

REFLECTIONS

Briana Morgan

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For Kate, who survived.

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1



THROUGH THE WOODS

The hot dressing room made Ramachandra “Rama” Ganeshan sweat, but not because of the temperature.

She and her best friend Myra Hare had been at the mall for hours. Myra had a dozen outfits stuffed into bags on her arm, but Rama hadn’t found a single thing she liked.

She never found anything she liked anymore.

The department-store dressing room pushed on Rama from all sides. Why was it so small? Either the airconditioning had broken, or she’d lost her coping skills. Sweat slicked her face, ran down her neck, and kissed the contour of her spine. She scowled at herself.

Standing in front of the dressing-room mirror, Rama hated her reflection. The too-tight, too-low, too-short dress dug into her thighs.

Disgusting.

As she studied her reflection, her stomach clenched. If only the ground would swallow her before Myra asked what was wrong.

There were too many questions. Rama didn’t have the answers.

Myra rapped against the door. “Can I come in?”

“Hang on a second.” Rama smoothed the dress over her stomach. Every bulge resisted the fabric. She’d never

ask Myra for the next size up. “I’m changing back into my clothes. Not getting this one either.”

“Rama,” Myra said, “That’s like, the eighteenth outfit.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m sorry. Give me a minute to change back.”

Myra sighed.

Guilt gnawed at Rama. Myra had proposed the shopping trip. They didn’t see much of each other. Myra did cheerleading, and Rama had three AP courses. She seldom left the house. Helping her parents with the restaurant kept her busy most nights. Social life? Forget it.

To make matters worse, so many teenage girls had been murdered in the past year that the mayor of Aldale, West Virginia, established a curfew for minors. No other mayor had ever imposed a curfew, but Mayor Paulson said it was necessary.

Aldale had three stoplights. An hour away Morgantown boasted shops and restaurants and West Virginia University, where Rama hoped to attend medical school someday. Two years ago, at fourteen, she’d joined other gifted students auditing lectures and shadowing residents. She’d pressed her face against the glass above an operating theater, breathless as a surgeon held a heart in his hands.

In that moment, she’d decided to become a surgeon too.

Though it wasn’t far from Morgantown, Aldale might as well have been centuries away. Morgantown wasn’t huge, but it had chain restaurants. It had a mall, a real one, and a Walmart.

Aldale didn’t have anything like that. Their mall didn’t count. If Rama or her parents needed anything, they had to go down to the drugstore. John Lewis Finster had opened

Finster's Drug Shoppe in the 1950s. It housed a dusty, decrepit soda fountain with a lunch counter and everything in the center of the store. If anyone had ever eaten there, Rama didn't believe it.

Like everything else in town, it had seen better days.

Everyone went to Finster's to get almost anything—prescriptions, toiletries, gifts, condoms. Once, Rama had seen Jessica Spurlock in the family planning aisle. Jessica hadn't taken anything, and even if she had, who would believe it?

Jessica epitomized the small-town "good girl" ideal. Imagine if someone caught her buying condoms when she was "waiting for marriage."

Somehow, she convinced her parents to let her spend nights with her boyfriend.

She got to stay out all night, even with the curfew. Even though girls like Jessica were murdered without explanation.

The dead girls had been Rama's age, classmates and friends. Girls she saw in town, flitting from store to store, laughing in the park, sitting in her family's restaurant. Smiling, shining faces. Smooth skin and bright eyes and white, even teeth.

They had been girls Rama envied, ones she would have given anything to look like. All her life, she'd assumed the world was easier for pretty people. All her life, she'd been wrong.

Even in Aldale, violence could happen.

Rama knew better than anyone else.

Myra's parents didn't buy it. Danger lurked everywhere. Their children were smart. Sure, they should be careful, but the mayor had gone too far. Nothing like this had ever

happened in Aldale. Myra's parents thumbed their noses at the rules and let their daughter roam. They preferred a lax parenting style, and sent Myra to the mall alone, armed with their credit card. They never asked questions.

"Let's go to the mall today," Myra had said after class. "You need to get out."

For some reason, Rama went along with the plan. Myra was right.

Myra knew best. That truth underscored their whole friendship. Since childhood, she'd "helped" Rama, telling her what to wear, where to shop, and who to spend time with. Myra had more social clout, so Rama trusted her.

Besides, Myra loved her. She wanted the best for Rama—even if Rama didn't know what that was herself.

In the dressing room then, Rama wasn't convinced. Myra was wrong. The dress scratched her skin, exposed the scar below her collarbone, and clung to her hips.

She was a pig.

Rama's fingers brushed her scar. Myra had seen it. Nobody else. They'd never talked about it. Rama hoped they never would.

Months ago, Myra asked Rama why she'd cut her hair. Rama hadn't said a word. It was past her shoulders now, but still shorter than it had ever been. When she stopped wearing jewelry, Myra said nothing. And when she showed up sans makeup on the first day of school, Myra kept silent.

If she had suspicions, she didn't say so.

Rama's parents weren't so thoughtful.

"Why can't you dress like you used to?" her mother had asked. "Myra dresses well. Let her take you shopping."

“Your mother’s right,” her father said. “You should spend more time with Myra.”

In the present, Rama swallowed the lump in her throat. The walls of the dressing room closed in around her—what if the ceiling caved in? She would be crushed or suffocate in the nation’s smallest mall.

No one would miss her—not even Myra, who’d pressured her to go in the first place.

“You all right?” Myra asked.

“Fine,” Rama lied. “I’m hungry is all.”

“It’s making you cranky.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. Look, can we go?” She tugged the hem of the dress. “I don’t want this.”

Myra sighed again. “You said you needed new clothes. We can’t leave until you find some.”

“I hate everything I try on.” Rama pulled the dress off and tossed it on the chair. A plastic hanger clattered to the ground. Rama stooped to pick it up. Her hair fell in her face. “No point staying here if I don’t want to get a dress.”

“I’ll find you something else then. Let me try, okay?”

Rama studied herself in the mirror again. Stretch marks pulled across her hips and thighs, dipping into her ragged waistband. How long had she had those panties? The underwire of her bra poked out on one side. Her hair, disheveled, dull, and tangled, elicited a frown.

If only she could have been anyone else.

Anyone who wasn’t her or anybody like her.

Myra returned with an armful of clothing. She knocked on the door, and Rama paused a minute before opening it. Myra shoved the clothing in. Rama dropped the pile of clothes on the chair. From what she could tell, they all fit

too tight, showed too much skin, drew too much attention. What was Myra thinking?

“Well?” Myra asked.

“Close the door.” Rama would never wear any of it. Myra didn’t understand.

No one did.

“Something’s wrong,” Myra said.

“It’s nothing,” Rama answered.

“I wish you’d tell me what’s bothering you.”

Rama inhaled.

“It’s not about the clothes,” Myra said.

“No, it’s not.” Rama squeezed her eyes shut, willed away tears. In her mind’s eye, he loomed—the man with the mustache. Chicken tikka masala. Fear unfurled like a banner.

“Ramachandra.”

She opened her eyes.

Myra smiled. “If you don’t love your body, there’s no way you can be happy.”

Myra’s legs and curves were the stuff of magazines. She’d never had a pimple.

Rama sniffed and covered her scar. She could never tell Myra what had happened that day.

Myra took the clothes from Rama. “You win, all right? We’ll go.”

“I appreciate your help.”

“It’s nothing,” Myra said. “We’ll get milkshakes on the way. Grab your bike. I’ll drive you.”

That morning, Rama had biked to school. Myra drove them to the mall.

Rama wanted to be alone.

“I’m biking home. I need the fresh air.”

“By yourself?”

“It’s all right.”

“With the murders?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Rama exhaled. “I’m going straight home, no stops on the way. It’s not dark yet. I need to think. Just let me take my bike.”

Myra didn’t press her. “Suit yourself. Let’s go, girl.”

After Myra and Rama separated, Rama rode her bicycle through the forest behind the mall. She’d chosen the long way home—a half-hour trek—but that was good. She needed to think. Once she got home, she wouldn’t have the time or the silence for that.

Her father had asked her to help with dinner service. She and Myra had spent too much time at the mall—she might not get home before sunset.

At one point in her life, the dark had been scary. But the most dangerous monsters hid in plain sight, attacked in broad daylight. The shadows and the light they worked against were equal threats.

Trees shaded the straight, smooth path through the woods. Soon, they’d drop their colored leaves for Rama to crunch beneath her tires. The air was warm for October, but it was still autumn. Winter wasn’t far off.

Rama liked winter. She could cover up her body without looking out of place. When the temperature dropped, everyone covered up.

If winter never ended, she might not be so miserable.

At one time, she’d appreciated her body. It was nice,

as far as bodies went. She could undress and look in the mirror without cringing.

Then he came into the restaurant and took all that away. Now thoughts of summer made her sick. When school let out next May—

Ramachandra. Stop it.

Rama's bicycle jerked. Shocked, she hit the brakes and skidded to a stop. The bicycle wobbled. She struggled to keep her balance.

What had she run over?

There were no roots on the path.

The bicycle swerved. Rama's tire ran over something else. She toppled from the seat, handlebars slipping out of her grasp.

Rama landed hard on her knees. The bicycle smacked against the ground.

She'd run over a rock. She'd have to check her tires.

That's what you get for not paying attention.

Rama scrambled to a seated position. She braced herself against a tree to see what she'd run over—

There was a body on the path.

Rama shook herself.

No. She'd seen it wrong. She scooted forward on her butt, grinding dirt and leaves beneath her shoes. A twig snapped at her heel. Its broken edges scraped her ankle.

She had to get a closer look.

There was a *body* on the path.

The girl was Rama's age. She lay on her side, facing Rama, blue eyes glazed. Unseeing. Dirt coated her long blonde hair and blood poured from her caved-in skull.

Jessica.

Drenched in sweat and shaking, Rama fell on all fours and threw up on the ground, retching until her ribs ached.

Jessica Spurlock.

Her parents lived in town. Rama had ridden her bike past their house.

They'd gone to school together.

She wasn't coming back.

Emboldened by shock, Rama lifted her gaze—and saw the man beside the body.

She'd missed him at first—his clothes camouflaged him. Blood splattered his green flannel shirt, khaki pants, and brown boots. He held a bloodstained rock. Blood marked his face too.

A flash of recognition.

The man from the restaurant. He lived in town.

Her father's friend.

The Smiling Man.

Rama heaved again, but there was nothing in her stomach.

She looked once more. It couldn't be. Her eyes had tricked her.

But what if they hadn't?

When she scooted closer, he looked up from the body.

He locked eyes with her.

He *smiled*.

Rama took off running. She couldn't run before. He'd blocked the door behind him. He was twice her size.

The knife—

Pounding heart. Aching thighs. Screaming shins.

She kept running.

If she stopped, he'd catch her. If he caught her, he'd hurt her.

He'd hurt her once before. She couldn't take her chances. Her mind shut down. The mustache threatened. The sharp tang of chicken tikka masala—

Rama spun around.

No one there. He hadn't followed her.

She stopped to catch her breath.

For the moment, she was safe.

What was he doing in the forest? How had he found her again?

Rama hadn't told anyone about what happened. The less she dwelled on him, the easier it was to pretend it was a nightmare. When she spoke of him, she gave him power.

He was already powerful.

The Smiling Man was her father's friend. Someone from town. No one to be afraid of. Before the attack, she'd believed he was nice. But what he'd done to her, and how he'd spoken, how he'd touched—

No time for that. Stay present, or he's going to track you down.

Rama gulped air and focused. What was there, besides the man?

Jessica Spurlock. Seventeen. Pretty, thin, and popular. Murdered with a rock.

Why had Jessica been in the forest? Why had the man been there too? Above all else, why had the man stood next to the body with a rock, like he'd done it?

And that *smile*.

Rama shuddered so hard she pulled a muscle in her neck. Wincing at the pain, she processed what she'd seen. If the Smiling Man had killed her, what had he done to her first?

She covered her mouth. She wanted to scream. The man would come after her, given she could testify against him. But *could* she testify, if she had to? Every time she imagined admitting what had happened, she came close to passing out. Add stumbling upon a crime scene and she wouldn't make a great witness. Besides, she had no evidence.

Rama took another breath.

Behind her, a branch snapped.

She jumped back against a tree. There was someone on the path, but it wasn't her attacker.

"Jessica?"

Whole and unblemished and alive. No signs of assault.

Rama couldn't breathe. "How did you—?"

"It's okay. You fell off your bike. You hit your head. Remember?" Jessica touched her hair. "I tried to help. You ran away."

She spoke like they were friends, but they seldom talked at school.

"Your head," Jessica repeated.

Rama pressed a hand against her throbbing temple. How long had it done that? She didn't remember hitting it, only falling off the bicycle, seeing Jessica's dead body and the Smiling Man.

Jessica's brow furrowed as she took a step toward Rama.

Rama stepped away but there was nowhere to go. Her back was still against the tree. The bark scratched her elbows. Dizziness swept over her—but was it from a fall, an injury? She touched her temple. No blood. She probed her face. Nothing.

Could she still have hit her head hard enough to hallucinate?

Jessica fiddled with her pendant. In the fading light,

Rama couldn't tell what it was. Dead Jessica hadn't been wearing a necklace.

But the body on the path might not have been real.

"I don't know," Rama said. The air crackled like a storm was coming, and ozone filled her nostrils. The hair rose on the nape of her neck. Jessica unnerved her. If Rama looked at her for too long, Jessica's form flickered—for a second, and no longer.

"You're all right?" Rama asked.

"Of course," Jessica said. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Rama's tongue refused to move.

She'd fallen off her bicycle and hit her head. That induced hallucinations. The Jessica standing in front of her was alive and well and real. She was expressing her concern.

Rama's fingers jumped to her temple again and searched her hairline. Normal.

Maybe she'd just bumped her brain, like a football player. Didn't some of them end up in hospitals? Her parents didn't watch football. Her father preferred soccer, what he called football, like in India. No wonder those players wore helmets.

She should have worn a helmet.

She should have gone with Myra.

"You were dead," Rama said. "You were lying in the road."

Jessica's expression stayed the same. "Come on now. Let's walk you back and get you on your way."

She could ask Jessica to check her head, but Jessica wasn't a doctor, and wasn't that weird? Other questions nagged her, but she wouldn't get the answers.

Jessica led her to her bike. Rama struggled to slow her heartbeat. Jessica's words hadn't reassured her. They'd made

things worse instead. None of it made sense. Her head felt fine. Had she hit it, or did it hurt because Jessica said it should?

Rama stooped beside the bike and ran her hands over the frame. Cold metal. Real.

She checked the ground.

No body.

No Smiling Man.

Praise Brahma.

Jessica raised her eyebrows, tapping her foot.

She looked nothing like dead Jessica.

“You’re all right,” Rama said again.

Without speaking, Jessica squatted down. She peered into Rama’s eyes. Rama looked away.

Jessica sighed. “Whatever you think happened—what you think you saw... I’m okay. Everything is fine.”

“Everything is fine.” In saying it, Rama hoped to convince herself it was true. Still there was something amiss.

What if she’d seen neither Jessica’s body nor the Smiling Man?

But what if she’d seen both?

Maybe her detour through the woods had done more harm than good.

Jessica’s fingers brushed Rama’s cheek and Rama jerked away. What the hell was Jessica thinking? Rama hated physical touch.

Jessica recoiled too, and frowned.

“I have to get home,” Rama said. “It’s getting dark. I promised I’d be back by now.” Why had she added that part? When Jessica didn’t respond right away, Rama’s anxiety made her continue. “I shouldn’t have gone this way. I never go this way coming back from the mall—I cut through town.

But I don't ever see anyone going this way and I thought—”

“Sweetheart, it's okay,” Jessica said.

Sweetheart? That was different.

Rama swallowed. “I'll see you in Spanish tomorrow. Take it easy.”

“Yeah, I will.” Jessica stood and brushed herself off. “Same to you, all right?”

Rama righted the bicycle and climbed aboard. The whole way home, her stomach churned. When she got back to the restaurant, she still couldn't get the woods out of her mind. No matter how many times she went through Jessica's explanation, it didn't satisfy her.

Rama's head didn't hurt. She couldn't have fallen and hit it, let alone hallucinated. What could she have run over, if not Jessica's body? No roots on the path. No obstacles.

She thought of the Smiling Man's teeth, the dread in her stomach. Jessica's hands on the end of her necklace.

Whatever the pendant was, it must have been important. So why had Rama never seen her wearing it before?

2



AFTER THE FOREST

Rama's bike wobbled as she walked it on the curb. Her body trembled too. The half-hour trek had never worn her down like this before. She was more shaken up than she'd figured.

After fumbling with the bicycle lock, she gave up. Aldale was safe; there was no real need to worry about someone stealing it. Sure, girls were being murdered, but no one was stealing bicycles.

When she walked into The Ganeshan Grill, Rama balked. Customers filled up several tables, talking, laughing, and already enjoying their meals. She'd promised to be back in time for the dinner rush, but she'd missed part of it.

Her parents would be pissed.

On weekdays, most of the The Ganeshan Grill's business came from dinner. It was one of the nicer restaurants in town, and as a result, filled up on most evenings.

"Papa and I can handle it," Rama had reassured her mother. But Piya wouldn't budge. She oversaw everything that went on with the restaurant.

"She means well," Dhayal often told his daughter. "She doesn't understand how she comes across sometimes."

Somehow, her control didn't overwhelm the twins. Banu and Unma got more freedom than Rama did, though

she didn't dare say a word about that to her parents. They'd put up with her mood swings and changes without criticism—she wasn't about to rock the boat by complaining.

But Banu and Unma were nowhere to be found. They seldom had to help at the restaurant, given their age. Most of the time, it bothered Rama. That day, she was glad they weren't around. It meant less chaos to deal with, less chance her parents would already be annoyed.

Rama swept past the fish tank at the entrance, the Taj Mahal mural, and the cutout metal flowers on the golden-brown walls. She ducked through the double doors leading into the kitchen. Her mother stood at the sink, already washing dishes. They had a dishwasher, but it was often broken, and Piya liked doing dishes by hand. It was therapeutic.

She looked up when Rama entered. "Dhayal, she's here."

Rama followed her mother's gaze to the freezer. Rama's father emerged with a large hunk of lamb. Dhayal Ganeshan was a tall, powerful man with a well-groomed beard and a smile that lit up any room he entered. The only thing louder than his presence was his laugh, which woke Rama when he joked with her mother every morning.

When he made eye contact with Rama then, his face lacked any mirth. He set the meat down on a stainless-steel countertop and wiped his hands on the front of his apron. "Where have you been, Ramachandra?"

She paused. She couldn't tell him the truth—*I found a body in the woods. One of my classmates. But then she was alive. And the man beside her, one of your friends, he—*

"Ramachandra," Dhayal said.

"I'm sorry," Rama answered. "We lost track of time."

The truth, or part of it. Rama hated lying to them. It made her stomach feel hollow, like it had been scooped out with a melon baller.

Dhayal pressed his lips together. "Is Myra still outside? We need to talk to her."

Rama's heart paused. She'd said Myra dropped her off. She'd said Myra drove her. If they found out how she'd gotten there, she would be in serious trouble.

"She had to run," Rama said. "She had to get home fast."

"So did you," he said. "We had an understanding."

"I'm here now."

"That doesn't matter."

"There's been no one up front for an hour," Piya chimed in.

Rama bristled. "Where's Claire?"

Her parents had hired a petite, blonde young woman as a fill-in waitress. She worked in Rama's absence or when a huge crowd swarmed the restaurant. Claire was new, but she'd been a great deal of help. She should have worked that evening.

"She called in," Piya said. "Her daughter was ill."

Rama frowned. "So you're punishing me because she's not here? It's not my fault her daughter's sick."

"No." Dhayal untied the apron, folded it, and set it on the countertop as he spoke. "We're punishing you because you went back on your word. We agreed you'd be back to help set up for dinner, and you didn't come through with your end of our bargain."

Rama looked to her mother for some show of sympathy and got nothing in return. Piya sometimes disagreed with her husband's methods, but she'd agreed this time. That spelled trouble for Rama.

“I’ll go to my room,” Rama said. “No dinner. It’s fine. That’s what I deserve.” She would be lucky if they listened to her, but that was Dhayal’s usual punishment. It wasn’t too bad. Rama often ended up alone in her room, anyway, and she could afford to miss several meals. In fact, after having scrutinized herself in the mirror that day, she could miss them all.

“No,” Dhayal said.

“No?”

“That’s not enough this time.”

Rama’s attention shifted to her mother again. She couldn’t read her expression. What other punishment were they thinking?

Dhayal went to wipe his hands on the apron again before realizing he’d removed it. “You’ll work until we close tonight, then every day until close for the next three weeks. No visiting Myra, no leaving the house except for school. Is that clear?”

Rama’s heart sank.

“This will teach you to manage your time.”

“Mama,” Rama said.

Piya shook her head. “This isn’t the first time this has happened. We don’t want you going out at all, not even with a friend. It isn’t safe.”

“It’s Aldale,” Rama argued.

“Someone’s killed girls in Aldale—is killing girls in Aldale.” Piya stepped over to Dhayal, who put his arm around her. “We lock our doors now, Rama. You have to understand.”

She did. That was the worst part. She didn’t want to go anywhere, but knowing she couldn’t made everything worse. Without an outlet for her anxious energy, she’d have to

turn it inward. If she couldn't get out of the house, she'd spend more time in front of the mirror, hating each part of her body.

She kept her mouth shut. Arguing would make it worse. "I'm calling Myra's parents," Dhayal said.

Rama pressed her teeth together so hard her jaw creaked. "Why?"

"To let them know about your punishment."

"Ramachandra," Piya said. "Why don't you want us to call them?"

Sweat gathered in her armpits. "I just—Myra said they were going out tonight. They might not be home."

"We can leave a message," Dhayal said.

"What's gotten into you?" Piya reached around Rama to snatch the phone off the cradle, handing it to her husband. He dialed without having to look down at the buttons. They were the only people in town who still used a landline. Her parents were too stubborn and set in their ways for cell phones.

"I'd better get started," Rama offered. "We're busy."

Piya waved her off. For once, Rama was grateful.

That evening as the restaurant closed, Rama went into the kitchen to talk to her parents. She lingered in the doorway for a minute—was she making the right call?—and then Jessica's face flashed in her mind's eye. She had to go through with it. She owed that much to Jessica, if not to herself.

Piya washed dishes at the sink. She paused when Rama entered.

"*Beti*, is something the matter?"

Rama chewed her lip, looking from one end of the

kitchen to the other. Where was her father?

“Are you feeling all right?” Piya asked. “You look pale.”
“Where’s Papa?”

She wanted to tell both her parents at once to contain the emotional fallout. If she couldn’t find her father, she’d have to call the whole thing off. And if she called the whole thing off, there was no way she’d be able to go through with it again.

“He was here. I heard the bell, though. Someone must have come in.” She went back to washing dishes. “Are you sure nothing’s wrong?”

Everything was wrong.

“Who could it be?” Rama asked. “No one ever comes in this close to closing, not even regulars.”

“I don’t know, my darling. You can go out there and look for him.”

Rama sucked in a breath. Her courage wavered. The longer she put off talking, the more she feared she couldn’t tell them—not about Jessica or the Smiling Man.

She wouldn’t risk that.

They needed to know the truth. She needed to tell someone—if for no other reason than to cast the burden off.

She couldn’t go it alone anymore.

Rama pivoted and pushed through the doors to the dining room. All the patrons had left. She still didn’t know who’d come in. Claire, apologizing for missing a shift, or wanting to pick up her paycheck?

But the closer she got to the front of the restaurant, the more confused Rama became.

As far as she saw, the restaurant was empty. Nobody

was even—

“Ramachandra. There you are.”

Her father’s voice startled her, but Rama responded. Dhayal leaned against the fish tank with his sleeves rolled up, plastic net in hand. A wet toy car sat at his feet—he’d pulled it from the tank. Children putt things in there when their parents weren’t looking.

Beside her father, a man stood with his back turned to her, watching the fish swim the length of the tank.

“There’s someone I want you to meet,” Dhayal said.

With trepidation, Rama took a step toward the two men. When she was close enough to touch them, the other man turned to face her. His warm eyes smiled, and the expression also turned his lips, thin beneath a bushy mustache.

The Smiling Man.

“Hello,” he said.

Rama staggered backward like she’d hit an electric fence. Her elbow caught a chair and knocked it to the floor. The room lurched and took her stomach with it. Darkness tinged her vision.

“Rama,” Dhayal said. “What’s gotten into you?”

The man’s smile faded. He said something to Dhayal. Rama couldn’t hear him.

She reached for the table with shaking hands. Her fingers caught the edge and tipped it, bringing the silverware sets to the ground. Her body burned. Nausea roiled in her gut.

“Are you all right?” the man asked.

Rama choked. “I—”

How could he be smiling, acting like he’d never hurt her?

“Rama, Javesh Misra. He lives over—”

“Get away from me.

“Rama,” Dhayal said again. “That’s no way to behave.”

“I have to go,” she said.

Before her father could stop her, Rama sprinted back into the kitchen. Her mother was still at the sink. When Rama rushed in, she let go of the plate she’d been washing and let it slip beneath the suds. She went to her daughter slumped against the refrigerator and held her against her chest.

“Ramachandra, *beti*... lovely girl, what’s going on? What’s happened?”

Rama’s whole body trembled as her mother held her. Cold sweat beaded on her skin. She wanted to tell Piya everything. She didn’t have the strength. Besides, how could she reconcile the Smiling Man’s past behavior with his lack of reaction to her? There should have been at least a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

All she’d seen was kindness—maddening, inexplicable kindness.

Pain knifed her chest and burned her lungs—she gasped for breath and dug her fingers into her mother’s arms.

“Can you hear me, darling?” Piya pushed Rama’s hair away from her face. “Are you in any pain? Should I call for a doctor?”

“N-no,” Rama said.

“Do you want to go upstairs?”

Rama hesitated. The main way to get up to the apartment was the staircase in the dining room. “Let’s take the back stairs.”

Piya helped Rama up and put her arm around her shoulders. Rama relaxed into her mother’s touch, but it didn’t quell her terror. Was there anything that could?

“Okay,” Piya said. “We can go upstairs now.”

The next several minutes passed by in a blur as Rama's mother led her up the back stairs into the apartment. A mental fog blanketed her surroundings and she was dragging. It was like moving through a dream, like wading through deep water. By the time Rama became lucid again, they were standing in her parents' bathroom.

Piya directed Rama to the sink. "Lean over. I'll get a washcloth."

Rama did as asked. Her heart rate had steadied enough for her to hear herself think. Still erratic, but it was getting better. The terror was going away. If she didn't think about what she'd seen in the restaurant—

Her pulse spiked again. She drew in a shuddering breath as her mother came back into the room.

Piya touched her back. "*Beti*, it's all right now. Everything's okay. Mama's taking care of you."

Most of the time, Rama hated when Piya treated her like a child, but her mother's voice soothed her. She leaned into Piya's touch and shut her eyes. A moment later, there was water running in the sink and the wet slap of the washcloth as it landed in the basin.

Coolness spread across the back of her neck as her mother placed the washcloth there. Water dripped down her hair and into her face, but she didn't mind. She kept her eyes shut.

With her eyes closed, she might be elsewhere, living someone else's life. Far away from there and someone different from who she was. And everything was fine.

"Focus on breathing," Piya said. "I'm here with you. Breathe in and out."

Her mother's calm voice brought Rama back to the present. Once again, she complied. Her breathing deepened

and the smoke inside her mind dissolved. She stopped trembling. She didn't feel great, but she did feel less anxious.

"I don't know what happened," her mother said, "and I won't ask. But you know you can tell me anything."

She did. And she could. But in that moment, she could not.

She'd gone into the kitchen intending to reveal everything to her parents. Instead, she'd seen a man and had a panic attack.

She was a disgrace. She couldn't tell them. Ever. Not them or anyone else.

Rama's chest tightened. "Can I have some water?"

Piya touched her cheek. "Of course. Why don't you go to bed now? You'll feel better once you rest."

There wasn't enough rest to fix what he'd broken.

"Thank you," she replied.

There was no sound after that, and Rama wasn't sure if her mother was still there until she opened her eyes. Piya leaned against the doorframe, watching her with the same distant look as her father.

"You used to be so little..." She reached for Rama again, but drew her hand back. "Take all the time you need here. I'll turn down your bed."

With that, she walked out of the bathroom, pulling the door closed behind her.

Rama pulled the washcloth off her neck and set it in the sink. Strands of hair clung to the sides of her face. She moved them away and took a step toward the mirror to examine her reflection. Her skin was pale and dull, splotchy in some places, and on the verge of a breakout. Her eyes were bloodshot.

Gross.

Rama gripped the edge of the sink until her knuckles turned white.

“Pathetic,” she muttered.

Why was she so weak?

She snatched a towel off the rack beside the sink, balled it up against her mouth, and screamed.

Three days later, Rama was wiping down tables in the restaurant when Jessica’s name popped up. It had repeated on a loop in her head for days, but spoken aloud, it jarred her.

Had she imagined everything in the forest? Could it have been from a head injury after all? Jessica’s words hadn’t satisfied her. Rama looked everywhere for signs she hadn’t hallucinated.

At school, there had been nothing out of the ordinary. Jessica hadn’t been in class, but she could have been sick. No one mentioned it.

Outside school, who knew? Rama’s parents further restricted her after learning she’d biked home. Instead of three weeks, she’d gotten two months.

She spent her free time analyzing memories of Jessica. Somehow she’d discover the truth about the forest.

She looked up from her work and watched the television in the corner, flashing the news. Most of the time, her father muted it, but he’d turned it on before going to the kitchen. Rama didn’t know what the news report was about, but when Jessica’s name came up, she paid attention.

“Mr. and Mrs. Spurlock reported their daughter left for school on the morning of the fourteenth. She never made it

home that evening,” the newscaster announced. “Considering the recent homicides in Aldale, Jessica’s parents called the police.”

The camera cut to the Spurlocks’ home, a two-story Victorian. Roy and Maureen Spurlock were standing on the porch. A reporter held a microphone up to Maureen’s face.

“We thought she might be spending the night with her boyfriend,” Maureen said. “She did that.”

“*Does* that,” Roy corrected.

Rama put down the rag. Someone had taken a seat on her chest.

Maureen sniffed. “We’ve lived in Aldale since before Jessica was born. This used to be one of the safest towns in the nation—most people don’t lock their doors around here.” She looked to Roy. When he nodded, she continued. “Whatever happened to Jess... we want her back here, safe and sound. Whether she ran off on her own or what, she’s welcome to come home, no questions asked.”

Roy leaned over to speak into the microphone. “We love you, Jessica. Always.”

Tears shone in Maureen’s eyes. She opened her mouth to speak but emotions silenced her. She turned away from the camera, the reporter, and the microphone.

“If someone’s taken her—” Roy’s voice broke into a sob. He took a moment to compose himself before wiping his nose with a handkerchief. “She’s our only daughter. We want her back. We’re willing to do whatever it takes to make sure she comes home.”

Rama’s ears roared. Her face heated. If she’d seen the real Jessica in the forest, what the hell was she doing out

there? Why was she torturing her friends and loved ones like she was? Didn't she know how her absence had hurt them?

"Rama, turn it up, please." Dhayal stood in the doorway, gazing up at the news. "Don't you go to school with her?"

Rama grabbed the remote from behind the counter and adjusted the volume. On screen, the Spurlocks' home had vanished, replaced once again by the newsroom.

"Jessica Spurlock's whereabouts are still unknown," the newscaster said. "If you know where she is, please go to the police, or call our toll-free hotline."

Rama debated writing down the telephone number. She had seen something related to Jessica's disappearance. Then again, she still wasn't sure whether it had been real. What could the police do with a girl's hallucination?

She looked back at her father still standing in the doorway. His brow furrowed, and his eyes looked far away. What would he do if something happened to Rama?

He didn't know how Javesh had hurt her.

If it were up to her, he'd never know. She couldn't imagine what that would do to him, and she loved him far too much to put him through that kind of pain.

It made much more sense for her to struggle through it on her own, to keep her pain locked up and shut out the rest of the world. Maybe one day she'd get past it, but she'd never forget it. Never.

He'd torn her up and left her there to pull herself together. So far, she couldn't.

"She's in some my classes," Rama replied. "That Spanish project last month... she was in my group. We got a ninety."

Dhayal nodded but didn't seem to have heard her. "I'm

telling your mother.”

“Didn’t she go to get the twins?”

Banu and Unma were at a friend’s house. Piya had gone to get them and then was planning to return to set up for dinner service. She’d made sure to let them both know she’d be back in time for dinner.

The longer Rama looked at her father, the more convinced she became—he wasn’t listening to her.

“Papa,” she said, “Mama went to get the twins. It’s only us for now.”

Dhayal rubbed his chin, still lost in contemplation. Sighing, he turned and walked back into the kitchen. The double doors swung shut behind him.

With her father gone, the dining room was cavernous, cold, and unsettling. The television, blaring ads, was far too loud for humans. Rama’s hands trembled as she picked up the remote again and turned the whole thing off. The silence was safer, though she faced her racing thoughts without distractions.

The news report had sent her mind spinning into overdrive. Jessica’s disappearance wasn’t what it seemed.

Rama drifted back to the table and wrung out the rag. Water splashed into the bucket. Whatever was going on with Jessica unnerved her. Something wasn’t adding up. For one thing, Jessica came from a loving home. Her parents were high school sweethearts. They treated their two sons and their daughter like royalty. Jessica got a car the day she turned sixteen, didn’t have a curfew, and got to spend nights with her boyfriend. And she still had an allowance.

Jessica also flourished at school. She led the cheerleading squad and the popular crowd with her looks and personality.

Her charisma attracted everyone, including Myra. She signed up for cheerleading tryouts after Jessica had encouraged her.

“I’d die for her life,” Myra had said. “She’s got everything.”

“Everything” was a loving family, devoted boyfriend, circle of friends, and social status. But if she’d run away to start a new life in the woods, maybe things weren’t all that perfect.

Rama dropped the rag into the bucket and sat at the table, propping her chin in her hands. Jessica hadn’t disappeared of her own volition. There must have been some truth to what Rama had seen—Jessica dead, half her head caved in, blood pooled in the dirt. Why was she so convinced? She’d never put much faith in gut feelings before.

But Jessica had touched Rama. Her body had shimmered like a road in summer. And the way she’d clutched her pendant...

Something wasn’t right.

Rama didn’t know what she’d seen in the forest, but it had been something. She needed to share.

She could go to the police, but the idea was daunting. She’d never spoken to the police, and she wasn’t sure she could. Doubt twisted her stomach. What would she say? What if she were a suspect?

Rama swallowed hard. She couldn’t go to the police. She wasn’t brave enough.

She could go to her parents, tell them what she might have seen. At least, she could say she’d run into Jessica in the woods on the fourteenth. She didn’t have to tell them she was certain she was dead.

The biggest problem with telling her parents was that she might not stop at Jessica. Once she talked about her,

she might bring up the Smiling Man. And if she told them she'd seen the Smiling Man, they'd ask her why she looked afraid, and it would all come out. The wall she'd built to protect herself would crumble into ruins.

Once she told them about the Smiling Man, nothing would be the same—no, not for any of them.

What if they didn't believe her? Not about Jessica, but about any of it—the Smiling Man, the knife. Chicken tikka masala. They might call her a liar. What if they punished her? Worse yet, what if they made her talk to Javesh and apologize?

Rama would die before she let any of that happen.

3



RETURN TO THE SCENE

Rama dreamed about Jessica again. She couldn't get the picture out of her head—Jessica's body, covered in blood. When she woke up, she tortured herself. She agonized over her panic attack and her failure to talk to her parents.

She'd failed herself and Jessica, who camped out in her nightmares.

Rama woke herself screaming. She sat bolt upright in bed, switched on the bedside lamp, and jumped.

Unma stood at the foot of the bed, twisting the hem of her nightshirt. "Bad dream, *didi*?"

The Hindi endearment caught Rama off guard, as did her younger sister's presence. They shared a room, but Unma slept like a comatose log and Rama had never woken her before.

"Bad dreams," Rama said. "That's all. Go back to sleep."

Unma frowned. "But you were screaming."

Concern etched lines in Unma's face. After a minute, Rama relented. She pulled back the duvet and scooted to one side, patting the bed. "Stay with me if you want to. I won't steal the covers."

Unma smiled and let go of her nightshirt. Without hesitation, she clambered into bed and pulled the duvet to her chin. She scooted back against Rama. Heat radiated off

her tiny body. Rama pulled her sister close, drinking in her scent. Unma smelled like lilacs—their mother’s shampoo.

“Rama,” Unma said.

“What is it, sis?”

Unma paused. “Mama said you were sick. Do you think you’re contagious?”

Rama chewed the inside of her cheek. “It’s not that kind of sickness. Go to sleep now. We can talk in the morning.” She smoothed her sister’s hair and turned on her side so their backs touched. Rama had never been able to fall asleep facing someone else, not even her sister.

To Unma’s credit, she didn’t mind the new sleeping arrangements. After a few minutes, she had fallen back asleep. Exhaustion tempted Rama, but she couldn’t shut her mind down. Then again, if she did fall asleep, she might find herself in the forest again.

Rama gulped, throat thick. Why had Javesh been so kind in the restaurant? He acted like they’d never met. It had all been so surreal. He’d attacked her—no denying the pain—but still, he’d smiled at her.

Even after knowing she had seen him in the woods.

Am I losing my mind?

Rama wasn’t sure how, but she managed to fall back asleep. When she opened her eyes again, sunlight poured in through the blinds. School holiday. She’d be helping her parents with the restaurant all day. Thoughts of Jessica’s body would drive her insane if she didn’t do something.

Careful not to disturb Unma, Rama slid out from under the duvet. She swung her legs over the side of the bed. The carpet itched against her feet. She went into the bathroom, avoided the mirror, and rejected a shower.

She didn't have time.

After she got changed—again, without disturbing Unma—Rama went downstairs. No one was in the restaurant. Too early. Her parents talked in the kitchen, voices distant. Dhayal's booming laugh echoed through the empty space.

For a minute, she debated going in there and telling them everything. She'd come so close three days ago, and it seemed like such a waste. Both were in the same room and she'd had more time to strategize. Shouldn't it have been easier?

Before Rama got to the kitchen doors, she froze. She couldn't talk to her parents. She still didn't know how they'd react, but she doubted it would go well. And what if they told her not to go to the police? What would she do then?

Rama whispered a prayer. She couldn't go into the kitchen. She couldn't tell her parents what was going on and what she'd seen and what had happened with the Smiling Man. She had to go to the police and tell them what she'd seen.

Rama sauntered out the front door of the restaurant, looking confident and certain, even if it wasn't true.

The streets of Aldale were clear as she walked. A couple of people milled about outside the shops and restaurants. It was a small town, and the sun was low in the sky. Most people were fighting the chill in their homes. The only bustling business was the coffee shop, Beans and Brew. Rama didn't like coffee, but they had excellent hot chocolate. As she passed the shop, the smell of roasting coffee beans made her head swim.

She was crossing the street when the Smiling Man and his wife came her way pushing a stroller.

Rama's stomach flipped over itself, slamming against

her intestines. Shock radiated up into her jaw, striking her brain and vibrating her nerves. Her hands trembled as she pulled her jacket tighter around her body. She'd swallowed three pounds of cotton. Everything burned.

What was he doing there? Why then? Why that day, of all days, was he standing in her way?

She wanted to throw up. She wanted to scream. She wanted to tear her hair out until her scalp bled and the pain disappeared. She wanted to cry. She wanted her parents.

She wanted him to die.

The coffee shop was the closest thing to safety within sight. Without thinking, Rama spun around and plunged through the front doors. The hot roasting scent hit her square in the face and enveloped her in its cocoon.

A shudder seized her as the barista looked her over.

“Cold outside?” he asked.

Rama nodded. “Restroom?”

He gestured toward the back. Rama walked straight and to the left, wrenched the door open, and slipped inside, locking it behind her. She half leaned, half fell against the porcelain sink, clutching the sides for support. Her knees threatened to give out; her heart, to give up. Hot tears burned her eyes and squeezed through searing ducts.

Vishnu, Brahma, Kali, Ganesha—whoever's listening, I need help. I've never been so terrified of anything before. I know what needs to happen, but I'm not sure I can do it. Every time I try, my body freaks out. I have a meltdown. Help me, help me, help me.

Although no one answered her prayers, Rama's anxiety abated. She breathed again. She focused.

She raised her head to look at herself in the mirror. A puffy face, a hooked nose, eyes too close together, messy eyebrows, cracked lips, and to top it off, some acne. Her face surprised her in the worst way. Her mother's face sparkled like the ocean in the moonlight. Even Unma, young as she was, had their mother's features.

Rama stepped back from the mirror, hands curling into fists. If she didn't leave the bathroom, she'd do something she'd regret. The glass taunted her, urging her to break her image, even though the mirror wasn't hers.

Help me in my time of need. Aid me now. Protect me.

None of them protected her before or seemed to care about her, but they were all she had.

Rama swallowed and tried again. For a prayer to work, she needed faith. Her faith lacked, but she faked it.

Help me, please, I beg you. I haven't been devout, but I can't do this on my own. I'm not strong enough to do what I need to. I need someone to guide me. Anyone. I don't know how to move forward, how to keep going—or I do, but I don't have the strength.

She'd never been religious, but it was early in the day and she'd already prayed three times. It offered her more comfort than she cared to dwell on. She needed something to draw strength from. She wasn't enough on her own. Maybe she never would be.

She'd been alone that day. Her father and mother were running errands, and the twins were at a friend's house. It was a Sunday. Few customers came in on Sunday.

The Ganeshan Grill was empty. Rama wiped tables, humming Bollywood soundtracks and dancing.

She'd worried about cleaning her room after her parents

came back. They'd gotten onto her about it several times, and if she didn't clean it, they would take her phone away.

It had been a normal day.

Until he walked in, jingled the bell, and swept over the floor with his shadow.

Rama leveled her gaze at him. Everything was silhouette. The sun streaming through the windows was so bright she had to look away. For a moment, his shadow was taller and lankier than he was—and not in the normal way.

“How many?” she asked.

“One,” the man said. “Unless you'd like to join me.”

Rama's face flushed. He was her father's age.

He knew her father; they were friends—she'd seen them speaking in the restaurant. She shielded her eyes from the sun. He was average height with broad shoulders, a barrel chest, and a mustache that annoyed her. It overwhelmed his lips. That was all she could come up with. And she'd seen him in town on several occasions, sometimes with a woman who must have been his wife. Still, she'd never talked to him, and serving him on her own was awkward, trying to make small talk. They were both nervous, or she was projecting her feelings onto him. Either way, she was uncomfortable.

They made eye contact. She blinked. “Coming right up.”

She cleared a table and wiped it down.

“Great weather we've had.” He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Nice for early summer,” she said. “Not too hot.”

“You in school?” he asked.

She nodded. “We get out soon. Why don't you sit down?”

He sat and Rama placed some silverware and a napkin on the table.

“I’ll be glad when these damn cicadas die,” he added. “Noisy little shits. Next big rain should wash them out.”

“Have you dined with us before?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, “I love it here.”

She handed him a menu. “Our special of the day is chicken tikka masala.”

He propped his chin on his fist. “Is it as lovely as you are?”

Rama’s cheeks warmed again. “It gets good reviews.”

“How about you?”

“Excuse me?”

“How old are you?”

“What do you want to drink?” Rama asked. “We have Coke—”

“Seventeen? Eighteen?” He cocked his head. “Old enough.”

Rama squirmed. “What can I get you?”

He sniffed and rubbed his mustache. Rama looked away. “Come back in ten minutes. I’ll be ready then.”

His change in tone jarred her. The sweet lightness in his voice had vanished, replaced by something sharper. She debated calling her parents, asking them to come home, telling them the man looked like he wanted to eat her. He’d never looked at her like that before. She debated telling him they’d closed, they’d run out of food, she wasn’t comfortable—but she couldn’t.

She was too scared to offend him.

Instead of making waves, she went into the kitchen.

He followed her. They exchanged words. He did most of the talking. At first, he was flirtatious. He courted her.

She wouldn’t have it.

“You must have forgotten your manners,” he said. “Be nice now, love, or else.”

He blocked the door. He took out a knife. Worst of all, he smiled.

The belt buckle clanged against the floor.

She left her body then. She didn't come back for a while.

When he finished, he ordered chicken tikka masala. After all, it was the special. On autopilot, she made it for him, set it up to go. Contemplated spitting in it.

Rama gave him the food, the box in a bag with the restaurant's logo on it.

He touched her face. He left.

The bleeding stopped. The bruises healed. Still, she couldn't shake the sense her body had betrayed her.

She hated it then.

She'd hated it since.

What had she been thinking? How could she tell anyone when she couldn't even admit what had happened to herself?

She shouldn't have served him alone, should have called for help, should have fought back more. She should have gone to the police right after it happened. She should have reported him, gotten tested, gone to trial. But what if no one believed her? Violence in Aldale was rare. Someone might believe her now that more murders had happened, but months had passed. They couldn't get any DNA or evidence from her.

If she couldn't report that, how could she report the body?

And was she still convinced what she'd seen in the forest was real? Was she certain beyond certainty it

hadn't been a nightmare? If Jessica were dead, how had she helped Rama after she'd fallen?

So many emotions swirled around in her mind that they made Rama dizzy. She couldn't talk to her parents. She'd tried once and it had been a disaster. She couldn't go to the police, either—not if the sight of the Smiling Man sent her spiraling into panic.

There was one thing left to do.

Rama ran cold water and splashed it on her face. She balled up a paper towel and dried her skin.

She ignored the mirror.

By the time she left the bathroom, Rama had decided. That was the only way she'd find peace again. It was the only way she'd stop the bad dreams. She needed to know what had happened, what she'd seen—if she'd lost her mind or else if everything was real.

When she got back to the restaurant, her parents were still in the kitchen. It was early in the day—no customers for a while. Why had they bothered coming down? Most mornings, they sipped coffee upstairs and talked. The restaurant was only for serious subjects.

Maybe they were talking about her strange behavior, the panic attack. Javesh. They didn't keep secrets from each other. Maybe they had come up with an idea to confront her.

She imagined how it might play out. She'd be studying in her bedroom—or pretending to study at least. They'd come in and shut the door, and they'd get to it right away.

Rama swallowed hard. What would she tell them? Not the truth. Reality was terrifying. Besides, when she got to the part about seeing Jessica in the forest,

she wouldn't know what to say. She didn't even know for certain what had happened.

She needed to go to the woods.

Rama crept upstairs and grabbed her bicycle. She walked it downstairs without a sound, looking back to make sure her parents hadn't seen her.

Once outside, Rama mounted the bike and pedaled downhill toward the trees. She preferred to take the path there as opposed to the one behind her house, even though it was longer. There were fewer brambles and less underbrush, and the canopy was thinner, so it was easier to see. It was safer.

Of course, the forest wasn't safe. After all, she'd seen a body.

As Rama rode, she kept her head down and studied her surroundings. The cool wind whipped her hair and stung her eyes if she went fast, so she kept a moderate pace. It wasn't as though she needed to get there in a hurry. If there was a body there, it wasn't going anywhere.

It was easier to think the whole thing had been a hallucination—but she was far too smart for that.

Maybe when she got to the scene of the crime, there wouldn't be a body. Then, she'd know it wasn't real.

And if she did find the body again, she'd have to acknowledge the truth.

The air was rich with the smell of decaying leaves and ozone—as though it were going to rain. Rama winced as she broke sticks under her tires. They sounded like breaking bones. Despite her fears, she kept her eyes trained on the path as she rode.

The sight of a familiar tree nearly jolted Rama off the

bicycle. How long had she been riding? Wasn't the spot farther down the path, closer to the mall?

She braked and got down from her seat, leaning the bike against a tree. Yes, that was the spot—the ground seemed to vibrate under her feet, and every cell screamed. She no longer had doubts.

Rama took her time examining the scene. There was no sign of Jessica's body. The dirt looked undisturbed. And as far as she could see, there was no blood anywhere—nothing like the puddle underneath Jessica's head.

Reeling, Rama kneeled in front of a bush and parted the branches to peer inside. Voices approached from her right, accompanied by footsteps, crunching leaves, and snapping twigs.

“Trust me, I'm not thrilled to be patrolling with you either.”

A woman's voice she didn't recognize.

“Listen, love,” a man said in an English accent “You're lucky I'm here. Vincent was going to send you alone—”

“Oh, he'd never—”

“Nathaniel got to him. And you know how your husband is.”

“He always gets his way.”

“At least where you're concerned.”

The voices sounded close, and Rama swore she felt their footsteps. Her pulse pounded in her ears. What were they doing in the forest? Out of all the paths through the woods, why had they chosen that one? Did they know what was out there? Were they searching for the body? She crouched lower to the ground, hiding in the shrubbery.

“We shouldn't be out here without cover,” said the

woman. “Someone might be looking now besides the two of us”

In the bushes, Rama stiffened.

“No way,” said the man. “As far as any stucks know, the girl is missing, presumed alive. Only our tribe knows she’s dead.”

“Do we know what happened?”

“Not a clue. But Vincent wants it covered up. Makes us look bad.”

“Gotcha.”

They knew about the body? They knew Jessica was dead?

Rama clamped a hand over her mouth to keep from crying out. She had no clue what they were talking about, but they knew at least as much as she did. She hadn’t imagined what she’d seen in the forest.

But that didn’t explain how she’d spoken to Jessica after seeing her dead on the path. It didn’t fulfill her desire to know where the body had gone.

If anything, it only raised a multitude of questions.

Rama wanted to get a look at the people approaching, but she might give herself away. She didn’t know a thing about them. If they had murdered Jessica, they could kill Rama too.

She tried to crawl behind a tree. Her hand brushed something cold and hard.

Rama craned her neck.

Jessica’s body lay next to the tree under a layer of leaves.

Rama screamed. She jumped back and covered her mouth. It was too late—the heat of twin gazes focused on her. She spun and faced the strangers.

The man was close to her age, tall and thin with bright, blue eyes and short, blond hair. His hand flew to his necklace.

A flash of purple erupted from the pendant before his hand closed on it. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“And who the hell are you?” his companion demanded. She was short like Rama but looked a few years older, with slender limbs and sharp features like a bird. Her purple hair was pulled into a high ponytail, and her emerald eyes sparkled.

Rama lowered her hands. “I-I was taking a walk.”

The man’s eyes moved to Rama’s left. “What about the bike?”

“I was riding my bike. I live nearby—”

“You know about the body.” It was a statement, not a question. Something in her face had damned her.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Never mind,” the woman said. “We’re good at reading faces.”

Rama’s stomach churned. Alarm bells went off in her head. If they knew about the body too, they had to be the murderers—or they knew who had killed Jessica.

“What’s your name?” the man asked.

Rama whirled around and took off running. She left the bike.

No matter what happened, she *would* stay alive.

Rama kept running even though the cold air shredded her lungs and the exertion made her legs ache. She ran farther than she ever had and then some. As she reached the edge of the woods, another man grabbed her shoulder.

He was taller and broader than the first man had been, with tanned skin and orange eyes with a dangerous edge. His hair was longer too—falling past his shoulders like a sheet of dark, brown ice. He had pulled it half back,

emphasizing his sharp features.

“Easy now,” he said.

His voice was polished oak and didn’t match his rugged looks.

Rama screamed and clawed at him. He jerked her back and held her, unwavering as she struggled.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

She couldn’t place his accent. Although his words were kind, she struggled against him anyway. The Smiling Man had gotten to her like no man ever would again. She would fight back this time—she would get away or die.

Rama brought her knee up into his groin. He released her right away, staggering backward and cursing. She pivoted to run again. He lunged forward and grabbed her by the hair, letting go when she yelped.

The second time, he tried a much warmer approach. “Please calm down. We want to talk.”

“Vincent,” the woman said when she’d caught up with them. “She’s a stuck.”

The man—Vincent—relaxed his hold, but he didn’t let Rama go. “I can see that.”

“Let her go.”

His eyes flashed as he fixed his gaze on the woman. “Don’t tell me what to do. I won’t ask again.” He returned his attention to Rama, not softening his features. “She knows about the body, Leda. What if she tells someone?”

The woman—Leda—studied Rama. “She’s not struggling anymore. She’s smart. Maybe she won’t say a word.”

Would she tell anyone what she’d seen in the forest? She feared letting Jessica down, letting herself down. Keeping quiet and suppressing like she had before.

No thank you.

Vincent held her by the shoulders and faced her. “You look familiar. Have we met?”

Rama shook her head.

“Where’s Carter?” Vincent asked.

“Carter?” Leda’s face scrunched up. “Working with the body. Vincent... what are we going to do? You said you didn’t want anyone to find out.”

He looked at Rama a long time before answering Leda. “We have to take her with us. I’ll interrogate her and then decide. I’m going to let her answers inform my next move.”

Rama’s throat thickened as she swallowed. Her nerves crackled, shot with electricity. The adrenaline high from the chase had worn off, and her muscles were too weak to support her anymore.

“Hey.” Leda touched her cheek. “You all right? Stay with us.”

The physical contact shocked her, and she sucked in a breath, jerking away from them. The movement tipped the horizon. Darkness swarmed. “Don’t touch m—”

“Vincent, she’s falling. Grab her.”

Everything went black.