm. I text Raj a few more times, but he doesn't respond. Finally, I give up and video call him. He picks up, and I sigh with relief.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," he responds. His face is drawn, and his skin has taken on a bluish hue. He purses his lips.

"How are you?"

He shrugs. "As well as could be expected. How are you?"

"Stressed. Frustrated. Why aren't you answering my texts?"

He lets out a long, slow breath. "I've been trying to stay away from my phone, to be honest."

"Me, too." Except the dozens of times I'd checked for a message from him. "I deleted Instagram and TikTok. That helped."

"Good."

"Want to come over? Maybe if we're together, things won't be so awful."

He shakes his head. "I can't. Mom and Dad are both home and we've got a bunch of events to attend for the holidays. I asked my mom if I could bring you to some of them, but she said . . . well, it might stir things up again if we're in public together."

"Oh," I say. Nitya Raghavan had been so friendly to me just a few weeks ago.

Raj furrows his brow. "You sure Raven didn't try anything—"

"He didn't. He wouldn't. He's—not like that. Nothing happened other than we were stuck in that creepy room. We're friends, and he respects me."

"If you say so," he mutters. "I believe you. I'm just furious that Raven put you—us—in this position."

I take a deep breath. “I told you about Asha and how devastated she was when her boyfriend and her best friend betrayed her.”

He frowns. “I remember.”

“So, you know I would never betray your trust, right? I’m—I’m crazy about you. And after seeing what it did to Asha, I’d never do anything like that to you.”

He shakes his head. “I know you wouldn’t. I just can’t believe—this stuff is so frustrating. Who the hell sent those photos in? It has to be someone from the team, which is just insane. And it’s all my fault. If I’d just let everyone go home instead of having the stupid lock-in, we wouldn’t be dealing with this right now. When I get my hands on whoever sent in those pics, I’m going to eviscerate them.”

“It’s all going to blow over soon. It has to. And besides, your mom has professionals working on this, right?”

He nods, still frowning.

I pause, then go on. “So, I’m talking to Elizabeth, the paralegal who knew my mom, tomorrow at six p.m. If you came over, I could put you on speaker while we talk. I’d love to have you with me when I make the call.”

“I’ll see if I can get away.” He looks to the side. “I’ve got to go. Text you tomorrow.” He hangs up.

“Bye,” I say to the blank screen of my phone.

I didn’t do anything wrong. None of this is my fault.

So why do I feel so terrible?

Chapter 26

Raj texts me the next afternoon.

RAJ: Can't make it tonight. Sorry.

Campaign event with Mom.

ME: OK.

RAJ: Let me know how it goes with Elizabeth Cordray.

ME: OK.

Hope I get some real answers.

For my English paper, I read more about Sita. She loved Rama. Something happened that wasn't her fault, but she's the one who was blamed for it. The whole thing is so sad. What am I supposed to take away from that?

"What do you think, Hanuman?" I ask the stuffed monkey at the foot of my bed.

He doesn't answer.

Eventually, I give up and shove my books and laptop aside.

Dad knocks on my door. "Are you coming with me to pick up Asha?"

"I'll stay home if it's okay. I've still got work to do."

"Of course. But don't work too hard. It's vacation, after all."

"Thanks, Dad. Love you."

"Love you, too, sweetie." He kisses me on the forehead and then closes the door softly as he leaves my room.

I start writing notes to prepare for my phone call with Elizabeth Cordray. I feel in my bones that she knew my mom. And if she's the one who used

my mom's story for the mock trial case, I'm going to tell her how wrong that was.

I'm so jittery I can't sit still. On a whim, I pull out my yoga mat and spend a few minutes doing poses I learned in class. Breathe in, breathe out, move, stretch. Stand straight, my feet rooted to the earth.

I feel a tiny bit better, focusing on my breath and my body.

Six p.m. arrives, and I put in my earbuds and make sure they're connected. I block my caller ID and dial Elizabeth Cordray.

She picks up on the first ring. "This is Elizabeth."

"Hello, Ms. Cordray," I say. "This is Grace Delaney."

"Hi Grace, how can I help you?"

"As I mentioned in my email, I'm doing a behind-the-scenes feature on the New Jersey high school mock trial tournament and I wanted to interview some of the attorneys involved with writing the case this year." I've pretty much memorized my spiel, so I go on. "I know this year's case is a civil suit involving a family suing an insurance company over failure to pay. The fictional person who passed away was a female attorney. How did you come up with the idea, and how did you decide that the deceased person would be a fellow attorney?"

"Let's be direct here," Elizabeth says. "Is this Siya? Siya Kumar?"

I open my mouth, but no words come out. How does she know?

"Mark Holloway contacted me and told me that 'Grace' asked about our former colleague, Lalita. He felt that something was off in that conversation. And then this weekend, I saw your photo and name pop up on Senator Raghavan's feed. You're on your high school's mock trial team with her son. You look a lot like your mom, you know."

"So, you did know my mom." I take a breath. "When did you decide it was okay to use her story as the inspiration for the mock trial case? Because it really messed me up when I read it."

"Siya, I'm truly sorry you were upset by this."

"But why did you do it?"

"I could ask you why you're pretending to be another student and contacting members of the mock trial committee."

I swallow. "Because no one would talk to me. I needed answers, and I didn't want to wait until the tournament was over. I'm not trying to win some advantage for my team; I'm just trying to understand why the case was written using the details of my mom's life."

“Fair enough.” Elizabeth pauses. “I used those details because what happened to your mom haunted me. Your mom was a fantastic lawyer and a truly exceptional person. What happened to her was a tragedy in every possible way. I missed her as a colleague, and her clients lost an incredible advocate. But of course, none of that compares to what you and your family went through.”

My throat tightens. My eyes start to burn. “So why did you use such a thinly veiled version of my mom’s true story as the basis for this case? Didn’t you know how much this would hurt me and my family?”

“I didn’t know Lalita still had a daughter in high school. If I had, I never would have put this case forward now.”

My face is aflame. “Even if I hadn’t been in high school and weren’t on the mock trial team, you shouldn’t have used my mom’s life as inspiration for a case. It’s a betrayal of her and your friendship with her. If you were actually her friend.”

“I understand how you feel. Again, I’m sorry.”

“My mom was an amazing person. She was way more than just the way she died.” My voice cracks.

“That’s exactly what I wanted people to understand. I wanted students and teachers to think about this case and recognize how important one person can be. That the loss of that person can have devastating effects on so many people—their families, but also the people who worked with them and relied on them. Your mom was a remarkable person. I still miss her.”

“You miss her, but you used her memory for your own benefit.” I spit the words. “You added those details about the disputed insurance contract, the bar investigation, and the marriage troubles to make the case more interesting, but they hurt me even more. They made me wonder whether those things were true about my mom. You attacked her character, and she’s not alive to defend herself.”

“I made up the disputed insurance contract, because otherwise there is no case,” Elizabeth says.

“And you made up the other stuff, too.”

Elizabeth stays silent.

“Hello?” My voice rises.

“I’m still here, Siya.”

“You made up all that negative stuff about my mom, her career, and her marriage. Did you think her family would never find out?”

“Like I said, I’m sorry this hurt you.”

But I notice what she’s not saying.

“Are you actually saying there was a bar investigation of my mom? She wasn’t an unethical lawyer. She was great at her job.”

Elizabeth is quiet for a moment. “She was, but that doesn’t mean she didn’t have to contend with issues at work and at—”

“Stop talking. Just stop!” I interrupt.

But I wonder whether this was the “struggle” that Mark Holloway was alluding to.

“Mom was an honest lawyer. You said so yourself,” I say.

“Even great lawyers can make mistakes. I don’t know the details, but I know she had a hearing scheduled,” Elizabeth says quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“Look,” I say. “I wanted you to admit that you used my mom’s story. And I wanted you to know how hard it’s been for me, and that you should have thought about that before you wrote what you wrote. That’s it. You can’t make up for what you did. I have nothing else to say to you.”

“Siya, I—”

“Goodbye, Ms. Cordray,” I say, and hang up.

I’m having a hard time catching my breath.

I text Raj: Spoke with E. Cordray. Can you talk?

I make myself wait a few minutes as my pulse speeds.

He doesn’t respond. As far as I can tell, he doesn’t even read the text.

I cover my face as the tears come. Nothing is right. I got to the bottom of what happened with the mock trial case, but now it turns out that my mom might have done something shady that prompted an investigation. Asha is coming home again, but I don’t know what version of her I will get. And I want so badly to talk to Raj, but he won’t even respond to a text.

So I do what I’ve done so many times before.

Emergency FaceTime?

Within moments, I’m looking at Grace.

“What happened?” she asks.

“Let’s wait for Max to pick up.”

“I’m here,” he says, putting his face next to Grace’s.

They’re together. *Oh.*

“Do you need us to come over?” Grace asks.

“Never mind,” I say. “I don’t want to bother you.”

I’m so stupid. They’re together. And now I’m intruding on their time.

“We want to know what happened,” Max says.

They’re at Grace’s house. I can see her bedspread in the background.

“I’m fine. I’ll catch up with you later.” I hang up.

Grace immediately tries to call back, but I decline the call and shut off my phone.

I’m all alone. No Raj, no Grace, no Max.

I stare into space. Who was Mom, really? How am I supposed to feel? What am I supposed to do?

Then I hear the garage door open.

Asha’s back, and all I feel is dread.

The Trial

Rama finally arrived in Lanka leading a monkey-warrior army. He met Ravana on the battlefield. Ravana was a mighty warrior, and the battle raged for weeks, with much carnage on both sides, until Rama finally slew the demon-king.

Rama came to Sita, bloodied but triumphant.

"I knew you'd find me, and vanquish evil Ravana," Sita said.

But Rama spoke formally. "I have saved you, but how can I bring you back to my kingdom, now that you have lived in another man's home? For Ravana's insult, I have killed him. And now you are free to go."

"I was brought here by force," Sita exclaimed. "How can you be so cruel? I have remained faithful to you."

Rama remained silent.

"I will prove that I am telling the truth. Lakshmana, light a fire!"

Lakshmana piled wood and lit a huge fire.

Sita prayed to the fire god, Agni: "If I speak the truth that I have remained faithful to my husband, Rama, let the fire not burn me."

And Sita walked into the flames.

Chapter 27

I plaster on a smile. “Welcome home!” I say to Asha.

Asha hugs me, and I squeeze her back.

“I’m starving,” she says. “And something smells delicious.”

I stay quiet as I help ladle chili into bowls and put out napkins and Dad cuts the cornbread and places butter on the table.

I’m itching to ask Dad about Mom and the bar investigation he never told me about, not even when he knew it was part of the mock trial case.

But I don’t want to talk about the case in front of Asha. I turn to her and ask, “How was the end of the trimester?”

She grins. “Busy, but really good. I got so much done in the lab after finals were over. Thanks for understanding about coming home a little late.”

I shrug, but Dad says, “Of course. I’m glad you took the time you needed.”

I barely pay attention as Asha and Dad talk about plans for winter break. We’re staying home, as usual, but this year we won’t have our cousins visiting: one set is going to London, and the other will be in California.

“So we’ll have together-togetherness,” Asha says. “Right, little mama?”

I nod absentmindedly and push the chili around in my bowl with my spoon.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

“Raj is really busy, so I don’t think I’ll see much of him over break.”

“Too bad,” Asha says. “But hopefully he’ll be able to squeeze in some time with you.”

“Yup.”

After we clean up dinner, we make hot chocolate and bring our mugs to the living room.

"So what are we watching tonight?" Asha asks. "Holiday-themed or non-holiday-themed?"

I sigh and realize with a flash of guilt that I assumed she'd be going out with friends. At Asha's confused look, I say, "Non-holiday-themed. You pick it."

I space out again as Asha and Dad discuss the merits of various movies and TV shows. Eventually, they settle on a superhero movie that we've all seen, and I'm relieved that I don't have to pay too much attention. I keep stealing glances at Dad, hoping he won't get sleepy too early and ruin my chance to talk to him tonight. But he seems to be wide awake and enjoying himself.

The movie finally draws to a close, and Asha announces that she's going to shower before bed.

She heads upstairs, and as I help Dad load the dishwasher, I say, "Can we talk?"

"Sure, honey. What is it?"

"I tracked down the person on the mock trial committee who was responsible for writing most of the mock trial case. She did know Mom. Her name is Elizabeth Cordray."

"The name sounds familiar," Dad says. "I hope you told her how much reading the case upset you."

"I did. But remember how in the mock trial case, the fictional lawyer—the one who reminds me so much of Mom—is facing a bar investigation?"

Dad nods and starts to wipe down the counter with a sponge.

"She didn't really want to tell me, but eventually Elizabeth Cordray admitted that the state bar was investigating Mom." I glance at the staircase. I can hear the shower running upstairs. "Is that true? Did you know?"

Dad purses his lips. "Yes. As you can imagine, it was very stressful."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why would I have told you? It was something from the past, something that didn't matter anymore."

I swallow. "Why was she being investigated?" I don't want to learn that Mom was a lawyer who played with the rules. I don't want to learn that she took bribes or didn't always act on behalf of her clients.

“Your mom was a fantastic lawyer,” Dad says softly. “But even when you work with integrity and the best of intentions, things can go wrong.”

“What happened?” I ask.

Dad swallows. “About two months before she died, Mom received a notice that the state bar was investigating her. She had some time to respond to the allegations, and then there would be a hearing.”

I nod for him to continue.

“That’s all I know. Mom said she couldn’t tell me anything else because of her duty to her clients. I didn’t even know if the complaint was about her work at the firm, or in family court.” Dad sighs. “I should have asked more. I should have done more.” Dad shrugs. “But at the time, there was only so much help she would take from me.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

Dad passes his hand over his face. “Saying ‘I’m sorry you’re going through this’ can only help so much. But Siya, you have to understand.” He takes my hands in his. “I know in my heart that she wouldn’t have done anything unethical, certainly not on purpose. I know she would have convinced them at her hearing. But she never got the chance. It was scheduled for January 28.”

But she died on January 16.

“It’s just so frustrating,” I say. “I want to know the real Mom, not just the nostalgic memories we’ve talked about over and over. And there’s so much I’ll never know.”

Dad puts his hand on my shoulder. “I understand, honey. I’m here, and I’m happy to talk about anything you want to know about her.”

I sigh. “Is it possible to ever truly know someone? Even someone you love?”

“Where’s this coming from?”

I hesitate.

“Raj has barely been in touch,” I say finally. “He isn’t even answering my texts.”

“Because of all the social media stuff?”

I shrug. “I feel like he’s embarrassed to be seen in public with me right now. And I can understand why, but it still hurts.”

“Oh, honey. That’s not fair to you. I hope he’ll come to his senses soon.”

I sigh. “Hope so.”

“It’s hard to have conflict with someone you care about.”

“How did you deal with it with Mom?”

“I guess my best advice is to have patience. Patience, and keeping the person you care about at the forefront of your mind. Of wanting the best for them, even when you don’t agree with them.”

“Even when they won’t talk to you?”

“Well, it helped me endure when Mom gave me the silent treatment. That was her way when she was upset.”

“Hmm.” I yawn. “Guess I’d better get to bed.”

I give Dad a hug, and he kisses the top of my head. I go upstairs and see that the light is off in Asha’s room.

I get under the covers and think that even after all this time, I keep learning new things about Mom.

Just imagine what I might have discovered if she were alive.

Chapter 28

The next day, when Dad goes to Jersey City for a rare day at the office, I catch Asha up on the debacle with Raven at the lock-in, the social media posts, and how Raj is suddenly too busy to answer my texts.

"Well then it's good that I'm home to keep you company," Asha says. "No guy is worth losing your mind over. Come on, let's get some holiday shopping done, little mama."

As Asha drives us to the Woodbridge Mall, I can't help reflecting that a guy is exactly what Asha lost her mind over. But I don't care. She's back to being my sister again.

We spend the next few days baking for the neighborhood cookie swap, wrapping presents, and hanging out with Dad. I only check my phone thirty times a day for a word from Raj that never comes. At least I'm not checking fifty times a day, like before.

"Where are Grace and Max?" Asha asks.

"Busy," I say. I don't tell her that I'm ignoring their texts and calls like Raj is ignoring mine. I'm doing this for them, I think. To give them space to be happy. They don't need me as a third wheel.

I try to work on my English paper. I tell Sita's story in my own words, but I'm still not sure what the point of it is.

I practice yoga, and it's not as painful anymore. I even start to look forward to the burning of my muscles, the stretching and the breathing. I'm glad I signed up for another session in the spring semester.

I spend hours looking at photos of Mom on my laptop. I examine every expression on her face—smiling, focused, contemplative. Who was she,

really? What would she have told me about the months leading up to her death?

Was her death really an accident? Or, as I argued about Lily Jordan as a mock trial defense attorney, was there more to the story?

But there are no answers in the photos.

I answer the doorbell on December 23 to find Grace and Max holding a bunch of bags.

"Let us in," Max says.

"Oh, I'm not sure it's a good t—"

"We already talked to your dad, and we know you don't have plans," Grace says, pushing past me.

I follow them into the living room, where they unpack the bags.

"Snacks," Grace says, placing chips and cookies and bottles of lemonade and iced tea on the coffee table.

"And gifts," Max says, putting a small pile of presents on the floor.

"What's all this?" I ask.

"It's Friendsmas. December 23. Remember?" Grace says.

"Oh, right. I . . . thought we'd just exchange gifts when we got back to school."

"It's a *tradition*," Max says.

"Even when you don't talk to us for over a week," Grace says.

"I thought you two would want to be alone," I say.

"Yeah, as evidenced by our trying to text and call you hundreds of times a day," Max says.

"Dozens, not hundreds. Don't weaken your argument with imprecision," Grace admonishes.

"But imprecision is my middle name," Max says.

"I thought it was hyperbole," I say.

"There she is," Max says with a grin. "We've missed your comebacks."

"We've missed *you*." Grace squeezes me, and I hug her back.

"Let me go get your presents. They're already wrapped."

I run upstairs to my room, swiping at my eyes.

I come back down and give Grace a set of watercolors. She crinkles her nose with her smile.

Her present to me is a beautiful silk scarf, white with blue print. "It's the Constitution and the Bill of Rights," she says. "I couldn't resist."

"It's perfect! I'll have to wear it at our next mock trial appearance."

That sets a pang off in my chest. What if Raj still isn't speaking to me then? How weird will that be?

Max gives Grace a T-shirt with a cartoon cat that looks like it was painted by Picasso.

"OMG this is perfect," she says.

It is perfect for her . . . but not particularly romantic, I think.

Grace gives Max a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*.

"More reading?" Max groans, but he's smiling.

"Got to keep up with me and Siya," she admonishes. "You're done with the Russian novels, after all."

For Max, I got a gigantic book with the history of the dynasties in *Swords and Sorcery*.

"You're kidding," he says. "I didn't even know this was out yet."

"You need to keep your finger on the pulse or you'll miss out," I tease him.

"I love it. Here's yours," Max says, handing me two boxes.

The first box contains a mug with "Opposing Counsel Tears" on it and a pair of socks featuring a law book, a gavel, and the scales of justice. "Oh, I love these!" I cry.

The second package is large but strangely light. I tear the wrapping and open the box to reveal twenty mini-bags of truffle potato chips.

"I figured I owed you this much for eating yours every day at lunch," Max says, his cheeks flushing.

I laugh and open one, grab a chip, and then hold the bag out to him. "Thanks. But I told you I only bring them for you. You're probably going to eat most of these."

"Good investment on my part, then." Max laughs and grabs a handful.

I've missed my best friends.

We spend the rest of the afternoon and evening watching our favorite holiday movies and eating nonstop. At one point, Grace falls asleep in an armchair.

"So what's going on between you two?" I whisper, leaning my head toward Grace.

"Same old, same old," Max says.

"You sure?"

Max laughs. "Of course I'm sure."

"I thought you were . . . together-together. So I tried to give you some space."

"That's not how we feel about each other. Grace is like a sister to me. We've been trying to tell you that, but you just shut us out."

"I didn't want to make things awkward."

"You made them *so* awkward, you dork. So we had to come over and fix things."

I punch him lightly in the arm. "Thanks."

"How are things with you and Raj?" Max asks.

"I haven't seen him since the lock-in," I say. "He's been busy."

"Hmph." Max shakes his head. "If Raj Raghavan can't see that you're the best thing that ever happened to him, he's the dumbest guy on the planet."

A ball of warmth inflates in my chest. "I love you, dude," I say.

"Love you, too, dude. Now that sleeping beauty has passed out, want to watch some *Swords and Sorcery*?"

"Do you even need to ask?" I pick up the remote control.

Christmas comes and goes. Dad, Asha, and I exchange gifts and stuff ourselves. I try to keep things light. But all I can think is *Raj won't talk to me and my mom wasn't the lawyer I thought she was and what else don't I know about her?*

I've deleted my social media apps, but I can't help stalking Raj from time to time. He's running all over New Jersey, doing event after event with his mom and dad—bringing presents to homeless children; serving holiday meals at a soup kitchen; dressed up and gorgeous at some campaign event. He's living the life of the wealthy, important person that he is, the son of two other wealthy, important people.

He doesn't look like he misses me at all.

I fill my days with Dad and Asha and Max and Grace—ice-skating, shopping, binge-watching shows, eating and laughing and staying up too late. But one thing is clear.

I miss Raj. I miss his laugh, his smile, that look on his face when he catches my eye across a room. I miss his sharp wit, his banter, his thoughtfulness. I miss his arms around me and his skin against mine.

I try not to wallow in how much I need him.

I keep practicing yoga. I keep getting better, and it helps take my mind off Raj. Asanas and breathing help keep me rooted, my mind and body connected, when it feels like I might lose my grip and go into free fall.

And then, at 3:26 p.m. on December 28, I get a text.

RAJ: Hey.

Sometimes, *Hey* is the most wonderful word in the universe.

Hey, I respond immediately. I'm too excited to bother trying to pretend I haven't been waiting for his message.

Dots appear on the screen. I sit on my hands to stop myself from typing anything else.

RAJ: What are you doing for New Year's?

"Whatever you want," I say out loud. But I type, Nothing much. You?

RAJ: Come to my house. We're having a party.

ME: Sounds good. I'll need to check with Dad.

RAJ: Bring him. Bring Asha. Max and Grace, too.

ME: Wow! Ok, thanks. What's the dress code?

RAJ: Festive.

ME: That's helpful.:)

RAJ: At some point, we need to talk.

ME: What about now?

RAJ: Gotta go. See you on New Year's! 8:30.

ME: See you.

I'm grateful that we'll see each other soon.

But I'm worried that the reason he finally wants to see me in person is to break up.

Chapter 29

Holiday lights outline the roof of Raj's house and every tree in the yard. The silhouettes of many, many people shadow the many, many windows. And I was intimidated by the house before. Dad pulls into the driveway, and a man in a dark suit asks us for our names and checks a list.

"Please leave your keys in the car and go on up to the house. Have a wonderful night."

"Valets and ID checks, huh? This must be the most exclusive party in the whole state," Asha whispers to me as we climb out of the car.

We walk up the driveway to the open front door and step into the foyer. "Welcome, Gopal and Siya. And you must be Asha. Lovely to meet you," says Raj's mom, who's dressed in a stunning shimmering silver dress.

I smooth the skirt of my blue silk dress. Two days ago, Asha and I scrambled to buy our outfits at our local thrift store, Raspberry Beret. I hope I look sophisticated. "We're excited to be here. Happy New Year," I say.

"Please make yourselves at home," says Raj's dad, looking amazing in a tuxedo.

"Thank you for inviting us," Dad says.

"So nice to meet you, Senator Raghavan and Dr. Raghavan," Asha says.

"Don't you dare," Raj's mom says with a wink. "We're Auntie and Uncle to you."

We make our way into the living room, weaving our way through the crowd. "I think the entire town is here," Asha says. "Maybe the whole state?"

"A wonderful way to ring in a year in which Nitya hopes to win reelection," Dad says, looking around.

Waitstaff offer us glasses of champagne (for Dad) and sparkling cider (for Asha and me). Every surface sparkles and shimmers. A string quartet plays something elevated yet lively. We snack on tiny samosas, mushroom tartlets, minuscule baked Brie, and shrimp cocktail.

"Who needs Times Square? This is clearly the place to be," Asha says. "You know how to pick 'em."

I shake my head. "That's not—"

"Of course not, silly. I know you care about him. But this is a bonus." Asha grins.

"He hasn't spoken to me in two weeks."

"I think he's invited you here to apologize. Oh—" She cranes her head to look across the room. "I'll see you later, okay?"

"Where—"

But she's already gone. I stand on my tiptoes, but I can't see who she's off to meet.

"So, Dad," I say, turning to him. "Do you have any New Year's resolutions?"

But Dad is gone, too. What is happening tonight? I scan the room, but I don't see anyone I know. I sigh and sink into an armchair near a large window. I reach into my tiny purse, extract my phone, and open the library reading app. At least I'll be able to work on my paper.

I'm deep into a scholarly article on the myriad meanings of the *Ramayana* when I'm startled by a tap on the shoulder.

"Hi, stranger," Max says. He's wearing a suave dark blue suit and silver tie.

"Why are you sitting here by yourself?" Grace asks from his side. She's gorgeous in a white satin dress that falls to the floor. Her hair is up, and tiny white gems sparkle on her ears.

"Dad and Asha abandoned me within minutes of arriving, so I'm doing some reading. Did you know that some scholars think that the *Ramayana* —"

"Oh, no, no way, you are not doing work on New Year's Eve!" Grace takes my phone and pulls me to my feet. "I hear there's a DJ and a dance floor downstairs, and you look incredible, so you're not going to spend all night introverting."

"Hey—" I reach for my phone.

“Don’t make me confiscate it,” Grace says with a don’t-mess-with-me look.

I sigh. “Okay,” I say. “I promise.”

She smiles and hands my phone back, and I put it in my purse again.

“We’re going to have fun,” Max says. “Whether you want to or not.”

“This way, I think.” Grace leads us through the crowd into another sitting room, and then toward a doorway that looks like it might lead downstairs.

“Siya,” comes Raj’s voice.

I turn to him and catch my breath at how gorgeous he is. He’s wearing a tux, too, and it makes him look older. I smooth my dress again.

“Hey,” I say with my characteristic eloquence.

“Hi, Grace. So glad you could join us tonight,” he says with a brilliant smile. “Rodriguez.” He nods at Max, and Max nods back.

“Thanks for inviting us,” Grace says. “We hear there’s dancing downstairs?”

“Right through that door. Please, go enjoy yourselves.”

I start to go with Max and Grace, but Raj puts a hand on my arm.

“Siya, can I borrow you for a few minutes?”

“Only if you promise to return her,” Grace quips.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Raj says. He turns to me. “We need to talk.”

“Go ahead,” I tell Max and Grace. “I’ll catch up with you in a bit.”

“Let’s go somewhere quieter,” Raj says. He brings me down a hall and into a room lined with bookshelves and dominated by a large dark desk. He closes the French doors behind us, and I can finally hear myself think. Raj puts his back to the doors and looks at me. “Hi,” he says.

“Hi,” I parrot. Why can’t I think of something more original?

Silence stretches between us.

He’s going to break up with me.

“How’ve you been?” he asks.

A thousand sarcastic remarks fly through my head. But I decide to tell him the truth. “Lonely,” I say.

More silence while he stares at the ground. He hasn’t moved from his spot across the room. Maybe he wants a quick exit?

Finally, he speaks. “Me, too.”

“You, too? *You, too?* You’ve been busy hanging out with all kinds of people. You didn’t even have time to answer my texts, let alone talk to me.

You made me feel like I'd done something wrong. Like you were punishing me. You just . . . left me alone." No matter what happens next, at least I've told him how I feel.

"I should have been in touch," Raj says quietly.

Here comes his goodbye. Why couldn't we have waited until later to have this conversation? At least I could have had fun dancing. But anything is better than the limbo I've been living in. "Say what you want to say, Raj." I rub my arms to try to warm them up.

"I just . . . I just had to stay away, so the social media stuff would calm down. It was messing with my head."

"I'm the one that random people were saying horrible things about," I remind him.

He nods.

"You should have done what you told me to do: delete the apps. I honestly haven't missed them. And you should have at least responded to me in private." I can't keep the hurt out of my voice.

"I should have done a lot of things," Raj says. Then he goes quiet again.

A cloud moves, and a shaft of moonlight spills into the room. Voices rise and fall outside the door, ready to count down to the new year. But I want to turn back the clock to that night before everything went wrong.

"Raj . . ." I begin at the same time he starts to talk. "Sorry," I say. "Go ahead."

He looks past me, out the window. "I don't know what to do with myself without you," he says softly.

A spark of warmth starts in my chest. "What?"

He sighs. "I've been busy. Surrounded by people all the time. But without you, I've felt completely alone. I missed you every minute."

My heart skitters like a stone skipping across a lake.

"I'm sorry," Raj says, finally leaving the door and coming toward me. "I know you didn't do anything wrong. But I let stupid social media posts keep me away from you. Can you forgive me?"

I bite my lip to keep it from trembling.

He stands in front of me and reaches for my hands. I let him take them.

"I missed you so much," he chokes out. "I should know better than to care about what idiots post online."

"I missed you, too," I reply.

He puts his arms around me, and I rest my head against his chest, where I hear his heart beating as rapidly as mine.

I reach up to him, and our kiss dispels all the confusion I've been feeling.

"Oh god, what a terrible couple of weeks," he whispers into my hair. "Let's never do that again, okay?"

"I won't if you won't," I say.

I can't tell if we stand that way for a few minutes or a few hours. All I know is that when we're together, it feels like the world is right. Like we can face anything.

"So . . ." Raj's voice rumbles in his chest. "I have something for you."

I lift my head to look at him. "Oh, I got you something, too—I left it at home, though."

"Don't worry about giving me anything." He's blushing. "It's just something small that I saw, and it made me think of you." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small velvet box.

I open the box and find a silver filigree necklace with a shining silver pendant. "It's beautiful. And is that . . . the earth?"

Raj nods.

"How very climate-aware of you," I say.

He shakes his head. "It's you," he says softly. "You're the world to me."

"Oh, Raj," I say. Tears spring to my eyes. "Thank you."

He clasps the necklace around my neck and looks at me like he can see everything about me and love it. Love me.

We kiss, and I whisper, "You're the world to me, too."

Sooner than I'd like, he steps back. "We should go back to the party."

"Do we have to?"

"Promise we'll have fun." He takes my hand and leads me out into the hallway again, around the corner, dodging other guests. Then we go through another door and downstairs, where there is a DJ, a lit-up dance floor, and tons of people dancing. Max and Grace spot us and come over.

"The whole school is here," Grace raises her voice over the music.

Raj laughs. "I couldn't invite the whole school, but I did invite the entire mock trial team, and selected others." He bows his head, and Grace curtsies.

The entire mock trial team? Including the unknown person who took photos of me and Raven and sent them to some online scumbag?

But then I gape as someone else approaches us. “Raj, did you actually invite Raven?”

“Of course not,” Raj says, frowning.

“Well, he’s right over there,” Grace says.

Raven leaves the corner where he’d been watching and sidles up to us, a lazy smile playing on his face. He’s wearing a leather jacket that somehow seems as cool as a tux.

“Thanks for inviting the whole mock trial team,” he tells Raj, who clenches his jaw but says nothing.

Raven leans down to whisper in my ear. “Glad to see you here. Don’t let the online assholes get you down.”

“Thanks,” I say gratefully.

Raj gets called away for a moment by Lorenzo, who’s also wearing a tux and is introducing him to some kids I don’t recognize.

Tessa taps my shoulder. She’s wearing a skin-tight metallic dress and holding hands with another girl. “This is my girlfriend, Heather.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say.

“Same,” Heather says. “This is some party.” She raises her eyebrows.

“Seriously,” I laugh.

“Siya’s another attorney on the team,” Tessa explains to Heather. “We’ll be in the home stretch of mock trial when we get back,” Tessa says. “And I know we’re going to finish strong.”

“With Siya on the team, we can’t lose.” Raj has returned, and he drapes an arm around me.

“Absolutely,” Tessa says.

“Turn the music up!” Raj yells.

We dance through the next few hours. At one point, Asha shows up, smiling ear to ear, with Grant and Alice. “I had no idea Raj invited them,” she shouts into my ear above the sound of the music. “He’s a gem. Told you he wasn’t going to break up with you.”

“I had no idea what he was going to do,” I say.

“He’s head over heels,” Asha says. “As he should be. Are you having fun?”

“I am,” I say. “Are you?”

“So much,” Asha says.

I glance at Grant and Alice, who are beckoning her to dance with them again. Asha’s happy. So I’m just going to go with it.

“I love you,” I say. “Happy New Year.”

Eventually, Raj grabs a mic and announces that it’s almost midnight. He presses a button and a cabinet opens, revealing a huge TV screen showing the celebration in Times Square.

Waitstaff hand out glasses of golden sparkling liquid.

“Siya, come up here with me,” Raj says into the mic. “Isn’t she the best?” he asks the crowd. “Brilliant and beautiful.”

“Siya! Raj! Siya! Raj! Siya! Raj!” the crowd yells.

I join Raj in front of the TV. Dozens of phones are up taking photos and videos.

It’s two minutes until midnight.

“2026 has been an incredible year,” Raj says, holding up his glass. “Here’s to making 2027 even better!”

The clock ticks down, and the whole crowd counts the last ten seconds out loud. Max and Grace are near us, beaming.

Midnight strikes, and everyone cheers. Raj leans down to kiss me. “Happy 2027,” he whispers in my ear. “We’re going to have an amazing year. Together.”

I whisper back, “I’m holding you to that.”

“I expect nothing less,” he says, and kisses me again.

“Happy New Year,” Max says, hugging me. “I love seeing that smile again.”

“Thanks for being my friend even when I’m scowling,” I say.

“I scowl most of the time, so it’s only fair.”

“I want in on this hug!” Grace says, throwing her arms around us both.

“Happy New Year, bestie,” I say.

“Thought I was your bestie,” Max says.

“We’re all besties.” Grace giggles.

We all return to the dance floor. I dance until I’m covered in sweat and my feet are sore. Then I kick off my heels and dance some more. Raj doesn’t leave my side.

After two weeks of darkness, it’s like stepping back into the sun.

Chapter 30

Raj practically lives at my house for the last few days of vacation. We spend hours with Dad and Asha cooking and eating, watching movies, and putting together a jigsaw puzzle. One day, we manage to get a few hours alone together while Dad is working and Asha is out.

"Want to go to your room?" Raj smiles at me.

I nod, and we go upstairs.

"Finally alone." He kisses me.

I pull away. "I love having you here, but how do your parents feel about it? You only go home to sleep."

Raj laughs. "They think you're awesome, and they want me to be happy."

"They think I'm awesome? Even after everything that happened?" I look away.

"Hey." Raj takes my shoulders gently until I look at him. "None of that was your fault. They don't blame you, and neither do I."

I frown. "That's not how it felt."

"I know," Raj says. "And I'm sorry. But even when I was in the middle of it, I didn't blame you. I just . . . I guess I just needed some space. But I'm really sorry for not calling you—"

"Or even messaging me."

"I swear I'll never do anything like that again."

"Okay," I say finally.

"Besides, now all anyone can talk about is the photos from New Year's."

I start to object, but he says quickly: "Not that it makes up for what happened after the lock-in. But at least no one's talking about that anymore."

“That’s something else we need to figure out,” I say. “Someone on the team took those photos of me and Raven in the storeroom and later in the Fishbowl and either posted them anonymously or sold them to someone else. What are we going to do about that?”

“I’ll talk to Tessa and bring it up at our next meeting,” Raj says.

I exhale. “Raj, I think you should talk to Lorenzo first.” I cross my arms. “He’s not my biggest fan, you know.”

“Lem?” Raj shakes his head. “He wouldn’t do something like that. Those photos hurt me as much as they hurt you.”

“Did they really?” I raise my eyebrows.

His cheeks redden. “You’re right. They did make me look bad, though, and Lem wouldn’t want to do that. And he was there for me while I was dealing with everything.”

“Lorenzo had the opportunity and the motive. He was at the Diwali party, too, and could have taken the photos from that night. Please talk to him, okay?”

Raj nods seriously. “I will. Promise.”

I chew my lip. “I care about mock trial, but I . . . I just don’t know if I can return to the team if I can’t trust my teammates.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it. We need you on the team. I need you.” He kisses me again, and then kisses down my jaw.

“So . . . we never got to talk about what happened with Elizabeth Cordray.”

“Hmm?” Raj keeps kissing my neck.

“Raj, I’m serious. I’ve been holding all this stuff inside, and Dad doesn’t really understand, and I don’t want to upset Asha.”

He stops kissing me and starts to pay attention. “You’re right. I should have asked. Sorry again. It’s just that I’m kind of distracted when I’m around you.” His pupils are huge, making his eyes look black.

I take a breath. “Elizabeth Cordray knew who I was. She knew I was faking being Grace.”

“Really? How?”

“Mark Holloway told her about our conversation, then she saw the social media posts of us and your mom mentioning we were both on the mock trial team, and she put it all together.”

“Wow. Well, what did she have to say for herself?”

I sigh. “Elizabeth said she used details about my mom’s life because she admired her, and her death haunted her. She also said . . . she said she didn’t make up most of what’s in the case materials.”

“Your parents had marriage troubles?”

My head spins. “Wait, what? No, she said that Mom was under investigation by the New Jersey bar.”

Raj blinks. “What for?”

I shake my head. “Elizabeth didn’t know. And I asked Dad, and he didn’t know, either. Mom died a couple of weeks before the hearing was supposed to take place.”

“Siya, I’m so sorry. That must have been so hard to hear. But you know, like we say during mock trial, most bar investigations come to nothing.”

“I know,” I say. “But it’s awful to feel like I barely know anything about my mom. About who she really was, not just the pretty picture Dad and Asha want to paint. I just wish I’d known what she was going through. I wish I could have helped.”

He wraps his arms around me. “I know. I’m sorry.”

We stay that way for a moment, our hearts beating in sync. I draw strength from him, from the fact that we’re finally talking about what’s been bothering me for weeks.

“There’s something else I want to show you.” I go to my desk and pull the mysterious note out from under the pile of books.

“It’s definitely not Mark Holloway’s or Elizabeth Cordray’s number?”

I shake my head. “Besides, why would they send me a letter? You don’t think it’s someone from social media who looked up where I live, do you?” I look out my window, wondering if there’s a creeper lurking out there.

“But they address you as ‘Ms. Kumar.’ That would be odd for a stalker. And if they wanted to message you, wouldn’t they do it online?”

“Either way, I’m not calling that number.”

“It’s up to you. If you change your mind, I’ll be there this time, I promise.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to encourage whoever it is.”

Raj touches my cheek. “You’re really important to me, you know?”

I lean my face against his palm and close my eyes. “You’re important to me, too.”

He glances at his watch. “We don’t have much time before Asha gets back . . .”

I smile and reach to kiss him. But as distracting as Raj is, part of my mind keeps wandering back to all that's happened.

Chapter 31

When I go back to school in the first week of January, things seem to have returned to normal.

"No one's posted about you for days," Grace says at lunch. "Although there were tons of photos from New Year's. Somebody was told—or paid—to post every happy photo they could. The two of you dancing, Raven smiling at both of you, half our high school looking hot and effervescent at the party. 'All is right in the world,' and 'Misunderstanding forgotten,' and stuff like that. Want to see?"

"No thanks," I say. "I like life without social media."

"I knew you were the smartest one in our class," Max says.

"Thank you, Max. Please take the rest of the bag." I hand him my truffle chips.

Raj tells me he asked Lorenzo about the photos, and Lorenzo denied taking any of them. He even showed Raj his phone to prove it.

I still have my doubts about Lorenzo but decide to let it go for now.

Raj starts our next mock trial practice by addressing the whole team. "Someone took those photos of Siya and Raven in the storage room and then posted them to social media," he says. "It was a betrayal. And it had to be a member of the team." His eyes sweep the room, staring at each team member in turn.

I look around myself. Which of these people has it in for me? How can I trust anyone?

Tessa joins in. "We can't function as a team if we're secretly undermining each other," she says.

“Don’t look at me,” Raven says to Raj, who is glaring at him. “I was in the photos. Besides, you had my phone, remember?”

“It wasn’t me,” Lorenzo says quickly.

We go around the room, and every single member of the team—attorneys, witnesses, alternates, and researchers—claims to know nothing about the photos and how they got taken and posted.

At the end of the meeting, Tessa pulls me aside. “I’m sorry we didn’t figure it out.”

I shake my head. “I really can’t believe anyone on the team would do something like that, but it’s the only possibility.”

She glances quickly at Raj, then back at me. “Listen, I understand if you feel like you need to quit the team. I mean, how can you trust anyone?”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to quit. That would mean they’ve won.”

“Good for you, Siya,” she says, patting my shoulder. “I’ve got your back.”

“Thanks, Tessa.” But Raj has my back, too. And yet those photos got taken.

Every time Raj and I have a free period in common, he insists that we spend it in the Fishbowl. “For fun,” he says.

We lounge on sofas in front of the large windows, like we’re on display, or, as Grace puts it, like we’re “reigning royalty.” Raj puts his arm around me, or pulls me onto his lap, even when there’s room on the sofa. Lorenzo and Tessa sit near us, and we talk and laugh like we don’t have a care in the world.

One day, I ask Raj to meet in the library instead. “I have so much work to do, and I can’t get it done in the Fishbowl.”

“Come on, Siya. I want to be near you,” Raj says.

“You can be near me in the library.”

“It’s not the same. Please come. For me.” He stares deeply into my eyes.

I can’t resist when he looks at me like that.

“Fine,” I say, and follow him to the Fishbowl.

But as we banter with Lorenzo and Tessa and whoever else shows up, a thought nags at me.

Raj’s sudden love for the Fishbowl seems to have very little to do with me, and everything to do with everyone else. To make sure that the whole

high school sees us together and knows our relationship is solid and all is well in our world. So everyone knows that I'm officially forgiven.

I hate being in the spotlight of the Fishbowl. But I smile and I bear it. For Raj. For us.

We have two more trials before regionals, and in the first one, we play the plaintiff, and at Raj's suggestion I take over the direct examination of Antonia Goldman (still played by Adele) rather than working with Raven.

"Ms. Goldman," I say, "can I ask you a little about bar investigations?"

"Objection, Your Honor," says an attorney on the other team. "Counsel is asking the witness to speculate when she was not privy to the details of the bar investigation against Ms. Jordan."

"Your Honor," I respond, "I'm asking the witness, who is an attorney, as we have established, to talk about her knowledge of these types of investigations in general, not the specific case of Lily Jordan."

"I'll allow it," says the judge. "Objection overruled."

"So, Ms. Goldman," I continue, "with your knowledge of bar investigations in general, could you tell us what the possible outcomes of an investigation might be?" I have to be careful not to lead my witness or put words in her mouth. But Adele and I have practiced, and she knows what to say.

"Of course," Adele says. "There are several possibilities. One is that an attorney is found to have acted improperly, and what they've done is so egregious that they are disbarred. Another is that wrongdoing is found, but it was unintentional, and a warning is issued. And another is that there was no wrongdoing at all, that the attorney acted in the best interests of their client and according to the law, and the investigation concludes with no further action taken."

"Thank you, Ms. Goldman. I appreciate your insight."

"Can I say one more thing?" Adele asks.

"Of course," I say, forcing myself not to smile. Adele is killing it!

"I don't know the details of the investigation against Lily Jordan, but I knew her. She was an excellent attorney who held herself to the highest standards. If there was an investigation into her actions, it must have been because of some misunderstanding or some innocent mistake. And I knew that Lily would be able to explain what had happened better than most

attorneys. So while I'm sure the pending investigation and hearing were stressful, I doubt they would have meant the end of her legal career. She was just too good, and she had too much integrity for that."

"Thank you, Ms. Goldman." I take my seat.

After we win the case, Raven takes me aside. "That was amazing," he says with an intense look.

"I just made the same opening statement I always do," I say with a shrug.

"I mean your direct examination of Adele. You really helped her shine."

"She did all the work," I say.

"Yeah, but you let her do it. You're a great teammate."

"Thanks," I say with a grin. "So, how have you been? Did you have nice holidays?"

"I did, in fact. Mom actually took some time to hang out, which was nice. She even read over some of my college applications."

I raise my eyebrows. "I thought college wasn't for you?"

"It might not be. But then I started hanging out with nerds like you, and it wasn't so bad. So I thought I'd keep my options open."

"Always a good idea," I say with a smile.

"Siya, are you ready to go?" Raj asks.

Raj and I walk away, but I turn back to give Raven a small smile.

Whether or not Raj likes it, Raven's proving to be a friend.

January flies by, and we win our next case in the beginning of February. Mom's garden is still in a deep freeze, but as March approaches, Dad starts seedlings indoors and orders more from the garden store for when it's finally time to plant outside.

The wind blows March in with a shudder, but I'm warmed by the energy of our mock trial team. We are working together as well as we ever have.

Then we fly through two rounds in regionals to emerge as one of the top four teams in the state.

It's official: we are going to the state semifinals.

Return

Sita walked out of the flames, unscathed.

Rama rejoiced and took Sita into his arms. “You have proved yourself true and truthful. We shall return home together, my love,” he said.

They left the isle of Lanka to its new king—Ravana’s brother, Vibhishana—and crossed the ocean to go home.

Their exile over, Rama and Sita returned to Ayodhya, where they were crowned king and queen. The whole kingdom reveled, and the heavens showered them with flowers.

Rama and Sita were kind, fair, and strong rulers. They improved the lives of all their subjects and delighted in each other.

They were doing what they were meant to do.

After years of struggle, they were finally happy.

Chapter 32

Our opponent in the state semifinals is the team from the Parker School, a private school from the southern part of the state. They also have only one loss.

But our team is at full capacity, with all our regulars present and ready to put on their best performances. And we are playing the plaintiff's side, which is definitely what I'm most comfortable arguing.

I feel somehow that winning this case will mean something special for Raj and me—not just for the team, but for us and our relationship. If we can make it to the state finals, maybe Raj will be satisfied that we improved on last year's performance. Maybe he will finally put aside his dislike of Raven. Maybe he'll forget all the social media stuff, and we can stop going to the Fishbowl in every spare moment.

The courtroom gleams with dark polished wood. We've arrived before our opponents and take our places at our table in our usual configuration: Raj and me at either end of the table, with Tessa and Noah in between. I'm wearing the scarf that Grace gave me. I stack my papers neatly in front of me. My hands are freezing, but I'm sweating through my blouse.

The other team arrives, and I'm surprised to see that all their attorneys are female. Their faculty and attorney advisors are women as well, as are two of their three witnesses.

"Look at all the girl power on that team," I murmur to Tessa.

She nods. "The Parker School has a strong tradition of female leadership. They used to be all-girl until about ten years ago."

I nod and smile at the attorney closest to me, a South Asian girl with her hair up in a shiny ponytail. She nods back with a challenging grin.

This is going to be fun.

"All rise for the Honorable David Martin," calls the bailiff.

The judge, a white man with silver hair and blue eyes shining behind small metal glasses, takes his place on the bench. "You may be seated," he says, and we all sit. "Today we consider the case of *Gregory Jordan v. Alouette Insurance Company*. Counsel for the plaintiff, are you ready?"

I stand. "We are, Your Honor."

The judge nods. "Counsel for the defense, are you ready?"

The attorney I'd nodded at stands, revealing a navy suit without a single wrinkle, and replies: "Yes, Your Honor."

Judge Martin nods again. "Members of the jury, are you ready to pay attention to the proceedings and make your decision with no prejudice?"

A girl with long braids stands. "We are, Your Honor."

"Very well then, let's get started. Plaintiff's counsel, please proceed with your opening statement."

I stand and begin my speech—the one that I've given numerous times before, about how the evidence will show that Lily Jordan had everything to live for, and there will not be any evidence that she took her own life—just conjecture and innuendo. But as I get to the final part about the letter found in Lily's purse, I'm interrupted.

"Objection, Your Honor," says the girl in the navy suit.

The judge gazes at her over his glasses. "On what basis?"

"Counsel is referring to something that has not yet been introduced into evidence," she says.

The judge regards me with raised eyebrows. "Counsel?"

My heart speeds up, and I can hear the blood whooshing through my veins. "I—I'm merely talking about what the evidence will show, Your Honor," I say, annoyed that my voice is shaky.

The judge considers us both for a moment. "We allow leeway in opening statements, but talking in detail about a piece of evidence not yet entered may not be the best idea. Objection sustained."

"Thank you, Your Honor," says the other girl. She turns to me and flashes a grin of delight.

Rattled, I look down at my piece of paper. Where was I? And what am I allowed to say? *Calm down, Siya. You can do this.* I take a calming breath.

"The evidence will show that Lily Jordan had a fulfilling life, full of purpose and success and love," I say, thinking of my own mom. "How can

we determine that a person intended to end their life when they were so clearly looking ahead to the future?"

I end with the piece about not letting an insurance company fabricate that a person with no history of depression suddenly decided to kill herself. I appeal to the jury to give the Jordan family what they deserve, so that Lily's forethought and planning will not go to waste.

I sit down, still feeling shaky. Tessa leans over and whispers, "I can't believe he sustained that objection."

We listen to our opponent make her opening statement. She is forceful but sympathetic, basically saying "poor Lily Jordan, we're sorry she was so stressed, but that's not the insurance company's fault."

When she mentions the letter found in Lily's purse, I stand. "Objection, Your Honor. Counsel is referencing something not yet put into evidence."

"Merely mentioning that the fact that she has a letter in her purse is important, Your Honor," my opponent says with a smile.

"Just don't go overboard, counselor," says the judge. "I'll allow it. Objection overruled."

I sit down, stung. Why could she reference the letter, but not me?

Soon, Tessa stands and says, "Your Honor, I'd like to call the first witness for the plaintiff, Greg Jordan."

Raven strides to the witness stand. Although Raj is three seats down from me, I can feel him stiffen in his chair.

But whatever Raj thinks about Raven, there's no denying that he's an excellent witness. He plays the part of the grieving husband and father with sensitivity. Tessa leads him through his testimony and Raven has me getting misty-eyed about the imaginary Lily Jordan and what she meant to her family. This case was inspired by my mom's life, and she meant so much to a lot of people—Elizabeth Cordray definitely got that right.

Then the opposing team's attorney, a red-haired girl wearing a dark red suit that looks like it shouldn't work but does, starts her cross-examination.

"I'm sorry for your family's loss, Mr. Jordan. But isn't it true that you and your wife were having marital troubles?"

Raven leans back in the witness stand. "We argued from time to time, but we loved each other very much."

"I see. In your household, I imagine you divided up the responsibilities?"

"Yes," Raven says. "Lily handled all the financial aspects of our life, and I dealt with things around the house and for the girls."

“You were in charge of the car maintenance, correct?”

“Yes.”

I cover my mouth to hide my smile. If they are suggesting that Greg neglected Lily’s car on purpose, that road leads nowhere.

“And you hadn’t changed Lily’s tires to snow tires, even by January?”

“No. As I said in my statement—”

“Because she had the car with her too much. Yes, I see,” says the attorney.

“Objection, Your Honor.” Tessa is on her feet. “Counsel for the defense is testifying for the witness.”

“Objection sustained. Please allow the witness to respond to your questions, counselor.” The judge regards Redhead over his glasses, but he has a smile on his face.

“Apologies, Your Honor. Do you have anything to add about why you didn’t change your wife’s tires, Mr. Jordan?” she asks Raven.

Raven squirms in his seat. “Uh . . . as I said in my statement, Lily always had the car with her, so I couldn’t change the tires.”

“Thank you.” Redhead glances down at her papers and tosses her hair back. “But I wonder, Mr. Jordan, did it ever occur to you that maybe your wife used the car so much that winter because she intended to prevent you from changing the tires?”

Raven’s eyes widen in surprise. “I . . . no, that never occurred to me.”

“Lily was the breadwinner for the family, right? How much money did she earn per year? And how much do you make?”

“Objection, Your Honor,” Tessa says. “This is irrelevant—”

“It’s very much relevant to Lily Jordan’s state of mind on the night of her death,” says the red-haired attorney.

“Objection overruled,” the judge says.

“Uh, yes, she made about $250,000 per year. I make about $50K,” Raven says.

“And she was working even more hours, and seemed troubled in the months leading up to her death, would you say?”

“She always worked hard,” Raven says.

“But you said in your statement that in the couple of months before her death, it seemed like something was bothering Lily. Are those your words?”

“Yes.”

“And if, after the bar investigation, she could no longer work as an attorney, that would be a big blow to your family’s finances, correct?”

“Objection, Your Honor. She’s asking him to speculate.”

“Your Honor, again, this has direct impact on Lily Jordan’s state of mind at the time of her death,” says Redhead.

The judge raises his eyebrows. “I’ll allow it. Mr. Jordan, you only need comment on your family’s finances, not anything to do with a bar investigation.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. I’ll rephrase. Mr. Jordan, wouldn’t it be a big blow to your family’s finances if Lily couldn’t work as an attorney anymore?”

Raven nods. “It would be. It has been. But more than the money she earned, we miss her.”

“Mm-hmm. Just a few more questions, Mr. Jordan. How much money would Alouette Insurance Company owe you if Lily died in an accident?”

“Forty million dollars,” Raven responds.

“And how much if she died by suicide?”

“Just the premiums paid, which amounted to about ten thousand dollars.”

“And would you say Lily loved you, Mr. Jordan? That she loved your daughters?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Raven says quietly. “More than anything.”

“So it stands to reason that in the event of her being unable to work, she would want you and your family to get as much money as possible.”

“Objection, Your Honor!” Tessa is on her feet.

“Withdrawn,” Redhead says. “No further questions, Your Honor.”

Redhead sits down and straightens her papers.

Raven is dismissed, and he looks like he has no idea what hit him.

It gets worse from there for our team. Parker’s lawyers are well-prepared and polished; their witnesses are confident and feign ignorance rather than admit to something damning. Even Raj can’t get Sandy McNamara to buckle under his questioning.

“I still think that letter was a way of saying goodbye to her whole family,” the lone boy on the other team, playing Sandy, insists. “Why else would Lily have finished it two weeks before her daughter’s birthday?”

That is the last thing that the jury and judge hear before the defense rests their case. Now all that is left are the closing statements.

Raj stands, looking striking as usual in his dark suit.

“May it please the court, Your Honor and members of the jury,” Raj starts.

I realize I’ve been grinding my teeth and make myself relax my jaw. I don’t need to be tense. This is Raj. He’s got this closing statement in hand, as always.

But Raj stutters a couple of times and has to glance at his notes—something he hasn’t needed to do since the second week of the tournament. Instead of rebutting the defense’s case, he seems to just repeat their points—that Lily was under pressure at work and home, that she seemed to be losing the ability to cope, that she loved her family and would do anything for them—without saying anything new.

I’m convinced that Raj is going to come through like he always has.

But the judge glances at his watch, and Raj seems to take this as a signal that he’s running out of time. His words speed up until they run together. He mumbles.

What is happening?

“As you can see, Your Honor and members of the jury, Lily Jordan was a talented attorney and loving wife and mother. She had troubles, but no history of depression. The defense has failed to produce a single piece of evidence that Lily took her own life. As a result, you must find for the plaintiff—for Lily’s husband and family.”

Raj sits.

He didn’t end with some brilliant phrase that will stick in everyone’s minds. He didn’t even thank the judge or the jury.

He just . . . stopped.

Then Redhead stands up and destroys our arguments, one by one. She reminds the jury that Lily was showing signs of stress, that her world was coming apart at the seams. She emphasizes how much Lily’s family stood to gain in the case of an accident and states that the evidence shows that Lily planned out her death: a car with no snow tires, a late-night drive in an ice storm, a letter telling her family how much she loved them.

Even to me, it seems impossible that she’s wrong.

Redhead finishes her statement and says, “Your Honor, the defense rests its case.”

The courtroom is silent for a moment.

Then the judge says, “Thank you. Members of the jury, it’s time for your deliberations.” He goes over the jury instructions and then goes back to his

chambers to score our performances.

The Parker team whispers excitedly. Ours is enveloped in stony silence.

We've lost.

We made it all the way to the state semifinals again, only to fail.

At least we lost to a great team.

Raj gets up. "Just going to the restroom," he murmurs.

I stand and make my way to our opponents' table. "I'm Siya," I tell the South Asian girl. I hold out my hand. "Congratulations on a fantastic performance."

She shakes my hand and smiles. "I'm Shirin. Your team did a great job, too."

Tessa and Noah join us as Shirin introduces us to the rest of her team. Max, Adele, and Chris come up, and we express genuine admiration for the Parker team and all they've accomplished. There's no way we've won. Parker deserves to move forward to the finals, and I hope they go on to represent New Jersey in the national tournament.

"Good luck in Trenton," I whisper to Shirin as the judge and jury return to the courtroom.

"No jinxing!" she whispers back. But she's grinning.

Raj comes in and sits down right before the judge reenters the courtroom.

"Members of the jury, have you come to a decision?" Judge Martin asks.

The girl with long braids stands. "We have, Your Honor," she says. "In the case of *Gregory Jordan v. Alouette Insurance Company*, we find in favor of the defense."

It's not that much of a surprise, but my stomach still sinks. Looks like we've lost both the jury and the mock trial case.

The judge bangs his gavel. "Thank you, members of the jury, for your service. And now, for my decision regarding the tournament aspect of today's case." He peers at us over his silver glasses. "I commend both sides on your performances today. All the attorneys and witnesses did remarkable jobs. It's clear you've all worked very hard. I'm looking forward to seeing you argue in front of me for real someday." He smiles, and members of both teams chuckle.

"This was a difficult decision," he continues. "But the team with the better performance today is the one that should move forward in the tournament to the state finals." His piercing gaze takes us all in, and my heart sinks a little further.

It’s the end of the road for our team.

But not the end of the road for Raj and me, I remind myself. The end of one doesn’t have to mean the end of the other.

“Based on my evaluation of each team’s performance . . .” The judge pauses and shuffles his papers again. “The winner of this 2026 New Jersey State Mock Trial Tournament semifinal is . . .”

I hold my breath and brace myself for the bad news.

“Bright Academy. Congratulations!”

There’s another moment of silence. The judge didn’t just say what he just said.

Did he?

A murmur rises from the Parker team. They turn to whisper to each other.

And then I see Judge Martin look at someone and give the tiniest of nods.

I follow his gaze and realize who he’s looking at. What that nod means.

He’s looking right at Raj.

Something flares in my chest. I know in my bones that Raj is why we’ve won. Not because of his performance, but because of who Raj is. Because of who his mother is.

The Parker team continues to whisper. Shirin wipes her eyes. Redhead turns as red as her hair as their team comes to our table to shake hands.

I don’t know what I say in response to their congratulations. I’m burning with the need to tell the truth: we didn’t deserve to win.

The judge nods benignly and leaves the courtroom, heading back to his chambers.

I make my way to Raj, who looks down at me with bright eyes. He hugs me tight, whispering, “We did it! We’re going to the finals!”

I pull away from him. “Raj,” I say urgently, “we need to talk.”

Chapter 33

I drag Raj out into the nearly empty hallway.

"What is it?" He looks back toward the courtroom doors as I pull him to a corner where we can have a little privacy. "Don't you want to be with the team?"

"I need you to listen!" I cry.

He finally understands that I'm being serious. "What is it?"

I put my hand on his forearm. "Did you talk to the judge?"

He looks at me, clearly confused.

"When you stepped out just now, did you say something to the judge to affect his decision?"

Raj's eyebrows fly up. "Of course not! How could you even think something like that?"

I cross my arms. "We didn't deserve to win today."

Raj frowns. "Of course we did. We're the best team in the state."

I shake my head. "We are one of the best in the state, but we were all off our game today. We shouldn't have won. You know Parker blew us out of the water."

"They were excellent, but clearly Judge Martin thought we were better."

"That's just it. I don't think the judge thought we were better."

"Obviously he did. He gave us the win."

"Raj, listen to me. I don't think the judge thought we won on points. I believe you when you say you didn't talk to him, but—"

"Gee, thanks for believing I didn't cheat."

Wow, he's going to make me say it. I take a deep breath. "But I think the judge awarded us the win because of who you are. Because your mom's a

senator."

Raj's eyes widen. "Siya, how can you say that?"

"You're the one who told me to watch people—to watch their faces to see what they were thinking." I swallow. "I saw the look the judge gave you. A look, and a tiny nod. I saw it, and I think you saw it, too."

"Don't be ridiculous," Raj says. His mouth tightens. "Our team did the better job."

"I wanted to win as much as anyone on the team," I say. "But you and I and everyone in that courtroom know we weren't the better team today. We don't deserve to go to the state finals."

"We might've barely scraped by, but Judge Martin made the call—and not because of my mom. And what can we do about it now?"

I take another breath. "I think we should ask him to reconsider."

"We can't do that!"

"We have to. You have to, Raj. You're the co-head of the team, and you can convince Tessa. We're still at the courthouse, and the judge is still in his chambers. We can do what's right."

Raj shakes his head. "We won. There's nothing else to say."

"But—"

"I hope you're not thinking of sharing this crazy idea with anyone else." Raj's face is grim. "You have no proof." Then he smiles at me—that smile that's always dazzled me. "Come on. Let's go back and celebrate with the rest of the team."

He holds out his hand. I don't take it.

Raj enters the courtroom first, and I follow in his wake. Every step feels heavy, and my head is spinning. Did I imagine that look between the judge and Raj? Am I acting crazy?

The Parker team has cleared out, and I don't blame them.

Our advisors are standing apart from the rest of the team, talking quietly to each other. Maybe I can convince them.

"Ms. Tillett and Ms. Briggs," I begin.

"Please come celebrate with the team at Giacomo's," Raj interrupts.

"That's very kind of you, Raj." Ms. Tillett looks at her phone. "If my husband is okay with the girls for another couple of hours, I'll swing by. This will be the first mock trial state finals appearance in Bright Academy history."

"Thank you, Raj," Ms. Briggs says. "I'll definitely be there."

The rest of the team swarms us with cheers, high fives, and hugs before I can say anything else.

I can't join in the celebration. I can't pretend that I believe we deserved this victory or that I'm happy about what happened. I hang back as Raj gets another round of hugs and congratulations.

"What's wrong?" Max's voice surprises me.

I hope you're not thinking of sharing this crazy idea, Raj's voice echoes in my head. *You have no proof.*

I shrug. "That was a tough trial, and I'm not sure the best team won."

Max purses his lips. "I hear you," he says. He looks at our teammates, then back at me. "You up for pizza?"

I shake my head. "I want to go home."

"I can give you a ride, then. I'm parked at school."

"Thanks, Max."

The bus ride back to school takes only thirty minutes—thirty minutes in which I sit mutely next to Raj while he chats it up with everyone else on the team.

"I wonder who's going to win the other semifinal," he says, glancing at his phone. "Both Edgewood and Upton Hill are excellent teams."

"Either way, we're going to beat them. And then DC, here we come!" Lorenzo says, and they bump fists.

I look out the window and can't help thinking about the Parker bus ride home, and how those students must be feeling. They should be the ones celebrating and looking forward to the finals.

By the time we pull into the school parking lot, I've made up my mind. I text Max:

ME: Wait for me. I just need to talk to Raj before we go.

MAX: You got it.

I touch Raj's arm as he stands up. "Max is driving me home, but can we talk first?"

Lorenzo, who is sitting in the row in front of us, turns back and raises his eyebrows. "You're not coming to lunch?"

Raj doesn't speak, but looks at me with concern, like I'm behaving bizarrely.

I follow Raj off the bus to a spot near his car. I shiver in the March wind. My eyes burn as I look into his beautiful face.

"I'm quitting the team," I say.

"Don't you think that's rather melodramatic?"

Suddenly, I see him for who he is. Not a golden boy. He's just a boy who wants to win. And I was part of that winning strategy . . . right up until I became a liability. And now he won't recognize unfairness when it's staring him in the face. I bite my tongue to stop from shouting and take another shuddering breath. I need to get out of here.

"We should talk later," I say. I turn and walk to where Max is waiting next to his car.

"Siya," Raj calls.

My heart squeezes at the sound of his voice, but I can't turn back. I reach Max's car and get in.

Max climbs into the driver's seat and fastens his seat belt. "Want to talk about it?" he asks quietly.

I shake my head, not trusting my voice.

But although part of me is hurting, I also feel warmth spreading through me. The flame of truth, cutting through lies.

We're silent for the five-minute drive home. "Thanks for the ride," I say as Max pulls in my driveway.

"What's going on with you and Raj?" Max asks.

"I quit the team."

"Why—"

"I don't want to get into it right now. But maybe later, okay?" I watch his face anxiously. I don't know what I'll do if I lose Max, too.

"Okay. Call me anytime."

"Have fun with everyone else."

"I'm not going out with them. That was . . . a weird day in court."

I hold my breath. I want to tell him what I think, but he's still on the team. It wouldn't be fair to him. I manage a nod and open the door.

"I'd do anything for you, Siya. You know that, right?"

I nod again and blink, making hot tears roll down my cheeks. "Same here," I say.

I let myself into the house and call for Dad, but he's not home.

I'm suddenly filled with an urgent need to talk to Asha. She'll understand. She knows how betrayal feels.

I sit on my bed, back up against the headboard, and FaceTime Asha. I nearly sob as she picks up.

Then I actually do sob when her face comes up, and she looks so healthy and happy. She's in her dorm room, sitting on her bed. Her pillow with the outline of New Jersey is behind her—the one I got her as a going-away present. "Asha," I say, and then I can't go on.

"Oh, honey," Asha says. "Did you lose in the semifinals?"

"Worse," I say. "We won."

I'm crying again. I keep trying to speak, but my words come out garbled.

Finally, I manage to stutter out everything that's happened: our terrible performance in court, the judge's surprise ruling, the look that passed between him and Raj, and how Raj refused to admit to any of it.

"Wow," she says. "So, what did you do when Raj wouldn't own up?"

I'm so grateful that Asha believes me that I start crying again. I was afraid she'd say that I imagined it. But she trusts me. She knows I'm telling the truth.

"I quit the team," I say.

Asha smiles. "That's my little sister. Speaking truth to power."

"Then why do I feel so terrible?" I hiccup.

"Because no one ever said it's *easy* to speak truth to power. And I know you care about Raj."

"I do," I say. "There are so many wonderful things about him. But I just couldn't ignore what happened. This is a lie that hurts a lot of people, even if it benefits us."

"I know," Asha says, soothing. "You did the right thing."

"And Asha . . . there's more I have to tell you." It's time to come clean, finally, about everything. If I'm going to quit the mock trial team over a lie, it's not fair for me to keep the truth from Asha.

"You can tell me anything," Asha says.

"The case this year . . . it was about an attorney. An attorney who died in a single-car accident on an icy road."

"Okay," Asha says.

"She was a civil defense attorney. She volunteered at family court. She had two young daughters. In the case, her name was Lily Jordan."

"Same job as Mom," Asha says. "Same family. Same initials."

"Yep. It was really upsetting. So, I tracked down the members of the mock trial committee who wrote the case, and I finally got one to admit she

knew Mom and based the case on her life and death."

"Wow."

"Right? And she told me that Mom had to deal with a bar investigation, too . . . but she didn't know what it was about."

"I see," Asha says.

"You knew?"

Asha sighs. "I knew Mom was upset about something at the time, but I didn't know what it was until later."

"And you didn't think you should tell me about it?"

"Siya, how would that have helped you? I didn't know what the investigation was about, either."

"It would have been the truth! All you and Dad do is tell me the same things about Mom. About how smart she was, how beautiful, how kind . . . how she loved that garden, how she loved us. But you don't tell me any of the real stuff. What bothered her, what she worried about, what she was disappointed in. You treat me like a little kid."

"You were a little kid when she died."

"But I'm not anymore! And I know so little about Mom that when I read that case, and it shook me up, I started wondering about all kinds of things. Like if there was an insurance policy that was disputed. If Mom had been investigated at her job. If Mom was so unhappy that she—that she took her own life."

"She wasn't. She didn't."

"But how do you know? I looked through our album. Mom looked thin and worried in the months before her death. *Whenever you need me, I'll be right here*, she told me. Was that her way of telling me goodbye?"

"Siya, don't go down this path. It's not healthy."

"*Healthy*? All I've done for like the past two years is worry about you being healthy. I kept secrets from you, to make sure I didn't upset you. I did everything I could to make sure you were okay. But I never wanted you to lie to me."

"What secrets?" Asha asks.

I sigh. Might as well tell her now. "Your senior year . . . I was near your locker one day, and I saw Grant and Alice hanging out. She seemed to be sad, and he had his arm around her. I didn't think it meant anything. After all, you were all friends. This was weeks before you found out about—about what they were doing. I kind of didn't realize what I'd seen until

everything happened. But I'm sorry, Asha. I'm sorry I didn't tell you what I'd seen. Maybe I could have stopped the end of your year from being so bad."

I sigh. She might hate me, but at least I finally told her.

"Can you forgive me?"

"Stop blaming yourself," Asha says. "It wouldn't have made a difference if you'd told me about seeing them together."

"But if you'd known earlier, maybe it wouldn't have come as such a shock when you found out in public that they'd been seeing each other behind your back. Maybe it wouldn't have made you feel so terrible."

Asha's look pierces me through the screen. "Let me repeat: it's not your fault. A few weeks before that day in the Fishbowl, I broke up with Grant. And I kind of stopped being friends with Alice. I think they reached out to each other to make each other feel better. And as you know, I'm back to being friends with them both. They're not the reason I became so depressed."

I don't understand. "Then what was it?"

Asha looks at me and sighs. "Oh, Siya, I don't think you want to know," she says softly.

"Of course I want to know! Just like I want to know the real Mom, and no one wants to tell me about her. What are you hiding from me?"

"I found out something . . . ," Asha trails off.

"What?"

"I can't tell you," Asha says.

"We promised each other!" I shout. "No more secrets!"

"It's not my secret to tell," Asha says.

"But why not?"

"I just can't."

In the silence that follows, the doorbell rings.

"I've got to go. Someone's at the door."

"Are you okay?" Asha asks.

The doorbell rings again, twice in a row, urgent. "I've really got to go."

"Call me later, okay?"

"Bye."

I hang up and peek out my window.

It's Raj.

Exile Again

One day, Rama overheard a washerman berating his wife: “Begone! I will not take you back after you have spent the night in another man’s house. I am not like our king.”

Rama became thoughtful. His people still doubted Sita’s purity.

He asked Sita to be brought to him. “I am sorry, my love. Our people still do not trust that you told the truth.” He touched her face as if to memorize it. “But I must be the king first, and your husband second. I must send you away. You must return to the forest to live in exile.”

“I have always told the truth,” Sita said. “I’ve been a faithful wife and queen. I have done nothing wrong, and yet I must pay and pay for the suspicion of others.”

Sita held her head high as she left her husband’s presence.

She removed her jewels and her fine clothes. She dressed in simple cotton and brought only what she could carry into the forest.

But she took with her something more precious than anything in the kingdom.

Chapter 34

"Thought you'd still be celebrating," I say.

"I can't celebrate without you," Raj says. "Can I come in?"

I sigh. "This isn't a good time."

"Please, Siya. Just give me a chance to talk to you."

I open the door. He steps in and we sit in our living room. I sit across the room from him and cross my arms.

"What is it you want to say?" I ask.

"I hope you'll come back to the team. Look, I know it was a tough trial this morning. The Parker team was amazing. But we won. We made it to the state finals. We can't win without you. The team needs you, Siya. I need you."

I force myself to look away from him. "I'm sorry, Raj. I told you how I feel."

"But that's it—it's how you *feel*. You need to put your feelings aside and look at this objectively."

Anger starts to boil inside me. "Don't tell me that I'm being emotional. I know what I saw. Based on our performance, we should have lost. But we won. Not because of how we did, but because you are the son of a US senator. That's all there is to it."

"Siya, be reasonable," Raj says.

"I am being reasonable," I say. "We had the chance to talk to the judge while we were still in court. It was your responsibility, as our leader, to face up to what had happened and do what was right. But you didn't. And then you stopped me from doing what was right, too."

“We won!” Raj shouts. “Whether or not you think we deserved to,” he says in a lower voice. “And now we have a chance to go to the state finals and possibly represent New Jersey in the national tournament! Don’t you see what it would mean to our school? To us? We need you, Siya. No one else can fill your shoes. I’m begging you. Please come back to the team.”

“Oh, Raj.” I shake my head. “I can’t. And if you can’t see why, then maybe we don’t belong together, either.”

Raj crosses the room to me. “You don’t mean that. Please say you don’t mean that.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “But I do mean it.”

“But I love you,” Raj says, reaching for my hands.

“I love you, too,” I say, squeezing his hands. I’ve never said these words to a guy before.

Then I think about that Ferris wheel we were on when we first kissed. The swoop of my stomach, the breeze on my skin, the fear and the anticipation. We reached the top, but it was only a matter of time before we fell back to earth. “But I can’t be with someone who’s okay with a lie as long as it benefits him.”

“Siya, please, I’m begging you, don’t do this.”

I let go of his hands. “I really am sorry. I loved being with you. But I can’t anymore.”

Raj takes a few steps back and looks at me. “Is this about Raven? Or Max?”

I stand. “Of course not. How could you even ask that?”

“Why in the world would you throw away what we have?”

“I just told you why! Now please, Raj, leave before you say anything else stupid!”

He recoils as if I slapped him. “You’re making a mistake, Siya. Before long, you’ll regret it.”

“Don’t threaten me.”

“I’m not! I just—I can’t believe you’re doing this.” He turns and walks to the door.

He steps over the threshold and looks back at me one more time. “I love you, Siya. The team needs you, but I need you more.”

He closes the door softly behind him.

I’m still wearing the clothes I wore to the trial this morning. I take off my suit jacket and collapse on the couch.

What have I just done?

I love Raj. And I just told him I don't want to be with him anymore.

I love the mock trial team. And I just quit right before the state finals.

I wait for the tears to come, for the panic to set in. But they don't.

Because I know what I saw in that courtroom. I know that the Parker team deserved to win. It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.

Not even Raj.

The garage door opens, and a few minutes later, Dad comes in holding a tray of seedlings.

"Oh, you're home already. Here," he says, handing me the tray. "Put these in the kitchen and help me bring in the rest. Then we can set them up in the window in the dining room."

I step into slippers and help him bring in four more trays of seedlings.

"I got three varieties of tomatoes, peppers, chili peppers, eggplant, zucchini, and two watermelon plants," he says. "I thought we could try and see if we have some of your mom's magic."

He chatters enough for both of us.

"Last year, we had an early thaw, but I'm worried about counting on that and putting these in the ground too soon. I think it's better to let them grow indoors, acclimate them in the mudroom for a few days, and make sure there's absolutely no chance of frost before we plant them outside. What do you think?"

"Sure," I say.

"Why are you so quiet? Oh—the trial! How did it go today?"

"We won," I say tonelessly.

"That's wonderful . . . right?" He furrows his brow.

"It should be. But we didn't win for the right reasons, so I quit the team. Oh, and I broke up with Raj." I wince at saying it out loud.

"I sense there's more to this story," Dad says. "I think it's time for some tea."

"You don't have to," I start.

"I think this is going to be a difficult conversation, and in my experience, those are always better with a good cup of tea. Is that all right with you? I'll make it quickly."

"Fine," I say, too exhausted to argue.

"It'll take just a few minutes."

"Guess I'll change my clothes," I mutter.

I drag myself upstairs and hang my suit and blouse in my closet. I won't be needing those for the foreseeable future. I throw on a pair of sweatpants—it takes me three tries to get my left leg in—and a gigantic sweatshirt. I go to the bathroom and wash the makeup off my face. I trudge back to the kitchen, where Dad is putting two mugs of chai and a variety of savory and sweet snacks on a tray.

"Go on, sweetie, have a seat in the living room and we can talk as long as you want."

I plop myself on the same sofa that I chased Aparna Auntie off of when she had tea with us way back in September. I put a blanket on my lap and fold my legs underneath me.

Dad hands me a steaming mug of tea. "Now," he says. "Tell me what happened."

I don't feel like going over everything that happened at the trial and with Raj, but I do. To his credit, Dad stays quiet and does nothing but listen for a long time. When I'm done, I take a sip of tea.

"Well," Dad says. "That's quite a story. I'm proud of you, Siya. Not many people would have had the courage to do what you did."

"So, you believe me?" I take another sip of the chai, and the warmth trickles into my chest.

"Of course I believe you. I know how much the mock trial team means to you. If you thought the other team bested you, and the judge gave your team the win for other reasons, I know it must be the truth."

"Thanks, Dad," I say, leaning my head against his shoulder.

"But Raj didn't see things that way?"

I shake my head. "I told him that I couldn't be with someone who couldn't—or wouldn't—tell the truth when he saw it. And now it's over, and I don't know what to do with myself."

"Oh, honey," Dad says, putting an arm around me. "I'm so sorry."

He holds me for a few moments, and I stare into space, not feeling much of anything. I finish drinking my tea. And then I steel myself for what I need to ask him.

"Something else happened today," I say. "I spoke with Asha."

"Is she all right?" Dad asks.

"She's fine. But she told me something." I pause. "She said that her breakdown her senior year wasn't because Grant and Alice had started seeing each other behind her back. She said it was something else."

Dad swallows and puts his half-drunk mug on the tray.

“When I asked her about it, she said she couldn’t tell me what.” I put my own mug down and turn to face him.

“So, do you know, Dad? What really caused Asha’s depression?”

Chapter 35

Dad's brown skin has gone ashy. "Oh, Siya," he says in a shaky voice. "Maybe it's best we don't go to that place."

"What have you and Asha been keeping from me?"

"Maybe I should clear the dishes first." Dad reaches for the tray, but I put a hand on his arm.

"Please, Dad. Tell me the truth. I'm not little anymore. Whatever it is, I can handle it."

Dad swallows, and I recognize the expression on his face. It's the same expression he had the night that Mom died.

Despair.

"Okay," he says. He takes a breath and clasps his hands together, gripping so tightly that his knuckles grow white. "It all started with Asha going into my office looking for a photo of Mom. She found a note that Mom had written to me. It said, 'I'm working late tonight. But we need to talk.'"

"We need to talk," I say. "Never a comforting phrase."

"No." Dad takes a shaky breath. "Asha asked me about the note."

"And then what?" I ask.

He looks at me and shudders.

"Dad, are you okay?"

He shakes his head. "I don't want to tell you the rest."

"Dad, you're scaring me," I say. "Please tell me what happened."

"Oh, Siya. Just promise me that you won't change how you think about me. That you won't stop loving me."

“Of course I’ll always love you. I just need to understand what happened and why you and Asha have been keeping secrets from me.”

“Asha had found the note on top of a newspaper. The newspaper that came out on the day Mom died. She thought the two were linked.”

“Were they?”

Dad nods. He takes another shuddering breath. “Your mom left that note for me on the morning of January 16. She left that note because she’d found out what I’d done.” He twists his hands.

“And what was that?”

“How am I supposed to tell her this? How can I make her understand?” Dad looks up, and I’m not sure who he’s talking to.

I keep quiet. I know what he’s going to say.

He’s going to say that Mom wanted a divorce, that she and Dad had stopped wanting the same things. That they had grown apart, like Lily and Greg had in the mock trial case. How did Elizabeth Cordray know so much that I didn’t know about my own mom?

“That day, your mom learned something she had suspected for a few weeks,” Dad says, looking at the ground. “That I was having an affair.”

My head reels. “You . . . you *what*?”

Dad shakes his head. “It’s my greatest mistake, one that I’ll regret forever. I loved your mom so much, but we were going through difficult times. She was working too much, and not spending enough time with you girls, or with me. So I turned to a friend at work, and things got out of hand. I broke it off, and I felt horribly guilty. I loved your mom and you and Asha more than anything, and I deeply regretted what I’d done. But then, the person contacted your mom.”

“Mom heard it from *her*? Not from you?”

Dad nods. “Once I saw that note, I knew she knew. I waited all day and night for your mom to call or come home. Eventually, around eleven p.m., I called her.

“As you can imagine, she was furious. She said she had more work to do. I said we should talk on the phone, then. She said she didn’t want me to talk—she just wanted to give me a piece of her mind. And so she did. Things got ugly. We yelled, we screamed, we said horrible things to each other. But eventually, we stopped, and I told her the truth: that I’d felt forgotten and very lonely, that I’d sought comfort in the wrong place, and I regretted it. I told her—” Dad’s voice cracks, and it takes him a moment to get it back. “I

told her that I loved her more than anything, that I was so sorry I'd betrayed her, that I'd already cut things off with the other person, and I'd do anything to make it up to her."

"And then what happened?" My voice comes out as a whisper.

"Your mom said she couldn't work anymore with all that rattling around in her head. She said she was coming home, and we could talk more. I sat here on this sofa, waiting. I put the TV on and sat here until I suddenly woke up to my phone ringing. It was three a.m. It was the police."

I cross my arms and rub my shoulders, suddenly freezing despite the blanket.

"So now you know the whole horrible story," Dad says. "I betrayed your mom. I betrayed our family. Your mom found out and, quite rightfully, was furious. Then, before we could talk more or work through things, she died. She died on that icy night in January, and that was the end of my happiness." Tears stream down his face.

"But I was determined that it wouldn't be the end of your happiness, or Asha's. I tried to be the best parent I could to you both. I promised I wouldn't seek love for myself—because I didn't deserve it. My self-loathing knew no bounds."

I close my eyes. Dad was right: I don't want to hear this. But I asked for it, so I have to listen.

"I'm so, so sorry, my sweet girl. I'm sorry for the betrayal. I'm sorry I wasn't honest with your mom. And I'm sorry your mom found out about it on that day of all days and drove home in an ice storm to talk to me. I won't ask you to forgive me, because I can't forgive myself. I kept that note from your mom to remind me of my terrible mistake."

He cries quietly into his hands. I've never seen my dad like this. Watching him is tearing me apart. But he doesn't stop talking.

"So Asha found out and hated me for it. But not nearly as much as I hated myself. Then I watched my beautiful, strong daughter become so angry and so sad—it was like she was losing your mother all over again. And I determined to fight to get her back, no matter how hard it was, no matter if it was against her will. I made Asha see a therapist and a psychiatrist. I did everything I could—I yelled, I cried, I bribed, I threatened. I made her get the help she needed. I had already lost your mother; I was determined not to lose her.

“And over time, she got better. I think it was because of you.” He smiles at me through tears and takes a breath. “She didn’t have much use for me, though—and I couldn’t blame her. It didn’t matter if she loved me anymore; what I wanted to make sure was that she loved herself.”

“So that’s why she wanted me to break things up between you and Aparna,” I say. “Not to protect you, but to punish you?”

Dad nods. “She was right. I shouldn’t have given Aparna those signals—it’s not fair. I don’t deserve to be with anyone, not after what I did to your mom. And after seeing Asha at Thanksgiving, I remembered that I deserve to be alone. I’ve broken it off with Aparna.

“I’m sorry for laying this burden on you. I didn’t want to. I made Asha promise she wouldn’t tell you, either. But I promised her that if you asked me for the truth, I’d tell you. It’s the least I could do in memory of your mother, who deserved to hear the truth from me first.”

I stand up and start moving toward the staircase.

“Where are you going? Are you all right?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

The truth is, I don’t know if I’ll ever be all right again.

Discovery

Sita went to the forest and stayed in the ashram of the sage Valmiki and his family.

Months later, she gave birth to twin boys—Kusha and Lava. They were beautiful, like their father, Rama. Sita raised her sons to be strong, brave, and forthright, telling them many tales of Rama's goodness and valor. She taught them to hunt using bows and arrows. She taught them to protect the weak and defenseless.

One day, Rama was hunting in the forest when he came across a pair of beautiful identical boys. They were challenging each other in an archery game.

"Hit that red fruit near the top of that tree," one gestured to his brother.

"That's too easy," said the other. And he struck the slender stem holding the fruit to the tree. It fell quickly to the ground, landing with a soft thud.

"Now you hit that golden fruit that hangs a little lower," said the other boy.

His twin closed one eye and looked at the fruit. Rama thought it would be a challenge even for himself—the fruit was that small and far away.

"Also easy," the boy said. And he raised his bow and shot at the tiny fruit, again hitting only the stem so it fell to the ground unharmed.

Rama came out from where he was hiding behind a tree. "What skill you both have. Pray, tell me who you are, lovely and valorous youths."

The first twin smiled and tapped his chest proudly. "I am Kusha."

"And I am Lava," said the other.

"We are valorous and skillful like our father, Rama," Kusha said.

“Who is the revered king of Kosala,” Lava said. “He lives not far from here, in Ayodhya.”

Rama could barely believe it. His own beautiful sons, standing before him, after all these years!

“Tell me, valorous ones, where is your mother? Where is Sita?”

The twins held up their bows and nocked arrows at Rama. “If you think to hurt our mother, think again,” Lava said.

“We guard her! No harm shall come to her!” cried Kusha.

Rama held up both his hands. “I intend her no harm or disrespect. I merely wish to see her and speak with her. We are . . . old friends.”

“Fine, then,” Lava said.

“Come along,” Kusha said.

And Rama followed the boys through the winding paths of the forest.

Chapter 36

During the two weeks of spring break that follow, I barely speak to Dad.

"Do you want to talk more?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"All right then, Siya. Work your way through this. I'll be here when you're ready."

I don't know when that will be.

For months now, I've been yearning to know more about who Mom really was. And now I've learned what happened to her, and it's more than I can bear.

I don't call Asha. She also has spring break coming up, but she's spending it on a trip with friends. I don't want to take that away from her.

So I look up yoga videos on YouTube and do class after class until I'm soaked in sweat and can barely move.

I wander for hours on the chilly streets of Plumbhurst.

I take the train to the Seaport and shoot at the VR target that Raj showed me in the fall. Although it reminds me of him, it feels strangely satisfying to look at a target, hold a bow, take aim, and fire. This much, I can control. If I hold the bow like this, and pull the string back this far, the arrow will fly like that. This much, I know is true.

I give the points I earn to a kid who looks like they could use them and smile at the surprise and happiness on their face.

Then I take the train to New York City. I pass dozens of people, each with their own story. What secrets are they hiding?

I ache with missing Mom. I ache with all the days and years we could have had together. She wasn't perfect. But she was ours. She was mine.

And the worst of it is, I don't know if what happened to her was an accident.

Or if she decided to take her own life.

It's like the mock trial case again, only it's not a matter of finding a way to argue both sides.

This is real. And I'll never know the answer.

My mom will stay frozen to me, forever the way she was when I was nine. Forever full of secrets that I'll never be able to uncover.

When it's dark, I take the subway home again.

Max and Grace come over and binge-watch shows with me. They take me to the movies, and to play Skee-Ball, but my heart isn't in it. Mocha chip ice cream has lost its flavor. They think it's because of my breakup with Raj, and I don't feel the need to tell them any more.

I do my schoolwork and read ahead. I write essays; I solve equations; I conjugate verbs and research complex molecules.

The only thing I can't figure out is the paper about Sita. Why do we revere someone who was the eternal victim, who was needlessly exiled and ostracized, and never stood up for herself? I think, not for the first time, that I chose the wrong topic, one that I will never be able to puzzle out.

Sita is unknowable.

Just like Mom.

I'm lying on my bed staring at a textbook on Friday night when someone knocks on my door.

"I'm busy, Dad," I say.

"Let me in, little mama," Asha says.

I get up and open the door. "What are you doing here?"

"Thought you might like a surprise visitor."

I shrug and sit back down on my bed. "Not like you can fix anything."

Asha comes in and settles herself down on my floor. "I can listen."

"He betrayed her. Betrayed us. And then she died."

"I know."

"How can we ever trust him again? And why didn't you tell me?"

"How was I supposed to tell you? What would that have helped?"

"At least I would have known the truth!"

“Oh, little mama, I know.” She gets up and sits next to me, puts her arms around me. “This whole thing destroyed me last year. I felt like my whole world fell apart and I didn’t want to be in it anymore. But you were even younger than me. How would you have dealt with it? What could you have done?”

“I don’t know.” I swallow the burning in my throat. “I miss Mom so much.”

“Me, too. But we have each other. And Dad. He loves us a lot, you know.”

“I know. But it hurts.”

“Right now, it hurts. But it won’t be forever, I know that. That’s why I’m here. You helped me when I was lost. And now I’m here to help you.”

She hugs me tighter.

“Tell me something about Mom,” I say. “Something you haven’t said before. Something that isn’t happy or sweet.”

“Let’s see . . . she said she thought the sound of gum snapping was the most annoying thing ever. She drank too much coffee. And she was terrible at mini golf.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“You don’t remember playing mini golf with her?”

“Well, no . . .”

“Your Honor, the plaintiff rests its case.”

A giggle bursts from me against my will. I cover my mouth.

“It’s okay, you can laugh.”

I shake my head.

“It’s okay to hold sadness and happiness at the same time,” Asha says. “Honestly, Siya, Mom was a wonderful person. That’s why Dad and I talk about all the good stuff about her all the time. Whatever other stuff there was, it was dwarfed by all the good.”

“And yet Dad cheated on her.”

Asha sighs. “Relationships are complicated. Especially marriages. He did wrong, but he was sorry about it.”

“Sorry isn’t enough, though.”

“I know. But sometimes it’s all we have.”

We talk late into the night, and Asha doesn’t leave. We fall asleep next to each other, like we did when we were little, when we clung to each other even in sleep.

Reunion

The boys brought Rama to where Sita worked in a field, harvesting vegetables for their dinner.

"Mother, look who we have brought," Kusha said.

"This man says he is your friend," Lava said. "He seems trustworthy, so we have brought him to you, as he requested."

Sita looked up, and her face shone with joy. "My lord Rama," she said, clasping her hands before her. "I have dreamed of this for so many years."

"As have I, my love." Rama ran to Sita and embraced her. The boys gasped.

Sita called to her sons with tears streaming down her face. "Come, my sons, and greet your father, Rama. I have been waiting for the day he would come and meet you."

"Father!" cried Kusha and Lava together. And the boys ran to their parents and touched their feet.

Rama asked his sons to stand and put an arm around each. He turned to Sita in wonder. "You have raised such valorous sons, all on your own."

"They are reflections of their father," Sita said.

"The wish of my heart has been granted today," Rama said. "Come, let us all go home to Ayodhya and live together as a family. Boys, you shall be renowned as princes! Come and claim your birthright!"

The boys were delighted, but looked at their mother, awaiting her answer.

"What say you, Sita? Will you return with me to Ayodhya and become the queen of Kosala once more?"

Sita looked upon her sons, finally united with their beloved father.

“I am willing to return,” she said. “But first, you must answer one question.”

Chapter 37

Asha goes on her spring break trip, making me promise to call her whenever I need to.

On Monday, I return to school knowing that the finals of the New Jersey State Mock Trial Tournament will take place the next weekend. And I won't be there.

Max tells me at lunch that Tessa and Raj have called for practices every day after school as well as our normal time during Club Block.

"Lorenzo's going to take your spot. There's no way he'll be halfway as good as you. Can't you tell me what happened that made you quit? What did Raj do?"

"I got a bad taste in my mouth about that last trial. And I realized that Raj and I disagree about something fundamental." I don't want to poison the rest of the team against Raj. Let them draw their own conclusions.

"We stopped nagging you during spring break like you asked. But you promised you'd tell us what happened," Grace says.

"I don't want to talk about it. I want the team to do well. But I'm not going to be part of it."

"People posted about your breakup for a few days, but that's all blown over," Grace says.

"Well, that's good to hear." I laugh.

"What's going on, Siya?" Grace asks.

I sigh. "It's been a tough spring break. But I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay," Max says. "Say, could you give me Asha's number? We might be going to Chicago in June, and I'd love to hear her perspective on Northwestern."

“Sure.” I pull out my phone and share her contact information.

The bell rings. Grace and I head to English, where I half-listen to the class discussion as I think about my paper. I still have no idea what my thesis is supposed to be.

“I’ve got a free period, so I’m headed to the art studio,” Grace says. “Want to come?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ve got an idea.”

We pass by the Fishbowl, and I don’t give it a single glance.

The week flies by. I can’t help running into Raj in the hallways, and I try to keep my face neutral. But my chest hurts every time I see him, and the intense looks he gives me take my breath away. I miss him so much. But I know I can’t be part of the team, and I can’t be with him if he doesn’t understand why.

I print out words and images of Sita from articles and illustrated versions of the *Ramayana*. I think that looking at her story from a different perspective might help me figure out the conclusion of my paper. We get permission from the art teacher, and Grace and I spend every afternoon after school in the studio.

On Friday afternoon, I’m passing by the poli-sci room when Ms. Tillett calls to me. “Siya, please come in.”

I go in. “Hi, Ms. Tillett,” I say.

She glances at the clock. “Do you have a class you need to get to?”

I shake my head. “Free period.”

“Great. Me, too. Please take a seat.”

I slide into a chair and wait for her to speak.

“Have you thought about coming with us tonight?”

I’ve heard what’s happening—Chris’s parents are hosting the whole team at their house so they can prepare and go to the state finals together as a team tomorrow.

I shake my head. “I quit the team. I shouldn’t be taking up space.”

“I’m not sure I understand what happened. I know it would be hard to be on the team now that you and Raj aren’t dating anymore. But you must know you’re still welcome.”

“That’s not it,” I say. I sigh. “I don’t think we deserve to be in the finals. The Parker team beat us in the semifinals. They deserve to be there, not us.”

“I see.” Ms. Tillett clasps her hands in front of her. “I can’t say I disagree with you, Siya. But as you know, sometimes the right team doesn’t win—in the courtroom, or in life. I understand your wanting to quit the team on principle. But you can still be with us and enjoy the fruits of all your hard work. You still have a place on this team, even if it’s not as an attorney in the courtroom.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think I could—” My voice catches. “I don’t think I could bear being in the courtroom. This was something I’d looked forward to all year. I just didn’t want it to be like this. I wish the team all the best, honestly. I just can’t be there. I hope you understand.”

Ms. Tillett looks at me thoughtfully. “I do,” she says softly. “And I hope you’ll consider coming back next year. It’s been a pleasure having you on the team.”

I stand. “Thanks, Ms. Tillett. I’ll think about it.”

But if Raj is on the team next year, could I stand it?

I pass the school van in the parking lot as I make my way home. Spring has finally arrived, and the air is mild and sweet, but it does nothing to untangle the knot in my stomach.

I wish our team had performed better in the semifinals. I wish Judge Martin hadn’t ruled the way he had. And a small but real part of me wishes I hadn’t seen him give that look to Raj.

I go home and go right upstairs. No more afternoon tea with Dad.

I sit at my desk, ready to work on my paper some more.

But then I see the note.

Ms. Kumar, I’d like to talk.

What do I have to lose?

Chapter 38

I call the number and don't bother to block mine. This person already knows where I live.

"Hello," a woman answers.

"Hi," I say. "This is Siya Kumar. Someone left me a note and asked me to call this number?"

"Oh," says the woman. "Thank you for calling me. I'd like to meet you in person. I have something important to tell you."

"Why can't you just tell me over the phone?"

"It has to be in person," says the woman.

"I'm sorry, I don't even know your name," I say. "I'm not letting you come to my house."

"It's Maria," says the woman. "And we can meet somewhere public. During the day, of course. Please meet me in person. I knew your mother."

I swallow. "Where do you want to meet?"

After I hang up, I find Dad in his office.

"I'm going out tomorrow morning."

Dad looks up from his computer. "Sure. Going to the city?"

"Kind of. I'll be gone the whole morning." These are the most words I've said to him in weeks.

"Siya—"

I close the door again.

I go back to my room and unpack my backpack. I've muted my phone, but I can't help glancing at it from time to time.

MAX: Wish you were here.

ME: Don’t think about me. Have fun tomorrow!

And kick ass!

RAJ: Miss you.

I don’t answer him. But I think: *Miss you, too*.

Early the next morning, I walk to the Plumbhurst train station and take the train to Jersey City.

I get to the ferry station and board at 8:00 a.m., the time that the mock trial final is supposed to start. I take a breath and step onto the boat.

Twenty minutes later, I arrive at Ellis Island.

I’m early, so I visit the exhibits in the museum and learn about the immigrants who came through in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although my grandparents didn’t come through this place (they came by plane, not boat), they started, as so many immigrants do, in New York City.

Then I board the ferry to Liberty Island. I’ve booked tickets for both the pedestal and the crown.

The bronze plaque within the pedestal reads, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” I think about the fact that someone like me—whose ancestors came from a different country—now represents my state in the US Senate.

Then I go to the observation deck and look out over the harbor.

Over two hours gone already. I wonder how the trial is going.

And now to climb 162 stairs to the crown, I tell myself.

With all the yoga I’ve been doing, it shouldn’t be that hard, right? I enter the spiral staircase, and it’s only slightly claustrophobic. But halfway through, I wish I’d counted the stairs, because it feels like much more than 162. But I keep going.

Sweaty and out of breath, I finally reach the top. Sunlight streams through the windows in the statue’s crown. I can see the arm and the tablet that Lady Liberty carries with July 4, 1776, inscribed upon it. I can see the arm that holds the torch. I can see Manhattan and the harbor and the ferries moving back and forth. I can see New Jersey, where my friends are arguing at the Supreme Court.

I think of all the people who’ve passed through this place. All the desperation, all the hopes and dreams they carried.

I reflect on why Mom was so enchanted with the law. She fell in love with the idea that the same rules apply to everyone—rich or poor, ignorant or educated. She understood how important the law is to preserving freedom. She worked her whole life to try to find justice in an imperfect system.

I think about my friends doing the same in New Jersey, and I smile.

I glance at my phone. It's time to go back down to the observation deck.

When I get there, a woman approaches me. "Siya?" she asks.

I turn to find a woman not much taller than me with reddish-brown hair. She's wearing a pink trench coat and sunglasses, which she takes off, revealing warm brown eyes. She smiles and extends her hand.

"Maria."

"Nice to meet you, Ms. . . ."

"Just Maria. It's simpler that way," she says. She speaks with a slight accent.

"So, what did you want to say to me?" I ask. "You said you knew my mother?"

She glances around as if to make sure no one overhears us. Who is this woman?

"Your mother represented me in family court eight years ago," Maria says. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "When I was trying to get away from my abusive boyfriend. I needed a protection order. And I wanted to make sure he got nowhere near our daughter ever again."

"Oh, wow, I'm sorry," I say.

Maria grimaces. "Your mother was so helpful. Prior to being in court, she told me about every step of the process. I was an immigrant. I wasn't sure how things worked here. I wasn't sure what rights I had. But she explained everything clearly, and she helped me have the courage to do what I needed to protect myself and my child. I knew I could trust her, because she was a mother, too. She had two girls, she said. You and your sister."

I nod.

"She got the restraining order for me and helped me find a place to live so my ex-boyfriend couldn't find us. She said she'd even help me change my name so that if he looked for me later, he wouldn't be able to find me. She was incredible. She saved my life, and my daughter's life. And I never paid her a thing."

“I . . . that’s wonderful,” I say. Wonderful is too small a word for what this is, but it’s the best that I can come up with.

“But at our next appearance in court, she told me she could no longer represent me. She told me that my ex-boyfriend was someone whose business was represented by other attorneys at her firm, and it was a conflict of interest.” Maria furrows her brow. “I was devastated, but I didn’t want her to get into trouble because of me.”

I wait for her to go on.

“But then she introduced me to another woman, another attorney. She said she was a good friend of hers, and she’d take care of me and my daughter.” Maria swallows. “She told me not to be afraid, that I was in good hands, and that I was so strong for leaving my relationship.”

Maria reaches into her pocket and pulls out a piece of paper. “She gave me this, and she told me to keep it with me always to remind myself of who I am and what I’d overcome.”

She holds the paper out to me. “I want you to have it.”

“Oh, I couldn’t—”

“Please,” she says. “I’ve held on to it for all these years, but I don’t need it anymore. I got away from that man, and I have a good job. A good relationship. I’m a citizen now, and I know what my rights are. My daughter is thriving.

“When I read in the paper that your mother had died in an accident, I felt so awful. She was such an incredible attorney and just . . . just an incredible *person*, you know?”

I blink through my tears. “I know.”

“I saw your photo in the paper with the senator from New Jersey. I didn’t know your name, but I would have recognized your face anywhere. You look—”

“Just like her. That’s what my dad tells me.” I smile.

“I just wanted you to know how wonderful she was, from someone who isn’t related to you. From someone she helped with no benefit to herself.” Maria places the paper in my hand and sandwiches my hand between hers.

“This is for you. I know she’d want you to have it.”

“Thank you, Maria. This means more than you know.”

“You’re welcome. God bless you, Siya. I know your mother is proud of you.”

She turns and disappears into the crowd.

I unfold the piece of paper. There, in my mother's handwriting, is a single sentence:

You know who you are.

My vision blurs as I make my way to the harbor, and I can't tell whether it's from pain or joy. I feel Mom's presence next to me as I take the ferry back to Jersey City, then the train back to Plumbhurst.

I glance at the time. For better or worse, the mock trial state finals are over.

And finally, I think I know what the bar investigation was about. And I know that Mom didn't do anything wrong.

I take off my sweater and let the sun warm me as I approach my home. A breeze brings the scent of earth.

I let myself into the house and see Dad through the living room window. He's in the garden on his knees, with dirt on his face and a spade in his hand, planting seedlings in neat rows.

My feet take me outside, where I grab an extra pair of gloves and another spade.

Without a word, I kneel next to Dad and start digging.

He's already planted the eggplant and zucchini, so I get to work on the tomatoes. The plants have done well in the dining room, their stalks dark green and fuzzy. Their pungent scent fills the air as I carefully tip them out of their plastic pots and into the holes I've dug.

We work side by side in silence.

He plants the bell peppers, and I plant the chilis.

I pat the watermelon plants into their beds and think of how Mom would talk to them.

Grow well, grow strong, bear sweet fruit, she'd say.

When we're done, I look around at the neat rows of plants, all stretching toward the sun. The garden has transformed from a barren wasteland to soft soil teeming with life. With potential.

The earth has its cycles. It grows and bears fruit. It knows when it's time to let go and die back. As it turns, it renews itself. It doesn't make us suffer through winter forever.

There is always another season, another chance. After the pain of winter, spring feels like forgiveness.

I crumble the dirt of our garden with my fingers. I watch Dad putting away our tools in the shed. Year after year, he's helped this garden grow.

He's helped Asha and me grow, too. He hasn't been perfect. But who is?

"Grow well, grow strong, bear sweet fruit," I whisper. Then I turn to Dad. "It's my turn to make tea," I say.

How long does someone have to suffer before they can be forgiven? I don't know the answer exactly.

But I know it shouldn't be forever.

We don't say much as we sip our tea. But for the first time in weeks, the silence doesn't feel resentful.

I go up to my room and finally look at my phone.

It blows up with messages.

GRACE: OMG Siya, you won't believe what happened!

RAJ: Can you talk? Where are you?

MAX: We're coming over.

The doorbell rings.

The Question

“Ask me anything, my love,” Rama said.

“I have proven over and over that I speak only the truth. If I return with you to Ayodhya, will you promise never to doubt my word again?”

Rama hesitated.

And in that moment, Sita saw that there were no words, no actions, that would eradicate Rama and his subjects’ doubts forever.

And Sita made a decision.

Chapter 39

"Finally," Max says.

"No one knew where you were," Grace says.

"What happened?" I ask.

Max and Grace both start talking at once, and I can't make out what either one is saying.

"Come in and sit down," I say.

We sit in the living room.

"Well, did we win?" I ask.

Max and Grace exchange a look.

"Well, that depends on what you mean by 'we,'" Max says.

"And what you mean by 'win,'" Grace continues.

"Oh, come on, stop being so cryptic and tell me what happened!"

"So, I got in touch with Asha, and she gave me the lowdown on why you quit the team," Max says.

"Are you serious? You said you wanted her number because you were visiting Northwestern."

"I am. This was . . . um . . . a secondary aspect to the conversation." Max grins.

"Seriously, Siya. You should have told us," Grace says.

"I didn't have any proof. And I didn't want to cause trouble for the team. I just had to act according to my conscience."

"Well, many other team members have consciences, too. Like me, for example," Max says.

"And Adele, Chris, Raven, and Noah. Even Tessa," Grace says.

"What do you mean?" I ask, confused.

“When I told everyone what had actually happened, all those people quit, too. We wanted to tell Ms. Tillett that we should forfeit,” Max explains. “But then Lorenzo spoke up. He said he didn’t care how we got to the finals, that we should still field a team and try.”

“What did Raj say?”

Max flashes me a look of annoyance. “He didn’t say anything for a while. He just looked back and forth at everyone who was talking.”

“And then?”

“And then Lorenzo basically begged him to keep going. *I finally have my chance*, he said to Raj.”

“So basically, Raj and Lorenzo enlisted a bunch of researchers as last-minute replacements and went ahead and argued the case.”

“Oh, wow,” I say.

“It went about as well as expected,” Max says.

“Edgewood destroyed them,” Grace says. “It was hard to watch.”

“You were there, too?” I say.

“Wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“They tried their best, but you could tell Raj’s heart wasn’t in it,” Max says. “He looked kind of lost up there.”

“Serves him right,” Grace says. “That semifinal win was totally shady, and he let it slide.”

“After the trial was over and we were back in the van, Raj had a long talk with Ms. Tillett and Ms. Briggs,” Max says. “He came clean in the end that you thought Judge Martin gave us the semifinal win because of his mom, and when he thought about it, he realized you were right.”

“Wow. So now what happens?”

Max shrugs. “Although they both believed him, it’s hard to lodge a complaint without any concrete evidence. Even though we know what you saw was real.”

“So that’s it? There’s nothing else to be done?”

“We lost the final,” Grace says gently. “At least we didn’t win the whole thing by cheating.”

I sigh. “Guess I’ll have to settle for that.”

We’re eating pizza and watching *Swords and Sorcery* when the doorbell rings. Dad answers it, and a few minutes later, Raj enters the room.

“Hi,” he says. He’s shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “Siya, can we talk?”

“That’s our cue,” Grace says, standing and yanking on Max.

“But we’ve only got ten minutes left in this episode,” Max says.

“Read the room, dude,” Grace whisper-shouts. “Good night, Siya. Thanks for everything. Good night, Raj.”

“Good night,” Raj says.

Grace shoves Max out of the room.

Raj waits until we hear the front door close. “I assume they told you what happened?”

I nod. “That had to be hard for you.”

Raj runs his hands over his face. “I’d been dreaming of getting to the state finals since last year. But it turned into a nightmare.”

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Raj shakes his head. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I should have listened to you. I should have believed you.”

“Ha! You were the one Judge Martin looked at! You should have seen it for yourself.”

“Right. Well, my mom and dad were both in the courtroom today. They saw what happened.”

“Oh. Really?” I wince.

“And in the car on the way home, I told them everything. What happened in the semifinal. What you said, and why you quit the team. Why we broke up.” He heaves a breath.

I raise my eyebrows. “You did?”

He nods. “And Mom—Dad, too, but especially Mom—she asked me what I planned to do.”

“And what do you plan to do?”

“I wrote Judge Martin a letter telling him what I thought happened in his courtroom. I said that Parker clearly bested us and deserved to win, and if he thought he was pleasing me, or my mom, by choosing us over them, he was gravely mistaken. I told him about how you saw through everything, and the stand you took even though it was really hard to do it.”

“You wrote all that?” I ask.

Raj nods. “It was a pretty good letter.”

I laugh and shake my head.

He swallows. “Siya. You were right, and I was wrong. I should have had the courage to see that at the semifinal instead of allowing the wrong team

to advance to the finals. Even if I couldn't see it, I should have listened to you."

"Thanks," I say.

"So that brings me to why I'm here now," Raj says. "I'm here to beg." He gets down on his knees.

"Please don't," I say. "Stand up. Or at least sit."

"Fine." He sits down next to me and grasps my hands. "I'm so sorry, Siya. About everything. I'm here to ask for your forgiveness. I should have listened to you and really thought about it when you told me what you saw. I should have talked to our advisors. I should have talked to Judge Martin. I shouldn't have let the Parker team lose. It was inexcusable.

"I've messed everything up. But I can't mess up what we have. You make me a better person, Siya. I need you. I love you. Will you please, please come back to me?"

"Raj—"

"I'll do whatever it takes. I'll never set foot in a courtroom ever again, if you want. Please."

I look into his deep brown eyes and see the boy who had to win, even if it was based on a lie. The boy who said, *Don't be ridiculous. Our team did the better job*. And I also see the golden boy who brought out the best in others. The boy who said *I love you*.

Was he lying then, or is he lying now?

Decision

“My lord, I have been doubted for too long. I have suffered too much,” Sita said.

She looked at her boys. “Take our sons and return to rule our kingdom. I wish you nothing but joy. But I will not return with you to Ayodhya. I will return to my mother, the earth.”

Sita put her hands together and prayed.

The furrow of earth upon which she stood opened to swallow her.

Rama, Kusha, and Lava cried aloud.

“Do not despair, my loves. I will see you all again in the next life.”

And with that, Sita turned toward the embrace of Mother Earth and disappeared forever.

Chapter 40

I finish writing my English paper the night before it's due. It's been a struggle, but I've finally understood the true meaning of Sita's story—at least the meaning for me.

I look at the canvas on my wall. Portraits of Sita in all the aspects of her life: daughter, bride, mother, victim, victor. All overlaid with a faint image of her face. I didn't put it in the art, but I imagine I could have overlaid Mom's image there, too.

After writing my own version of the events of Sita's life, I conclude my paper:

> My name is a version of Sita's name. But I have always struggled with Sita's story.
>
> She is revered as a model of what a woman, wife, and mother should be: loyal, strong, honest. But she suffered so much—because not everyone believed the truth when she told it. Not even Rama, her divine husband, the one who loved her the most, the "perfect man."
>
> Why was Sita punished over and over for things that were not her fault? Why did she choose exile when she had done nothing wrong? Why did she leave her children and husband rather than return to the kingdom where she belonged? What is the point of telling the truth if it brings you no reward?
>
> But as I did the research for this paper, I realized what Sita's story is really about.
>
> Sita was divine—she is believed to be an incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi, just as Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu. Her divinity is reflected in the fact that she wielded Shiva's bow as just a child. That was why her father set that challenge at her swayamvara: Sita needed to marry her equal.
>
> Sita made her own choices. She chose to follow Rama into exile when she didn't need to. She chose to step outside the circle of protection and feed the beggar. She refused Ravana's advances and displayed enough strength and virtue that he sought to marry her, not ravish her. She chose to tell Rama to defeat Ravana in battle, rather than escape into the night, to prove that right would defeat wrong, and good would triumph over evil.

She chose to walk through fire to prove she was telling the truth.

Sita bore her children alone, and raised them alone, all while still telling them of their father's goodness and valor. She understood Rama's predicament and did not blame him for it. She forgave him, even though he contributed to her suffering.

And at the end, when Rama couldn't guarantee that doubts would not arise again, that he wouldn't question her virtue again, Sita chose to leave. She chose to deprive herself of the love of her sons, her husband, and her subjects. But in doing so, she also chose to forgo a life of always being doubted, of always needing to prove herself.

Sita knew who she was: woman, mother, wife, queen, goddess. Sita had power, and she chose how to exert it. That is why she is revered. Sita holds the power of the truth, which shines and burns and heals. Sita shows us that the truth matters to the one who speaks it, regardless of what others may think.

Ultimately, Sita is not a victim, but the hero of her own story, a woman who owns her own power, a goddess who ends her story on her own terms. She exemplifies the balance between selflessness and righteousness, self-sacrifice and strength.

Today, when the truth can seem ambiguous, when people question whether the truth even exists, when people are told to ignore what their own eyes and hearts tell them, Sita's story means even more.

Sita proclaims the truth, and that is powerful, all by itself.

That evening, I call Asha. "I've had a chance to think about things," I say.

"And?" Asha asks.

"You know, the thing I keep thinking about is what Mom did that night—the last night of her life."

"Yeah?"

I swallow. "Dad didn't force Mom to come home. He admitted what he'd done, and she decided to come home."

"So?"

"So, Asha, she could have done anything. She could have spent the night at the office. She could have told Dad to move out. But she didn't. She was coming home to talk to Dad in person. And maybe even work things out."

"Maybe, maybe not," Asha says.

I tell her all about Maria, and what she told me. *You know who you are.*

I take a breath. "We'll never know for sure what Mom would have done. Just like there's no resolution to the mock trial case I've been thinking about all year. It's just a bunch of facts that you can look at from all different angles. But *we knew Mom*. And I believe she was coming back to try to find a way forward with Dad, despite what he had done. Because she loved us. And she loved him. I believe she had room in her heart for forgiveness. For Dad, but also for herself. Maybe it's time we find our way to forgiveness, too."

“Siya—”

“You forgave Grant and Alice,” I remind her. “I didn’t think you should have, but you did anyway. And you’re happier for it. Not just them. *You.*”

Asha raises an eyebrow.

“Dad’s been here for us. He took care of us even when we didn’t want to take care of ourselves. He loves us. That has to count for something. And Asha, he’s the only parent we have left. Shouldn’t we treasure him at least as much as the one we lost? And shouldn’t we allow him to try to find love again?”

Asha’s silent for a moment. She looks offscreen.

Then: “How’d you get so wise, little mama?”

I smile. “I don’t know everything, but in case you haven’t noticed, I have a pretty smart family.”

Chapter 41

Bright Academy is small enough that the whole high school is invited to the prom.

I pose patiently as Asha and Dad take pictures. Each time I think they're done, they find new locations they want to capture: on the staircase, in front of the house, out on the sidewalk.

"My ride's going to be here any minute," I say, glancing at my phone.

"Just a few more," Dad says. "Out in the garden."

I can't stop my smile from bursting forth. "Can't complain about that."

We take photos with the peonies that flounce, pink and white; in front of the Japanese maple, green leaves edged in crimson; sitting on the bench Mom loved. And I know she's with me.

Max pulls up in his old car, which he's washed for the occasion. He looks dashing in his tux. His blue bow tie matches my dress.

Grace climbs out of the passenger's seat looking gorgeous in purple chiffon. She gives me a hug. "We are going to have so much fun," she says.

"Whether or not you want to," Max adds, and I laugh.

"Let's go," I say.

"Just a few more photos," Dad says. "Of the three best friends."

"Always," I say, and stand between them.

We put our arms around each other and smile.

"I still can't believe they rented the courthouse rotunda," I say when we arrive.

“Well, it’s a lot prettier than usual,” Max says.

“And it helps raise money for the town,” Grace says brightly. “And really, all this marble shouldn’t go to waste.”

Light shines through the windows of the dome and illuminates a space filled with balloons and streamers, tables and flowers. This space is for conversation and snacks; there’s a tent outside for dancing.

Tessa’s wearing a pale pink off-the-shoulder dress. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure,” I say, and follow her to a secluded corner.

“There’s no easy way to say this,” she says, her cheeks flushing. “I’m the one who took the photos and sent them to those people online.”

“*You*? Why?”

She wrings her hands. “At first, I was just . . . jealous, I guess. I’m a senior, and Raj’s friend, and his ‘work wife’ or whatever, and then you came along and all anyone could do was talk about you. I was barely co-captain anymore.” She laughs ruefully. “Even the paper thought you were in charge.”

“But you could have gotten Raven and me out of that storeroom,” I say. “Why did you wait? It was freezing in there.”

“You have to believe me when I say I didn’t realize you were stuck in there. I thought you were . . . well, you know. Especially when you took off your shirt.”

I shake my head. “That was a terrible thing to do to anyone.”

“I know. But I just . . . I don’t know, I’d just gotten in early to Penn, so once I realized that you hadn’t been hooking up with Raven, but I’d already sent those photos, I just . . . I just chickened out, I guess. I didn’t want to ruin anything for myself. But I am sorry.”

I glare at her. “So why are you telling me now? You could have kept it a secret forever. I never would have known.”

“Once I found out why you quit the team and broke up with Raj, I knew I had to confess. You’re kick-ass, Siya. You deserved to hear the truth from me.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

I go back to Max and Grace.

“What was that all about?” Max asks.

“You won’t even believe it,” I say. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Come on, no time to waste!” Grace cries, pulling Max and me along to the tent.

We dance in a triangle, impervious to embarrassment. No matter what happens, together the three of us are unbreakable. I look at my two best friends, and my heart could burst.

At one point, Raven pulls me aside. He’s wearing a tuxedo shirt and black tie with skateboarding shorts.

“Nice look,” I say.

“You’re looking pretty amazing yourself.”

I bat my eyes and laugh.

“So did you decide what you’re doing next year?” I ask.

“Gap year,” he says. “Going to California to see what might happen.”

“Cool,” I say, meaning it.

“I deferred my acceptance to Bennington,” he adds. “Just in case I feel like going to college after all.”

I tilt my head. “Always smart to keep your options open.”

Someone comes to stand next to me. Raven narrows his eyes.

“Want to dance?” Raj asks.

Once again, I’m dazzled by how good he looks in a tux. My eyes sweep his handsome face, the smile playing on his mouth, the softness of his eyes.

He looks . . . uncertain.

“I’d love to,” I say. “See you later, Raven. And congratulations.”

Raven nods and strolls out of the tent.

We walk to the dance floor, and Raj puts his arms around my waist. I look up at him.

“Beautiful night,” I say.

“Beautiful,” he agrees, eyes locked on mine.

“Any plans for the summer?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Mom has a ton of campaign events. We’re supposed to take a vacation on the shore at some point. How about you?”

“Oh, this and that,” I say. “I got a job interning at a law firm.”

“Really? That’s awesome.”

I nod. “With Elizabeth Cordray, of all people. After she wrote that letter coming clean to the whole mock trial committee and apologizing for using my mom’s story for the case, she reached out to me and asked if I wanted to work for her this summer.”

“So, you forgave her,” Raj says.

I nod. The music swells around us, and he pulls me closer. I lean my head against his chest. His heartbeat matches my own.

"Am I forgiven, too?" he whispers in my ear.

I look up at him again. "I already forgave you, Raj."

"But can we be together? I miss you, Siya. I don't want to be with anyone else."

I look up farther to the lights above us, decorating the tent. His arms are warm around me. I think of what it means to be his girlfriend. Loved and beloved. Someone whose life will always be public.

"You know I love you," I say.

A spark leaps in his eyes.

"But I don't know if it's a good idea for us to be together. I'll always be a fan. And your friend. It's just—this year was a lot."

"I don't need another friend. Or another fan," he says, frowning. He sighs. "But I respect your decision." He looks down at me again. "Just tell me there's hope."

I rise on my tiptoes and kiss him on the cheek. "There's always hope."

Max and Grace come up to us. "Need a rescue?" Max asks under his breath.

I shake my head.

"Ugh. My feet are killing me," says Grace.

"Come on." I tilt my head.

Grace and I move to the edge of the dance floor and kick off our shoes onto the lawn. To my surprise, Max and Raj do the same.

A lilac-scented breeze whispers around us. The grass tickles as I set my bare feet upon the earth and dance.

And I know who I am.

Acknowledgments

I once told my grandmother that I loved her name and thought I might name my daughter after her one day.

She said to me, “Don’t name her Sita. There’s too much hardship that goes with that name.” As I reflected, I realized my grandmother was right. Although she was the beloved matriarch of a close-knit family, she had dealt with much adversity in her life.

My grandmother was named Sita after the faithful wife of Rama in the *Ramayana*, the hallowed epic of Hinduism. Sita was forced to endure exile, kidnapping, and rejection. She told the truth but was disbelieved by everyone, including the husband she loved. I wondered why Sita was revered as a paragon of wifely virtue when her life was so sad. I wondered why anyone would name their daughter after her.

I wrote *Such Great Heights* to explore the nature of the truth and truth telling, which I feel is particularly relevant in our current times. I tried to imagine what Sita and Rama’s story might look like now, and I used my own high school experience on the mock trial team, where there is no “truth,” and teams must argue both sides of a case.

Lyn Tillett was my government teacher and high school mock trial advisor. She taught her students about our Constitution and our democracy. Most important, she taught us to consider the sources of information, what biases these sources might hold, and how we should evaluate what they have to say. While this process was important in the 1980s, I can’t think of anything more vital for young people to learn right now. How do we get to the truth in a world that bombards us with all kinds of information, some of

it false? Who benefits by getting us to believe them? Thank you, Lyn, for sparking my interest in politics and justice. Being in your class and on the mock trial team inspired me to study government in college and, all these years later, to write this book.

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About the Author

RAJANI LaROCCA was born in India, raised in Kentucky, and now lives in Massachusetts, where she practices medicine and writes award-winning books for young readers, including the novel in verse *Red, White, and Whole*, a Newbery Honor Book. She's always been an omnivorous reader, and now she is an omnivorous writer of novels and picture books, fiction and nonfiction, in prose and poetry. A graduate of Harvard College and Harvard Medical School, she lives outside Boston with her family. Visit her at rajanilarocca.com.

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