Two Plus One

by hidden_inside_of_you

Summary

Kala, married to Wolfgang and living in Paris, finds herself unexpectedly pregnant. She and Wolfgang work through it together. Sequel to Diary of a New Life Together, canon-compliant with S1 & S2 but NOT with the finale.
It’s a crisp, bright October evening. The leaves are just beginning to turn, and the city is softly reflected in the Seine. It would have been a perfect night to put off her paperwork and walk along the river, but Kala Dandekar has just received some unsettling news, and wants to go straight home. She was sure it was a simple case of stomach flu. She was sure she had just gained a little weight due to their flat’s proximity to her favorite ice cream place.

Her phone buzzes.

What do you want for dinner?

She sighs softly and texts him back. Anything is okay.

You alright?

She knew he would be able to sense her anxiety, but she’s certainly not breaking this news in a text, so she writes: Just fine. You’re cooking?

Trying to.

She smiles and begins to reassure herself. It was bound to happen. No one is perfect. You can’t be careful all the time.

She remembers the night it happened. Yes, it’s true, she wore his favorite skirt, and yes, she had a bit too much wine, and yes, perhaps she was a bit too impatient in the back of the movie theater and no, she didn’t stop him when he put his hand up her skirt, and true, it was her idea to go into one of the bathrooms together, and yes, she forgot to take her birth control for a few days, but at the time it seemed harmless, and really, how was she to know? Does she really have such terrible luck? One time and this is what I get?! She buries her face in her hands, heart pounding, unsure how to properly convey how terrified she is while still being sensitive to the fact that this is something Wolfgang has always wanted, though never pressured her for.

If it had to happen, an accident was certainly the best way. He wouldn’t feel guilty, and she could honestly say she tried to avoid it. And yet, she isn’t sure what to say.

I’m pregnant! Where’s the nearest window to throw myself out of?

Probably not that.

She sighs again when she sees her hands are instinctively on her stomach. Stop it Kala, she scolds herself as she turns up their street, you can’t already care.

She slows her pace, giving herself 10 minutes to reflect before she reaches home. She plays over the last few weeks, and in retrospect, is shocked how obvious it all was.

It began in September. She remembers waking up one night, grumbling and spooning a pillow. Wolfgang had asked if she was okay and she explained she was sick. She spent much of the night throwing up, and it was only in the morning that she was able to get to her feet, take a shower, and keep down a bit of toast. She insisted it was stomach flu, and he agreed, so he brought her some medicine and she managed to go to work.

When she woke up several days later with the same nausea, Wolfgang was less convinced about the
flu, but couldn’t think of anything else it might be. He suggested she was working too hard, which was true, but so was he, and besides, what could she do?

Then, after two more occurrences like this, they began to suspect something in their flat -- mold? They spent a weekend scouring the place for any sign of this, to no avail.

It was around this time that she noticed she no longer fit in most of her bras and that some of her pants were tight. *Am I getting chubby?* she had asked. *You have to be honest.* In retrospect, asking her husband this while standing in front of him in a tiny nightgown was probably not wise, because he assured her that he didn’t care whether she was chubby or not by making love to her so thoroughly she forgot what she initially asked him. Similarly, when he squeezed her ass while they were making coffee last week and remarked that she was popping out of her shirt, she thought he was flirting, not informing her that her breasts were literally uncontained. It was only when a coworker timidly offered her a cardigan that she realized there was a real issue.

It was also around then that she started to desperately, lustfully crave peanut butter, which she ordinarily dislikes, and began to buy jelly beans by the pound. She passed this off as a simple evolution of taste.

Then, after another bout of nausea, they considered the idea that she was ill. This conversation lasted five minutes before they both shelved it, put on an album, danced in the living room, and aggressively repressed the idea that something might be actually wrong.

But after this, Wolfgang insisted she see a doctor, which brought her to this afternoon, when she walked confidently into the small family practice, sure that she would be diagnosed with something minor, curable, and obvious. The doctor, a lovely Jewish woman that reminded her of Amanita’s mother, immediately suspected she was pregnant. She laughed it off, daring the doctor to give her a blood test. *Me? Pregnant? As if!* When she walked out of the doors of the doctor’s office twenty minutes later, she was shocked, unsteady and on the verge of tears.

And now she’s here, walking up the street where she and Wolfgang bought their first flat, desperate for a solution. She knows it’s easy for most couples, but it has never felt easy to her. She doesn’t want to disappoint him, but she doesn’t want to pretend either. The pregnancy scares her the most, but she’s also terrified of the idea that her career might be compromised.

Though if she’s honest, she’s always loved watching Wolfgang interact with kids -- it’s something he’s surprisingly good at. And if she’s honest, she’s always liked children and the way they express themselves with such undisguised emotion. If the timing was right, she wouldn’t be entirely against having a family. She knows how happy it would make Wolfgang, though she worries his reasons are rather complicated and have something to do with redeeming his own childhood, which she doesn’t see as entirely healthy, but all the same, she knows he would be thrilled if she suddenly agreed to have children, and she doesn’t like to withhold anything that makes him happy -- so few things do. But she didn’t want to give in just to please him, and he didn’t want her to do that either, so they always agreed not to have children for a while.

But now the decision has been made for them. Kala glances down at her belly.

“Why did you have to happen, hmm?” she murmurs softly. “You know you make me uncomfortable.”

She’s quite sure the microscopic life inside of her does not know it makes her uncomfortable, but still, she feels compelled to inform it of the fact.

She palms over her stomach for a moment, then forces her hands to her sides, angry with herself for
this display of affection, frustrated that she has so little control over her emotions. She knows there’s no exit. Whatever it is, whoever it is, it’s a part of her and a part of the man she loves more than anything. She’s confident she’ll love it to pieces too. She just wishes she had some choice in the matter.

“So there’s nothing I can do?” she goes on, putting her hands back on her belly. “I’m just stuck with you, is that right? Don’t you think that’s rather unfair?”

She’s nearly to their flat. She takes her keys out of her purse, breathing in deeply, and finally sets her mind and starts up the stairs. She just has to say it. Two words. How hard could it be to say two words?

She unlocks the door and finds Wolfgang in their softly-lit kitchen, having a beer and stirring a pot of pasta, listening to what he calls “light background music” and what Kala calls “headache-inducing techno.” He’s wearing the dark blue sweater that she loves. She smiles at the sight of him and he kisses her hello and turns the music down so they can talk.

“Smells good,” she says quietly.

He kisses her again. “Thanks. Figured you had a long day. It's not as good as what you make.” He pokes a fork into the pot and nudges her. “Here.”

Her eyes brighten as she takes a bit. She moans softly and tilts her head back. “Oh, I’m starving, I didn’t eat all day. This is delicious...”

He smiles. “You always tell me I can’t cook.”

Kala glances at him, smiling in response, and reaches for the fork so she can eat some more. He puts his arm around her waist in a half-hug and nudges her forehead with his nose.

“How was your day?”

They ask each other this every night, but tonight, she knows he’s really asking about her doctor’s appointment. The fear floods back and her stomach clenches. She buys time by taking another bite of pasta, and then she hesitates, tucking her hair behind her ear and glancing unsurely at him.

“Maybe we should sit down,” she suggests softly.

His hand tightens on her waist, and he turns so he can pull her closer. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

She shakes her head, starting to cry, which she only forgives herself for because her hormones are so frayed. She knows this gives the wrong impression and she can sense the fear in his touch.

“Kala,” he says urgently. “What happened, what did they--”

She shakes her head. “No, no, it’s nothing bad.”

He nods and runs his hands down her arms, letting her take her time. She brightens at the touch, finding courage in it, reassured that he loves her, that he’ll know what to say. She looks up at him once more and tangles their fingers together.

She breathes out heavily. “I’m pregnant.”

She feels his grip tighten on her fingers. He looks wordlessly at her for what feels like a very long time. His expression is characteristically difficult to read -- his brow is softly knitted, his eyes are
bright, there’s the hint of a question on his lips. Then he lets out a breath, stunned.

“You’re pregnant?”

She nods nervously.

“Are you sure?” he asks.

She nods again, starting to smile. He shakes his head, at a loss for words, and kisses her gently. She grins against his lips, surprised how sure of herself she suddenly feels, and then he hugs her tightly. She breathes in at the contact and tucks her face against his chest, and he holds her closer, nuzzling into her hair, kissing her brow repeatedly and squeezing her with each kiss. It reminds her of the way he hugs her after returning from long trips, full of need and gratitude.

She pulls back slightly and glances at him. “So this is good news?”

He nods hard. “Yes, yeah.”

It’s the comfort she’s been wanting since getting the news, and she feels immediately calmer.

But still, she bursts out, “Oh my God, I’m pregnant. I’m pregnant, and I have no idea what to do or how to do it, I’m sure I’ll do everything wrong--”

He shakes his head. “No, no, you’re going to be fine, you’ll know what to do.”

She looks at him. “I’m so scared.”

“It’s okay, I’m scared too.”

“You’re scared too?” she asks quietly.

“Fuck yes,” he replies. “Are you kidding?”

She laughs again, wiping her eyes. “Well, at least we’re both scared.”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “How did this happen?”

“Well,” says Kala, “when a man and a woman--”

He grins. “Are you telling me our first child was conceived in a movie theater bathroom?”

“That’s going to be our secret,” she replies.

He laughs and shakes his head again. Then his expression softens. “I know this isn’t what you wanted, I’m sorry if...”

“No, no, don’t apologize,” she murmurs, touching her nose to his and squeezing his arms. “I’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure?” he checks.

She nods, pressing closer.
“Just promise me I won’t have to quit my job,” she says quietly.

He shakes his head. “No, you won’t, I can stay home more often.”

“Aw,” says Kala happily, kissing his cheek. “And we know so many people who can babysit.” She sighs suddenly and looks down at herself. “I don’t want it to suffer developmentally, though, I’ve read infants need constant parental presence...” Then she frowns. “We’re going to have to come up with something better than it, aren’t we?”

“How long before we know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“Well, it depends,” says Kala. “It could be in as little as two weeks or in as many as ten... boys are easier to identify, so if it’s a boy, fairly soon.”

Wolfgang hums in thought. “What do you want?”

“What do you mean?” asks Kala.

“Boy or girl,” he says.

She starts to smile. “Oh, I don’t know.”

“Here,” he says, pulling out a chair at the kitchen table, “I’ll get you some food...”

Kala eyes him as she sits down. “You aren’t allowed to treat me like I’m suddenly fragile.”

“I’m just getting you dinner, babe,” he says gently.

Kala nods cautiously and takes her shoes off. She groans.

“I’m going to have to stop wearing these,” she mumbles. “My poor feet.”

“You can get some of the sexy nurse shoes,” he suggests, throwing a kitchen towel over his shoulder and plating up some pasta.

Kala makes a face. “Those white ones? Did you mean sexy sarcastically?”

He sets the pasta down in front of her. “You would make them sexy.”

She laughs. “I doubt that.”

He sits down across from her with two beers and hands her one. Then he pauses. “Wait.” He takes the beer back. “Shit, I’m sorry. What do you want? Water?”

“Tea, it’s chilly,” she says, touching her hand to his waist as he gets up and adding, “thanks.”

He smiles at her and slides the kettle onto a burner and lights it. “Chai?”

She nods, yawning. She’s tired enough now that some of the anxiety has faded. She pulls her knees up to her chest for warmth and hums.

“Boy,” she says musingly.

She notices him smile. “Yeah, me too. You go first. Why?”

“I would be so worried about a girl,” she says through a big bite of pasta.
“My daughter?” he asks. “She’d kick anyone’s ass.”

Kala laughs. “Okay, she would.”

“I just think I’d do better with a boy,” he explains. Then he shrugs. “I’d like to think I would do a better job than my father did with me.”

“Oh,” sighs Kala. “That’s a low bar.”

Her matter-of-fact tone cracks him up. “Uh, true. But still.”

She reaches out and squeezes his hand. “You’ll be wonderful.”

He smiles tentatively and responds with a soft kiss. “Thanks.”

Kala nods. Then she spontaneously laughs and covers her face.

“I can’t believe this,” she says.

“We’re so stupid,” he agrees.

She continues to laugh. “So stupid. This was so obvious!”

He frowns playfully. “Yeah, didn’t you...?”

“Miss two periods? Yes, I stubbornly ignored that because it’s happened before.”

He shakes his head. “And it didn’t occur to you that you might be pregnant?”

“Well, it did, but it seemed impossible my luck could be that terrible!” She glances at him, smirking softly. “I thought if I ever did get pregnant, it would clearly be your fault, but I was the one who had to have you. I can’t believe myself.”

He grins. “Yeah, you could have settled for some harmless fingering.”

“I could have, oh my goodness, what was I thinking?”

“If I remember correctly, you were thinking if you’re not inside of me in two seconds I’m going to die.”

She turns bright red, laughing loudly. “Oh, I said that, didn’t I? Oh my God.” Then she giggles. “In my defense, you were wearing those jeans I like...”

He nods, playing along. “It was the jeans.”

She nods in agreement. “And the skirt.”

He clicks his tongue on his teeth. “I love that skirt.”

She giggles again. “See.”

He shakes his head and tucks her hair behind her ear. “We have to stop turning each other on.”

“We really do,” she says seriously. “Look what we’ve done.”

He chuckles and kisses her. Then he meets her eyes and skims his fingers along her waistline.
“Can I...?” he asks.

Her skin suddenly prickles with excitement. She looks at him, her smile softening, and nods gently. “There’s nothing there yet...”

He shrugs and presses his hand against her belly. He grins softly. “It’s funny.”

“What?” asks Kala.

“Well, you’re right, you feel like you always do, but...”

She smiles. “But it’s different.”

He nods. “Yeah.”

She glances down at his hand. “Maybe I can get used to this.”

He looks back at her. “Yeah?”

“No promises, but I think so.” She takes a deep, shaky breath. “Oh my. Our whole lives are going to change, aren’t they?”

He nods. “That’s okay.”

She takes a long drink of tea and nods too. “I just didn’t expect this...”

“No, me neither,” he agrees. Then he smiles. “I never expected to meet you, though. I never expected some of the best things in my life.”

She squeezes his hands. “That’s true.”

He kisses her one more time, and she leans back and rests her legs on his lap. He pats her calf affectionately and she smiles. They finish their few bites of food in comfortable silence, and then she collects their dishes and goes to the sink. He holds her from behind while she washes the dishes, and then she simply rests against him. He tangles his fingers with hers, which are warm and damp from the dishwater, and she nestles the top of her head against his chin. They look out their small kitchen window together, taking in the city.

After a few minutes, Kala glances up. “Bed?”

“Yeah,” he agrees fervently.

She laughs. “We’re tired just from talking about a baby. Imagine what it’s going to be like when it’s actually here...”

He laughs too and gives her a soft squeeze. “We’ll figure it out.”

She yawns. “Yes, I guess we’ll have to.”

She shuts off the light over the stove and pulls him with her towards their room. She puts on her most comfortable sweats and Wolfgang smirks.

“So I see the days of you wearing those nightgowns are over...” he teases.

Kala throws a pillow at him, laughing. “Don’t you think we’ve done enough damage?”
“Well, I can't get you pregnant again.” He frowns. “At least not yet.”

She sits up and fixes him with a stare. “Wolfgang. You’ve known that I’m pregnant for a single hour, and you’re already talking about baby number two.”

“Or three, Kala...this could be twins.”

She holds her hands up and closes her eyes. “Do not use the T word.”

He bites the tip of his tongue between his teeth, looking at her playfully. She laughs and beckons him closer with a twitch of her fingertips.

“C’mere you, I want to go to bed...”

He smiles and flops heavily on the bed next to her. Then he presses an exuberant kiss to her cheek, rolls over onto her, and effectively smothers her. She laughs wildly and pushes him away.

“Stop, you’ll pop me--”

He tucks his face into her neck and shakes his head. “Mm, no, I’m staying right here.”

She rolls her eyes and wraps her arms around him, then kisses his ear. “You’re hopeless.”

“I know,” he says.

She smiles and reaches for the light. “I love you though.”

“I love you too,” he agrees.
The Appointment

Chapter Summary

Kala goes to the doctor for the first time, and Daya poses problems.

Two Weeks Later

“Anatomy is very complicated,” remarks Wolfgang as Kala shuffles around in her bathrobe, fumbling for coffee, regretting making an 8 a.m. appointment, wondering how her husband is already fully awake, sitting on the couch, reading a book about pregnancy that she simply can’t stomach.

“Yes it is,” she replies, not hearing him.

“These diagrams are so detailed,” he goes on.

“That’s nice,” she murmurs, setting water to boil.

He frowns. “The only reason women give birth is because the baby literally outgrows the womb... that seems dangerous.”

“Hm, interesting,” says Kala, massaging her feet on the rug in front of the sink.

Wolfgang glances at her, realizing she isn’t listening. “Did you know if you eat carrots while you’re pregnant, the baby comes out orange?”

“Wow,” she says, closing her eyes, focusing on the steady drip of the coffee.

Wolfgang smiles to himself and shuts the book, and then he gets up, goes into the kitchen, and wraps his arms around her.

“Tired?” he asks.

She groans in agreement. “I was up all night. Can you believe we used to stay up all night for fun? On purpose? What was wrong with us?”

He laughs and kisses the back of her head. Then he glances at the coffee she’s making.

“Hey Kala...”

She glances at him. “What?”

“You forgot a filter,” he says, gesturing at the coffee.

“Oh my God,” she murmurs. “I’m getting in the shower...”

“Good call,” he says.

She comes back a half hour later, wearing a vermilion colored top and a jean jacket. Wolfgang smiles slightly at her and gestures at her tummy.
"You're starting to show a bit," he remarks.

She glances down at herself. "Am I?"

"Just a little," he replies.

He puts a thermos of coffee into her waiting hands, then glances at the kitchen table.

"Okay. List of questions, extra water, bagels, comfortable shoes, jacket, keys... are we missing anything?"

But Kala doesn't answer. Instead, she closes the distance between them and kisses him affectionately.

"You're so responsible," she murmurs.

He smiles and taps her coffee thermos. "And I remembered exactly three sugar cubes and a sprinkle of cinnamon."

She bumps her nose against his in thanks. He laughs and kisses her again. Then he looks at his watch.

"Oh, shit, we should go..."

They hurry out the door. Kala flies down the stairs -- Wolfgang holds his breath, keeping back the urge to tell her to use the goddamn handrail -- and then they burst out into the street together. She looks at her watch, then wordlessly takes Wolfgang’s hand and pulls him at a run towards the metro.

"Kala--"

"Pregnant women can run just fine, Wolfgang!"

He sighs and picks up his pace. They hurry down the steps into the metro, just in time to board a train.

"Why did we run?" pants Wolfgang.

"Because," says Kala, running a hand through her hair, "I refuse to be late for my first prenatal appointment. It makes a terrible impression."

"Because doctors are never late."

Kala glances at him. "Be nice to the doctor, she's very sweet."

"Yes, I will," he promises grudgingly.

Kala rolls her eyes, holding onto one of the bars as the train jerks forward. Wolfgang steadies her and then puts his arms around her waist, resting a hand on her belly. She takes a breath, still slightly uneasy at this gesture. She isn't sure if he's being protective or simply affectionate, but either way, she doesn't feel quite as independent now.

"What's wrong?" he asks, noticing her expression.

She shakes her head.

He hesitates, then murmurs, "I don't think you're any less capable than before, you know that right?"
She looks up at him, not answering.

“You're the same woman I fell in love with,” he goes on. “The same woman who's objectively more capable than me in every way.”

Kala giggles.

“I'm serious,” he says. “You make all the money, cook things that are actually edible, know everything about health and medicine... what do you even need me for?”

She keeps laughing. “Sperm?”

He grins. “Sperm bank, problem solved.”

“Gosh, you're telling me I could have done all this by myself?”

“Yeah, and you probably should have, you know I'm going to let that kid get away with everything.”

Kala beams and nods in agreement. “I know. It's okay.”

The train jostles to a stop. Kala glances at Wolfgang once more.

“When are we going to tell everyone?”

“I don't know, when do you want to?”

“Soon,” says Kala. “I nearly let it out last week when I was getting dinner with Nomi...”

“We could invite everyone over,” suggests Wolfgang.

Kala nods. “That would be sweet.” Then she sighs. “It's my parents I'm concerned about.”

He frowns. “Why?”

She shrugs softly. “They expected this from me years ago.”

“It's not for them,” he says quietly.

She nods. “No.” Then she smiles, shaking her head. “I guess if they accepted you, they'll be able to understand this.”

“I think I still make them nervous.”

Kala laughs. “Oh, yes, you do.”

He chuckles and pulls her closer. “Do you think they'll be surprised?”

She nods. “Shocked. They were sure I didn't want children.” She rolls her eyes fondly. “My aunt asked if married you because you were the only one I could find who would accept that about me.”

Wolfgang smirks. “That's not why you married me?”

Kala laughs and gently shoves him.

“It's unbelievable that it's been a year,” he says softly.

She grins. “It's been a good year, hm?”
“Best year of my life,” he says seriously.

She nods in agreement and stretches to kiss him. The train slows to a stop again, and they step out onto the platform. Kala digs into her bag to pull out the two bagels that Wolfgang had wrapped up in foil.

“Oh my God,” she says dramatically. “You didn’t burn them!”

He gives her a light spank in response. She smirks at him as they go up the stairs, then hands him one of the bagels.

They each take a bite and then they focus on finding the doctor’s office. It’s an unusually warm day for November, and Kala tilts her head back in the sun while they navigate the narrow streets and finish breakfast. She smiles and he holds her a little closer and they exchange a small, happy glance.

They come up to the doctor’s office after a few minutes. It’s one of the few places with doctors who speak a language they both understand (‘How is it possible that out of eight of us, none of us speak French?’ she had asked when she and Wolfgang first moved to Paris.)

“Oh okay,” says Kala, taking a breath as she pushes the door in. “Here goes.”

The reception room is filled with young mothers and their children, many of whom are whining, crying, and shouting. Wolfgang glances at Kala, who simply nudges him up towards the front desk. They check in, then take a seat. Kala unscrews the lid on her thermos and takes a few sips of coffee, then offers it to Wolfgang. He squeezes her knee in thanks and kisses her under her ear.”

“What are we finding out today?” he murmurs.

“I’m not sure,” admits Kala. “Perhaps whether it’s a boy or a girl, which would be helpful. I’m tired of saying it. And once we know that, we can start arguing about names.”

He grins. “I have plenty of unpronounceable German names in mind.”

She nods. “Yes, I think it should be five syllables minimum.”

“Definitely,” he agrees, rubbing her arm.

She glances at him. “You’re very affectionate lately.”

He shrugs, smiling lightly.

“It’s nice,” she goes on, snuggling against him. Then she brushes her lips on his ear and adds in a whisper, “Date night tonight, okay?”

He glances at her. “Where do you want to go?”

She smiles. “I just want to stay in bed and ignore a movie.”

“This is why I love you,” he replies, kissing her quickly.

She grins, then takes the coffee back. “You’re hogging this.”

“Caffeine is bad for you,” he says.

“Oh, my love, if you think I’m switching to decaf…”
He chuckles and she smiles brightly. She’s about to pull out the jelly beans she stashed away, but the nurse calls them in. Kala goes through the steps of weight, blood pressure, temperature and more before they’re let into a small examining room.

Wolfgang glances around. “Fuck, I hate these places.”

Kala wrinkles her brow and squeezes his arm softly.

“Here, focus on these,” she says halfheartedly, gesturing at a dish of lollipops. “I'm sure BPO didn't have these...”

He manages a smile. “No.”

“You don't have to sit in here with me,” she goes on quietly.

“I'll be okay,” he replies, still looking around, still stiff.

“Are you sure?” She sits down on one of the chairs and pats the one next to her. “C’mere.” So he sits next to her, and she takes both of his hands. “Just tell me if you want to leave.”

“I really think I'm okay,” he says honestly. “At least this place has a window.”

Kala nods, aching, and gently touches her fingers to his lips.

“And we're here for a good thing,” she murmurs.

He nods. Then he takes one of the lollipops and she laughs, reassured.

“I think those are for children...”

“And?” he asks, unwrapping it and placing it in his mouth. He frowns. “This is a weird flavor...”

She giggles and twitches her fingers at him. “Let me try.”

He gives the lollipop to her and she puts it in her mouth.

“We're going to gross our kids out,” he says, laughing.

Kala grins around the candy. “Oh, we are, aren't we?”

He nods, asking for the lollipop back.

“This is a weird flavor,” she agrees before giving it to him.

“Grape?” he asks.

She frowns. “Fruit punch?”

He laughs and shakes his head. Then he smiles at her.

“Thanks for always distracting me when...” he trails off.

She nods. “Of course.”

She would say more, but the doctor arrives. She's a tall, frizzy-haired woman with large glasses, and she immediately yells in delight.
“Oh good! Oh. I was sure you wouldn't be back, you looked so scared last time. It's Kala, right?”

Kala nods, blushing slightly.

“I'm back,” she replies, smiling and shaking the doctor's hand.

“And you are the.... boyfriend, husband, significant other, life partner, biological father, supportive gay friend...?“

Wolfgang laughs. “Husband. And biological father. At least I'm pretty sure.”

“Oh my God,” says Kala.

“Lovely,” the doctor says warmly, shaking his hand. “I'm Doctor Marsielle. You're a bit pale, you're not gonna pass out on me, are you?”

“Not a big fan of doctor's offices,” he explains. “But no.”

“Great,” she says, taking a seat across from them. She opens up her file. “So, huh... you're about 12 weeks along, so we'll definitely do an ultrasound... but I always like to ask the parents what questions they have first...”

“Oh, uh, we have a list,” says Kala, reaching into her bag.

“She has a list,” Wolfgang says to the doctor. “She makes lists in her sleep.”

“Well, someone has to,” says Kala, unfolding the paper. “Okay, number one, when will the morning sickness go away?”

The doctor sighs. “It's the worst, right? You should be about through it.. if it lasts more than a couple more weeks, come back and see me.”

Kala nods. They work through the rest of the questions, including how to stop eating peanut butter, whether it's okay to sleep on her stomach, if cramps are normal, when she can expect kicks, and finally, blushing hard, she asks, “Uh, two questions. Um. Sex is very important to us, so we would like to know that having sex is safe? For the baby I mean? And, I know how silly this sounds, but babies don't know what's going on, right? He or she wouldn't, um, hear something and...?”

Wolfgang glances at her and murmurs in German, “Sex is very important to us?”

She pushes him. “It is!”

“But why tell her that?”

“I wanted to give her some context... we have quite a bit more sex than most people.”

Wolfgang starts to laugh.

The doctor grins and holds her hands up. “Okay, sex is perfectly fine...and while yes, the baby is aware of its womb environment and to some extent the outside world, it doesn't have all the social cues to pick up on what's happening. And in fact, we recommend sex! Feel-good hormones are great stress relievers for mom and baby and babies tend to develop the best with two affectionate parents, so the sweeter you are on each other the better. Also helps with cramps, depending on what kind of sex you're having. And to preempt the question all women ask me, no, he won't “pop” you, you aren't a balloon.”
“Oh, no, I know,” says Kala, blushing. She laughs at herself. “Actually, I could answer most of my own questions, but...it’s nice to hear it from you.”

“Are you a doctor?”

“No, a pharmacist,” says Kala, adding, “though I did do all my graduate studies in biochemistry, so I like to think I can at least follow a conversation.”

“Oh, lovely,” says the doctor, nodding. “Where do you work?”

“The labs nearby? Dandekar Pharmaceuticals?”

Doctor Marsielle looks down at her chart. “That lab’s yours?” She clicks her tongue in delight. “Oh, that’s my favorite lab to work with. It’s all women, right?” She pats Kala’s arm. “Good for you. We need more female leadership in science.”

Kala beams. “Thank you.”

Wolfgang glances at her, smiling, then looks at the doctor. “No one can do what she does.”

Kala meets his eyes, and he can tell she wants to kiss him. She settles for squeezing his hand.

“I try to give young women opportunities,” she explains modestly. “I never would have been so successful if I didn’t have opportunities when I was young.” She laughs suddenly. “Oh my God, they’re going to tease me. Just last week I was telling them how important it is to put careers first...”

“You can still put your career first,” says the doctor gently. “You’ll balance things just fine, especially since you have a responsible partner.”

“Well,” says Wolfgang, and they both laugh.

“So you’ll be staying home, you think?” asks the doctor.

He shrugs. “If I need to, yeah, of course. She has the real job.”

“What do you do?” asks the doctor.

“I work with kids,” he says. “kids who have dropped out, been expelled, gotten into drugs, any of that. Try to understand what’s wrong in their lives and fix it.”

“Well, I don’t have to worry about you two being excellent parents,” says the doctor, folding her chart shut. “So, any more questions? Otherwise we’ll do that ultrasound.”

Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other, then both shake their heads. Doctor Marsielle pats the exam table and Kala takes a shaky breath.

“Okay,” she says.

She looks at Wolfgang, who gives her a gentle squeeze, then she hops up on the exam table. She lies down and pulls her shirt over her tummy, automatically tracing her fingers over the slight bump. Wolfgang watches intently, uncomfortable with her out of his reach.

“Okay,” murmurs Doctor Marsielle, adding some gel to the top of an imposing-looking wand.

Wolfgang stiffens and takes a breath. Then, impulsively, he asks, “Can I see that? I’d just feel better if I...”
He trails off. The doctor nods and hands him the transducer. Kala watches, concerned, as he compares the transducer to the tools BPO used, which are still etched in his mind.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters, “I just feel better when I...”

The doctor watches him, gathering information from his expression, and smiles sadly, seeming to understand.

“Here,” she says, offering Wolfgang a place next to her, so he can take Kala’s hand.

“Thanks,” he says softly.

“Of course,” says Dr. Marsielle.

Kala smiles and squeezes his hand. Then she tilts her head towards the monitor, watching the grey-white blobs coalesce into definitive shapes as Dr. Marsielle moved the transducer over her belly.

“Oh, there we go,” says the doctor. “There we go...okay, do you see?”

Kala, based on her reading and education, knows that what she’s seeing is about the size of an apple. Still, on the screen, lit up for them to see, it’s clearly a baby. Overlarge head, tiny legs, very alien looking. But still, a baby. She holds her breath, then looks at Wolfgang, whose expression is distant and overwhelmed.

“Okay, thoughts on knowing the gender?” asks Dr. Marsielle.

“Can you tell?” gasps Kala.

She nods. “Yep.”

Kala looks at Wolfgang. “We want to know, don’t we?”

He nods, eyes still fixed on the image. She nudges him.

“Huh?” he asks.

She smiles. “Do we want to find out if it’s a boy or girl?”

“Oh,” he says in surprise, glancing at the doctor. “Do you know?”

“90% sure,” she says. “Two more weeks and I’d be positive.”

Kala and Wolfgang look at each other once more, both smiling thoughtfully. Then Kala nods, understanding the expression on her husband’s face.

“Yes, tell us,” she agrees.


Kala grins widely, holding Wolfgang’s gaze. He tightens his grip on her hand.

“A little boy,” she murmurs.

He nods. “He’s going to be trouble, right?”

She laughs. “Yes. Definitely.”
He laughs too, kissing the side of her head. Dr. Marsielle smiles at them.

“Okay, so, that out of the way,” she says, moving the transducer, “he looks healthy, normally formed, the right size...” She continues to move the transducer, adding, “Do you recall your mom having any difficulty with pregnancy?”

Kala shakes her head. “She said it wasn't too bad.”

“Any genetic disorders you're aware of?”

She shakes her head again. “No.”


“No idea,” he says, adding at the doctor's questioning glance, “Not a lot of doctors where I was born.”

“Okay new plan. Any close relatives die of genetic conditions?”

“I'm not sure they had the chance to.”

Dr. Marsielle frowns.

“Mom was 28, dad was 57,” explains Wolfgang.

The doctor nods. “Understood. I'm sorry. And siblings?”

Wolfgang shakes his head.

“And you, dear?” she asks Kala.

“One,” says Kala. “And yes, she is crazy. But perfectly healthy.”

Wolfgang chuckles. “I'm not ready to tell Daya about this.”

“Just don't mention the movie theatre,” sighs Kala. “If she finds that out, I promise you, it will be carved on my gravestone.” Then she laughs. “I'm not looking forward to telling Felix.”

Wolfgang nods. “Yeah, I might have to get drunk for that.”

“He's godfather, obviously,” says Kala, and Wolfgang looks at her in surprise.

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Of course,” she says, smiling.

He smiles back. Then he says, “Want to go to Berlin to tell him? It's the weekend, it's been ages--”

“Yes!” agrees Kala, sitting up slightly and having to apologize to the doctor. “Yes, definitely.”

“Oh, stay there!” says Dr. Marsielle as Kala adjusts her position. “Look, can you see? Aw, he’s moving a little bit. What a chubber.”

“This is bizarre,” murmurs Wolfgang in German, which he reverts to in moments of intense feeling.

Kala nods, watching the image. “Very bizarre.”
“How big is he?” asks Wolfgang.

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“About the size of a lemon,” says Dr. Marsielle.

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“Huh,” Wolfgang goes on, pressing closer to the screen. “Is that a foot?”

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“Sort of,” says the doctor. “Legs and arms aren’t perfectly formed yet.”

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Kala grins. “He will.”

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“The dad jokes,” she says feebly.

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She dials, touches speakerphone, and waits. After two seconds, her father picks up with an exuberant outburst. “My daughter, she’s remembered me. How are you? Here, let me put this pan down..."
“Hi dad,” says Kala, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Is mom there?”

“Yes,” Sanyam says cautiously. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, uh, fine--”

“Hi, sasura,” puts in Wolfgang.

“Oh, hello my son,” says Sanyam warmly. “It’s been too long, how are you?”

“Is mom there yet?” asks Kala.

“One second...Priya!”

Kala chuckles. “Tell her to take her time.”

“Okay,” agrees Sanyam. “Where are you right now? Home?”

“By the river,” says Wolfgang.

“Is it warm there?” asks Sanyam.

“Very,” says Kala. “Unusually so.”

“Okay, here we go, your mother is here--”

“Hello!” chirps Priya.

Kala takes a breath, listening to her parents wait on the other line. “Okay. We have some...news.” She pauses. “I -- I know this may be quite unexpected and in contradiction to everything I have ever had to say on the subject -- but. I am...um. I’m. We. We are... I’m having a baby.”

There’s silence, and then Priya shouts in delight. “You’re pregnant?”

“Yes.”

“Pregnant?” confirms Sanyam.

“Yes, with a little boy, actually, so...”

“Oh my goodness, when did you find this out?” asks her father

“Two weeks ago?” Kala says nervously. “But my doctor told me to wait until now, when everything was...more certain.”

“Congratulations, oh my God!”

Kala laughs. “Okay, calm down.”

“Calm down? You’re pregnant! Daya! Daya, come here!”

“Oh no,” murmurs Kala.

“Yes?” asks Daya.

“You won’t believe it, your sister is pregnant!”
Daya’s squeal drowns out the next few seconds of conversation. Wolfgang glances at Kala.

“I love your family,” he says.

“It’s your family too,” she replies, pressing a soft kiss to his mouth.

He nods, taking a moment to kiss her back while Daya melts down on the other line.

“Boy? Girl? Oh my god Kala! How dare you? You said you would never!”

Kala laughs. “Boy, and Daya, please! Accidents happen?”

“Oh!” cries Daya dramatically. “I knew it!”

“We are very excited,” Priya says sincerely. “You have to visit.”

“We will,” says Wolfgang.

“Next month?” suggests Priya.

Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other.

“How about December?” says Kala.

“Okay, yes, good,” agrees Priya. She sighs, then laughs. “I thought you would never...?”

Kala smiles and leans against Wolfgang.

“I’m still getting used to it,” she confides.

“Yes, it takes a while,” agrees Priya, adding, “If you are ever confused, or scared, you know you can talk to me. Or auntie! Though I admit auntie can be a challenge.”

Kala laughs. “Thanks, mom.”

“It’s easier when you have a husband who loves you,” Priya goes on.

“Wolfgang has been wonderful,” Kala replies earnestly.

“Oh, no doubt,” says Priya.

“Yes, Wolfgang, how are you holding up?” asks Daya excitedly.

Wolfgang laughs. “Still surprised. Excited though.”

“I didn’t sleep for weeks when Priya was pregnant with Kala,” says Sanyam, chuckling.

“I figure I should sleep while I can,” says Wolfgang.

“Oh, yes,” agrees Sanyam. “You won’t sleep for the next twenty years. I still don’t sleep!”

“Dad, don’t scare him,” laughs Daya.


“We promise,” says Kala.
“And we have pictures, we’ll send you some,” says Wolfgang.

“You couldn’t have gotten a better son-in-law,” Daya says to her parents, adding, “I told you, second time’s the charm!”

“Daya!” sighs Kala.

“Don’t tease your sister, Daya,” says Sanyam.

“I’m not teasing her!” says Daya. “Who was more thrilled than me when Kala married him?”

“Me,” says Wolfgang and everyone laughs.

“Well, we’ll let you go,” says Priya. “But please call more often. And send those pictures!”

“We will,” Kala assures her. “We love you!”

“We love you,” says her parents together.

“About time!” adds Daya as the line dies.

Kala smiles gently and pockets her phone. Then she leans her head on Wolfgang’s shoulder and glances up at him.

“Lunch?” she asks.

He nods. “Carbs?”

She laughs. “Yes.” Then she nuzzles him and presses a kiss to his mouth. “Pasta.”

He laughs, and then they get up, heading towards the nearest cafe with pasta, strong coffee, and the chocolate cake Kala loves.
Announcement Part 1

Chapter Summary

Kala and Wolfgang go to visit Felix and Dani in Berlin. Kala eats all the Thai food. Felix reassures Wolfgang about fatherhood by getting him drunk.

Chapter Notes

Mostly fluff. Warning for a quick conversation about Wolfie's childhood that mentions domestic abuse. I had to write about Felix first. The Cluster is next!

“I do believe it is always raining here,” says Kala, peering out of the window of their BMW (a slightly updated version from Wolfgang’s old gray one.)

“It rains just for us,” he mutters, adding loudly to a nearby car, “Fuck off! Fucking merge! Goddamnit.”

Kala pats her tummy and says to it, “Thank goodness you can’t understand.”

“Shit,” Wolfgang goes on.

Kala rests her hand on his leg. “We’re almost there, it’s fine.”

“Germans are awful drivers,” he says softly.

She squints. “You’re German.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “And I’m an awful driver.”

She laughs. “Yes, you are, the first time I drove with you I nearly had a heart att--”

“YES,” he interrupts, merging aggressively and flipping off the driver behind him, who beeps.

“---ack,” Kala finishes weakly. “And now I’ve nearly had another one.”

He reaches over and squeezes her thigh. “Sorry.” Then he says, “We should get a new car...one with airbags.”

“Yes, and I should be the one driving,” she replies.

He looks at her incredulously. “You have worse road rage than I do.”

She looks down, laughing, and tangles her fingers gently with his. “I know. I do.” She laughs more loudly, eyes crinkling. “We need to grow up before we have this baby.”

He shakes his head. "No. It’s more fun like this.”
She leans over and presses a quick kiss to his cheek. Then she glances at the time on the dashboard. “Oh, we’re late.” He reaches for his phone, but she stops him. “Wolfgang, no, oh my God.” She picks up the phone. “I’ll text him.”

But Felix has already texted. *You’ve literally never been on time for anything in your life what is wrong with you? Also Dani wants to know what do you want for dinner? Also I miss you both a fucking lot, get here soon.*

Kala laughs. “Aw. He wants to know what we want for dinner?”

Wolfgang slams on the breaks, swearing again. Then he says, “Anything you want.”

“Okay, peanut butter,” she agrees.

He laughs. “No, not peanut butter.”

“Peanut...butter...” she sounds out, typing it. “There.”

“Thai food,” he says.

She moans. “Mm, yes, okay.”

He laughs. They finish the drive without incident and pull up to Felix and Dani’s apartment about fifteen minutes later. Kala stretches for a moment, sore from being in the car for so long, and Wolfgang locks it up and pockets his keys. They head for the door, but Felix and Dani beat them to it. Felix runs up to them and catches them both in a bone-crushing hug, followed by Dani, who runs at them with her hands over her head, squealing, and wraps her arms around all three of them.

“I can’t believe you’re really here!” she yells.

“Fuck! It’s been so long!” Felix laughs and releases them.

They step back to look at their friends -- Felix in a baggy Germany Football sweatshirt, sleeves rolled up, hair mussed, grinning, and Dani, in a pink floral robe, hair in big curlers, eyes bright with excitement.

Then their dog -- a small black lab named Chance that Kala and Wolfgang found on the street the last time they visited -- runs out of the apartment door.

Felix sighs. “Goddamnit, hold on--”

Kala kneels down and scruffs Chance’s ears. “Yes, hello! You’re much bigger!”

“Eats like a hippopotamus,” sighs Felix. “Chance, get over here, c’mon!”

Chance doesn’t come back and instead nuzzles Wolfgang’s knee interestingly. He kneels down too.

“Yeah, are you giving them hell, huh? Hope so.”

“Yes, she is, yesterday she ate the remote,” says Dani, folding her arms.

“Good girl,” says Wolfgang. “Next time eat Felix’s PlayStation...”

Kala giggles and pats the dog’s side. Then she straightens up and hugs Felix and Dani again.

“How are you?” she asks warmly.
Felix smiles. “Good.”

“Tired,” says Dani, nudging him. “He helped an old woman who locked herself out of her house at like...three last night.”

“We were awake anyway, Spatzi.”

“True, we were,” sighs Dani. “He was running lines with me all night like a fucking angel.”

Felix grins. “She's got a big audition tomorrow.”

Dani holds up two sets of crossed fingers and smiles brightly.

“How did we end up with these women, hm?” Felix asks Wolfgang.

Wolfgang laughs. “No idea.”

Dani smirks and puts an arm around Felix. “We took pity on you.”

“You can't joke about that!” says Felix.

Dani glances at him, eyes full of humor, then kisses the side of his head.

“I actually like you, dummy.”

“Do you see what I put up with?” he asks the other two.

Kala and Wolfgang smile warmly at each other, and then Wolfgang smirks.

“So when are you two getting married?”


Felix glances at her. “We have to figure out where we're going.”

“Pick carefully,” teases Kala. “We went to Paris and never left...”

Felix rolls his eyes. “No one can compare with you two. You go to Paris for your honeymoon and what do you fucking do? Buy an apartment.”

Kala laughs and runs a hand through her hair. “Yes, an apartment which is far too small now.”

Dani squints. “Why is that?”

Kala gasps at her carelessness and glances at Wolfgang, then squeezes his hand excitedly and says to Felix, “Did you get the food yet?”

“You two and your secrets,” says Felix. “Yeah, we did, it’s upstairs...”

They glance at each other once more, then follow them up the stairs. Chance barrels up next to them, nearly knocking them all down.

“You two and your secrets,” says Felix with a sigh.

They enter the first-floor apartment, which is spacious, warm, and always filled with the mumbled background noise of a favorite film. Kala nearly runs to the table.
“Oh my God, I’m sorry, I just -- I have to eat, right this second, oh my God, these are my favorite noodles!”

Wolfgang smiles to himself and Felix glances at him.

“You look good,” says Felix. “Like better than usual. Like not exhausted.”

Wolfgang shrugs. “I’m happy lately.”

Dani glances at Kala, who’s filling a plate for each of them.

“Wonder why,” she says, smiling in amusement.

Felix looks back at Wolfgang. “You drove all the way here to have dinner with me?”

Wolfgang grabs Felix’s head and pulls it closer so he can press a kiss to the side of it. “Yep.”

Felix snorts and gives his friend a quick side-hug. Then he perks up. “Beer? I got your favorite. And Kala’s favorite wine, don’t even ask me how I remembered that.”

“He called Daya,” reveals Dani.

“Babe,” groans Felix. “I was trying to impress them with my memory!”

Dani shrugs. “I like to keep you honest.”

He chuckles, giving in, and Wolfgang smiles to himself.

“I’ll take a beer,” he adds. “Long drive.”

“I made up the spare room for you,” says Dani. “We assumed you weren’t driving back tonight.”

Wolfgang shakes his head in agreement, adding, “We might hang out with everybody tonight after dinner, just ignore us.”

Felix smirks. “You know we always do when you’re doing your freaky mind seance.”

Wolfgang shoves him, grinning, and then they look up when Kala yells at them to come sit down. Felix goes to the fridge for beer and wine and Dani helps him with glasses. They sit down at the table with their friends, and Felix goes to pour some wine in Kala’s glass but she stops him.

He squints. “Wrong kind? I was sure I got the right one...I even called your sister...damn.”

“No, no, you did,” says Kala. “I’m just...um...dieting.”

Felix glances at her plate, which has at least a pound of food on it. “You’re a worse liar than Wolfie. But...suit yourself.” Then he stops and looks at her in a new light. “Hold up.”

He and Dani exchange a brief, exhilarated glance. Kala and Wolfgang also look at each other, nervous. Felix’s eyes widen suddenly and he makes a show of setting down the bottle of wine and taking a deep breath. Then he puts a hand on Wolfgang’s shoulder and looks at Kala.

“Tell me you’re not having a kid with this idiot,” he says.

Kala covers her face, suddenly laughing, and eeks out, “I might be.”

Dani gasps loudly, jumping to her feet, nearly upsetting the table. Felix lets out all his breath at once,
overwhelmed, and then smacks Wolfgang’s arm hard.

“Congratulations, oh my God!” yells Dani.

“Congratulations!” adds Felix. “Shit!” He reaches across the table to squeeze Kala’s hand and she grins. “When did you find out? Shit! I can’t believe it. I mean, I can, you guys fuck enough to screw up any birth control—”

“Felix!” scolds Dani, laughing.

“-- I just thought you were trying to, you know, do the career thing!”

“How pregnant are you?” asks Dani.

“About three months,” says Kala.

“What the fuck! You look the same! Three months? You waited to tell us that long?”

Wolfgang smirks and squeezes Kala’s knee. “Someone, despite extensive medical training, didn’t think she might be pregnant until two weeks ago.”

Kala nods. “I’m excellent at lying to myself.”

Dani smirks. “I never expected such carelessness from you, Kala. From Wolfgang, of course, but you?”

“I was the responsible one,” says Wolfgang. "I told her I didn’t have a condom.”

“It’s true,” sighs Kala.

“And you told me to do something more useful with my mouth than talk...” he goes on.

Kala blushes hard, shoving him and laughing. “You are revealing far too much about our intimate relationship.”

He shrugs, smiling, pleased with himself. Kala shakes her head.

“You’re hopeless,” she informs him.

“So when does it get here?” asks Felix. “Like...April?”

“April,” agrees Kala happily.


“Boy,” says Kala.

Dani awws loudly, putting a hand on her heart. “A little boy! Oh my God, Kala, he is going to be so beautiful!”

Felix grins. “Shit. You better hope he’s not a miniature Wolfie.”

Kala turns her eyes on Wolfgang and smiles. “That’s exactly who I hope he is.”

Wolfgang kisses the side of her mouth softly and she smiles wider.

Felix shakes his head and finally starts in on his food. “Just don’t let him drive you to the hospital.”
“Hey,” says Wolfgang. “My driving’s not that bad.”

“Oh, no, it is,” Kala says seriously, swirling some rice noodles on her fork.

Wolfgang chuckles and grabs a wonton from a container in the center of the table. “Knowing us, we’ll miscalculate and you’ll have him at home.”

“Oh, undoubtedly,” jokes Kala. Then she nudges Wolfgang under the table and looks at Felix and Dani. “So, you two...we were hoping...”

“Only if you want to,” says Wolfgang.

“Yes, only if you want...” agrees Kala.

“What?” asks Felix.

“We’d like you to be the godparents,” explains Kala.

Felix stares at them, his light eyes flicking back and forth between them. Dani simply covers her mouth, eyes growing wet, and smiles widely.

Felix finally says, “Us? Me?”

“You,” says Wolfgang

“Me,” repeats Felix. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” laughs Wolfgang.

“So?” asks Kala.

“Well, fuck, of course,” says Felix softly, turning to Dani. “Babe?”

“Of course,” says Dani, sniffling. “I’m going to fucking fall apart right now. Of course.”

“What about your friends, Will, Lito...?” asks Felix.

Kala smiles warmly. “We love them but we know this is the right choice.”

“You’re family,” adds Wolfgang.

Felix nods and sniffs. “Thank you.” Then he grins suddenly and raises his glass. “Fuck, you’re having a baby!”

Wolfgang laughs and they all clink glasses. Dinner passes quickly. Kala eats nine wontons and Wolfgang looks at her slack-jawed (she sticks her tongue out and reaches for wonton number 10). Felix, Dani, and Wolfgang each have several beers and then some celebratory vodka (and then Felix and Wolfgang have some celebratory scotch). Kala and Dani retreat to the kitchen to share some tea, while Felix and Wolfgang sit down on the old couch by the window that overlooks the city. Chance settles at their feet, chewing on a beef bone.

“Freaking out?” asks Felix as he pours a bit more scotch.

Wolfgang throws back the dregs of his current drink and sticks his glass out for more. “Not as much as I thought I’d be. I was at first.”
“How’d that happen?” wonders Felix, sounding so incredulous he might as well be asking how the world began.

Wolfgang bites his bottom lip, smiling in amusement. “Boring movie, started fooling around, very nice bathrooms just seconds away.”

Felix groans. “Well, there’s the first thing you gotta keep a secret from that poor kid...a movie theater bathroom? Who the fuck are you?”

Wolfgang laughs. “What’s sad is that our flat was a five-minute walk away.”

Felix. “That is sad. A movie theater bathroom...”

Wolfgang leans back and looks up at the ceiling, shaking his head. Then he says, “Fuck, I love her so much...”

“She’ll be okay,” says Felix.

Wolfgang shrugs. “It’s so dangerous. I keep reading this book. Kala hates it, she says I’m just scaring myself but...”

“Women have babies every day,” says Felix in a slow, soothing tone. “And Kala? She’s the toughest girl I’ve ever met in my life, I have no idea what you’re worried about.”

Wolfgang smiles and glances at his friend. “Yeah, she is.” Then he shakes his head again, starting to laugh. “You know, what do you do with a baby? Like...what do they like?”

“I think they just eat,” says Felix. “Eat and sleep and cry.”

Wolfgang wrinkles his brow. “What are we doing having a baby?”

“You’ll figure it out,” says Felix.

Wolfgang keeps looking at the ceiling. “It’s such a big responsibility, it’s impossible to do everything right...”

“Yeah, it is,” agrees Felix. “So what, you’ll do all the important parts right.”

Wolfgang breathes out, fingering the lip of his glass. “I don’t want to do anything my father did, I remember what it was like being a kid and...”

“Hey, listen,” Felix says firmly. “Remember when you and Kala were getting married, and you came over and poured your teeny-tiny inaccessible heart out to me about how you couldn’t live with yourself if you ever treated her like your dad treated your mom?”

Wolfgang nods.

“Well?” Felix goes on. “It’s been a year, and I don’t think you’ve ever come home drunk and beat the shit out of her, so...”

Wolfgang nods again, more slowly. “I know.” He straightens up and takes a drink. “I know that, I just...”

“I know how hard it is for you,” says Felix. “But you can trust yourself, okay?”

Wolfgang squeezes his arm. “Thanks.” Then he shakes his glass at Felix. “You have to stop me after
“Getting you drunk’s the only way I ever get you to tell me anything important,” complains Felix, pouring some more.

Wolfgang laughs. “Yeah, that’s why you have to stop me.” He takes a large sip and rests his arm along the back of the couch, then goes on, “I want him to have Kala’s last name, is that weird?”

Felix shakes his head. “No, I get that, the world doesn’t need any more Bogdanows. I mean, I love you, but Berlin’s pretty fucking pleased you’re the last one.”

Wolfgang snorts. “Yeah, I’m pleased about that too.”

“Have you talked to Kala about that yet?”

Wolfgang shakes his head, leaning forward to take his shoes off. “I almost took her name when we got married so she won’t be surprised, I don’t think she’ll mind.”

“You did?” asks Felix.

“Yeah, but she told me not to,” says Wolfgang. “She thinks it’s important we’re two separate people.”

“You’re the least separate people I’ve ever met in my life,” says Felix. “Seriously, you freak me out, you’re fucking in sync.”

“That’s the sensate part,” says Wolfgang, adding with a frown, “actually that could just be the married part. It’s hard to tell anymore.”

Felix glances at him and refills his glass. “Yeah, didn’t they all catch on by now? How’d you keep this from them?”

“We don’t visit a lot lately, we’re all so busy,” he explains. “Though Lito was losing his mind about back pain the other day, that’s definitely Kala’s fault.”

“Pregnancy sounds terrible,” sighs Felix.

Wolfgang shrugs. “It’s been kind of fun.”

Felix makes a face. “I’m not talking about for you.”

“Oh.” Wolfgang laughs suddenly and covers his face. “Damn it, Felix...”

“Don’t complain, this is my best scotch,” says Felix, adding, “why is it fun for you?”

“Because I get to spoil her, I love spoiling her,” says Wolfgang dreamily. “I love making her happy.”

“Okay, you’re drunk,” says Felix, grinning widely.

“So are you,” says Wolfgang.

“True,” says Felix, gesturing with his glass. “But not as drunk as you.”

Wolfgang sits up suddenly and shakes his head. “Shit, I told Kala we’d talk to everybody tonight...”

Felix actually giggles. “So much for that.”
Wolfgang nods in agreement. Then he glances at the bottle of scotch, which has about two drinks left, and grabs it. “Might as well.”

“Exactly,” says Felix, extending his glass.

About an hour later, Kala returns to the living room, wrapped in a fluffy robe she brought, yawning widely. She sees Felix and Wolfgang on the couch, asleep with the dog next to them, and rolls her eyes affectionately. She wants to sleep too -- Dani talked her ear off about maternity clothes -- so she’ll settle for visiting everyone tomorrow.

She nudges Wolfgang’s shoulder, and he grins sleepily and pulls her onto his lap.

“No...” sighs Kala.

He nuzzles into her and mumbles, “You’re my wife.”

She nods. “Yes.”

“You actually married me.”

“Mmhm.”

“I can’t believe it...”

Kala kisses the side of his head. “It’s true.”

“And you’re having a baby...”

“I am...”

“A baby, Kala, like, a real human person just...tiny.”

“Yes, that’s what a baby is.”

He laughs and holds her tighter.

“Are you a little drunk?” she asks.

“Oh, yeah, very drunk,” he agrees.

She smiles. “Want to go to bed?”

He nods.

“Okay,” she says patiently, getting to her feet and pulling him with her. “Let’s go.”

“I love you so much,” he says as she pulls him towards the spare room.

“I love you too,” she says.

“No, like...I...I just...like... I just love you so much.”

Kala throws her head back and giggles. “You are so drunk.”

He laughs too and they reach the spare room. She throws his pajamas at him (he catches the boxers but not the shirt, and deciding he won’t be successful in finding the arm holes anyway, just opts for the boxers.) Kala flops down on the bed and he curls up next to her after getting dressed, then holds
her close to stay warm. She touches her nose to his.

“Wolfgang?” she asks, voice full of humor.

He opens his eyes. “Hm?”

“I just like I just love you so much, too,” she says.

He laughs loudly. “You are so mean.”


He nods. “Uh huh.” Then he pulls her closer and kisses her. “It just means I love you.”

She smiles. “I know. I love you too.”
The next morning, Wolfgang and Kala set out on a walk around Berlin (Wolfgang moaning about his head and drinking copious amounts of coffee, Kala teasing that he can no longer handle alcohol, which means he’s getting old) and end up at a tiny cafe that looks out on a stony alley, strewn with strings of lights.

“This reminds me of the cafe in the rain,” says Kala, pulling her chair closer to Wolfgang and nudging her knees against his.

He reaches for a strawberry on the plate of fruit, bread, and butter that the waiter set out.

“This one’s warmer,” he replies.

She laughs. “True.” Then she gestures at a server and asks, “Is it possible to get some peanut butter?”

The server glances at Wolfgang, seeming to check whether he heard correctly, then says, “Yes, right away.”

“You have a problem,” Wolfgang tells his wife.

She kicks him lightly under the table. “Cravings typically reflect a real nutritional need. It’s unhealthy to ignore them.”

“Says the woman who ate two tubs of peanut butter cup ice cream last week, during a single episode of The Voice—”

“It was an elimination episode, Wolfgang!”

“Two entire tubs, Kala.”

She giggles and squeezes his hands. “Okay, ready?”

Wolfgang nods, adding, “We need to be careful with Riley.”

Kala sighs. “I feel terrible, being excited around her for this...”

“We can’t help it,” he replies. “I’m sure she knows that.”

Kala nods unsurely.
“So, do you want to do it individually, or...?”

Kala shakes her head. “I’d like them all here.”

“Some of them are going to be asleep...”

“Yes, but us having a baby is far more important than their sleep schedules.”

“You’ve gotten so inconsiderate.”

“You’ve rubbed off on me.”

He crunches on a piece of apple. “You know I want to make a joke about that, right?”

“Don’t you dare,” she says.

He cracks up and pushes the plate towards her. “Eat something that isn’t peanut butter.”

She selects a piece of pineapple, then smiles excitedly and squeezes his hand. “Okay.” She pulls out her phone, opens up the group chat (which, despite their connection, is easier when trying to get ahold of everyone at once) and starts to type.

Kala, 9:14 a.m. -- Come have breakfast with us! We have news :) 

Lito, 2:14 a.m. -- It’s nighttime here my love, we’re watching a movie.

Nomi, 1:14 a.m. -- Breakfast at night, fuck yeah, hold on, I’m in the tub...

Riley, 8:16 a.m. -- Ooh yes! Let me wake up Will.

Will, 8:17 a.m. -- Riley just jumped on me to wake me up. Thanks guys.

Wolfgang, 9:17 a.m. -- You’re welcome.

Capheus, 11:17 a.m. -- What’s for breakfast?

Wolfgang, 9:18 a.m. -- Peanut butter.

Kala, 9:18 a.m. -- Ha ha.

Lito, 2:18 a.m - Aren’t you two right next to each other? Why are you texting each other?

Sun, 5:19 p.m. -- News? For all of us?

Kala, 9:19 a.m. -- Yes!

“Hi,” says Nomi, appearing in the booth wearing a bathrobe with a pattern of leaves and birds on it, twisting her hair to rid it of moisture.

“Hey!” murmurs Kala, squeezing her waist.

“Nice place,” says Nomi, glancing around the cafe. “Where are you at?”


Nomi nods then reaches for a piece of bread and spreads it with marmalade and butter.
“Sorry to make you get out of your bath,” says Kala.

Nomi waves the concern off. “I was about to anyway, I was getting pruny.”

Kala laughs. Then Will and Riley slide into the booth -- Riley in penguin-themed footie pajamas, Will in the same, only featuring polar bears -- and laugh as they jostle for the pitcher of coffee.

“Where can I get some of those?” jokes Wolfgang, gesturing at their pajamas.

“You could never pull these off,” replies Will, pouring Riley a cup of coffee.

Riley grins widely. “Cute, right? I found them at a thrift store, can you believe that?”

“Ugh, you find the best stuff at thrift stores,” gushes Nomi.

“Yes!” agrees Riley. “Why does anyone shop anywhere else?”

“Well, for clean underwear, Riles,” says Will.

She pauses, nibbling on a strawberry. “True.”

Lito, bleary-eyed and hugging a blanket, appears next in the booth. “This better be good,” he says. “We were at the climax of Vertigo .”

“Good one,” says Wolfgang.

Lito squints. “You like Hitchcock?”

“No, Felix does, and he forces me to watch with him,” says Wolfgang.

Lito grins and nods. “Good for him.” Then he notices the food and happily grabs a slice of cantaloupe. “Finally, something sweet! Hernando has me on a strict diet after last week’s ice cream incident...”

Kala’s eyes widen, full of guilt.

“Nice job, babe,” murmurs Wolfgang.

She elbows him hard.

Then Sun and Capheus appear -- Sun smiling tiredly, Capheus grinning wide -- and take seats next to Will and Riley. The waiter appears to refill the coffee, resupply the bread, and give Kala a small dish of peanut butter.

Capheus laughs, gesturing at it. “You weren’t kidding!”

Sun, surprising everyone, moans happily. “Peanut butter! Do you mind? Can I have some? I can’t believe how much I’ve wanted this lately!”

Wolfgang glances at Kala, who bites her lip, looking even guiltier, and nods at Sun.

“So,” says Nomi in a conspiratorial voice. “What’s the big news?”

Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other. Kala takes a drink of coffee and then smiles gently at her hands in her lap. Wolfgang reaches over and takes one of them and she smiles wider.

“Okay,” she says breathily, “this might be quite a shock. At least, it was for me.”
She looks around at their faces -- Riley puzzled, Nomi and Will excited, Lito and Sun concerned, Capheus simply smiling -- and then back at Wolfgang, who nudges her.

“Okay. I’m having a baby.”

There’s a second of silence, and then the table explodes with cheers, laughter, and clapping. Nomi gets to her feet, her hands above her head, dancing and yelling, “Neets! Neets, get in here! You won’t believe this!” Lito is also on his feet, clapping, already crying. Sun squeezes Kala’s arms, beaming, whispering congratulations. Riley and Will shake each other like kids who just won a prize, grinning, whispering to each other about babysitting. And Capheus throws an arm around Wolfgang and ruffles his hair, laughing victoriously.

“This explains it!” sighs Sun as the table quiets. “The peanut butter, the nausea!”

“I’m sorry!” says Kala hurriedly. “I didn’t know what was going on until a couple of weeks ago, and then, well, we wanted to wait for the second trimester.”

They overwhelm her with questions until she finally puts her hands up and laughs.

“One at a time!”

“Me first!” says Nomi, sticking her hand in the air like a student. “Okay. When are you due?”

“April,” says Kala.

“A, Spring baby!” says Nomi.

Kala grins. “Yes.”

Then Nomi squints. “Was this...a birthday sex baby?”

Kala laughs and shakes her head. “No. It happened after that.”

“Okay, the question we all want answered,” says Will dramatically, “was it an accident?”

“Of course it was,” jokes Nomi.

Kala glances at Wolfgang, who smirks.

“A...happy accident?” suggests Kala.

Will laughs hard. “Called it!”

Kala pops a strawberry in her mouth and shrugs. “I may have ignored my better judgment...”

Riley giggles. “Good for you.”

“How did you find out?” asks Sun.

“She ignored all the obvious warning signs for two months until I told her to go to the doctor,” says Wolfgang.

Kala opens her mouth to disagree, then nods. “Yes.”

Sun rolls her eyes affectionately, then looks at Wolfgang. “And how’d she tell you?”

He laughs. “She scared me to death, she came home crying after her appointment and I thought she
was going to tell me something was wrong.”

“Nice,” laughs Nomi. “Poor Neets, literally every time I have good news for her I get emotional and freak her out first.”

“Wait, wait,” says Lito. “Set the scene. You were...”

“At home, cooking dinner...”

Riley wrinkles her nose. “You cook?”

Sun laughs into her hands. “I cannot picture you cooking.”

“He’s a very good cook,” Kala says protectively.

Lito raises an eyebrow.

“Fine. He can make pasta.”

Lito snorts in delight. “There it is.” He collects himself over a sip of coffee. “Okay, okay, so you were cooking...”

“And I came home and burst out crying...” says Kala, laughing. “I was so nervous.”

“Nervous?” asks Will. “What, to tell Wolfgang?”

Kala nods and spreads some peanut butter on a piece of toast. “Well, he knew I didn’t want a baby, I didn’t want him to feel like he...made a mistake?”

“It was your mistake, babe,” says Wolfgang, smirking over his coffee cup.

Kala holds up a finger. “Yes, yes it was, but that is a different point.”

“No, I think we need to hear about that part,” says Riley, smiling mischievously.

Kala turns steadily pinker and finally tilts her head. “You know those dark wash jeans Wolfgang has...?”

Will and Lito both groan.

“Oh, understood,” says Will.

“No one could blame you,” adds Lito.

Kala gestures at them, catching Wolfgang’s eye. “See. It was the jeans.”

He shakes his head, trying hard not to laugh, then steals her toast and takes a bite. She gasps dramatically at him and steals a piece of bacon off his plate in retaliation.

“So, anyway,” she goes on excitedly, “he had the sweetest reaction.” She glances at him, then says to the others, “Isn’t he the cutest thing you’ve ever seen? He’s so excited he can barely stand it...”

Wolfgang does his best to hide his face behind his mug of coffee.

“Look at him,” Kala goes on fondly, putting her arms around him and nuzzling his cheek.

He glances at her. “You’re unbelievable.”
She beams, he rolls his eyes, then he kisses the side of her mouth. The table collectively *awws*, and Wolfgang looks at them all with an outraged expression.

Then Lito gasps. “Oh! Boy or girl?”

Kala glances up. “Boy!”

Another loud *aw* from everyone

Nomi smiles. “Just don’t get too attached to that...”

“We don’t care about any of that,” agrees Wolfgang. “We just want a healthy baby.”

Nomi beams in approval. “Good approach.”

Lito leans forward, full of feeling, and squeezes one of Kala’s hands and one of Wolfgang’s. “He’s going to be beautiful. I’m so happy for you.”

Kala grins. “Thank you.”

Wolfgang smiles. “Thanks.”

“How are you feeling?” asks Capheus.

Kala laughs. “Oh, a little off-balance, but at least the morning sickness is gone...”

Capheus grins and shakes his head. “No, no, how are you feeling as a mother?”

Kala considers, then smiles suddenly. “Good,” she says, nodding. “I was terrified at first but...” She looks at Wolfgang, smiling wider. “He says all the right things.”

Everyone smiles. Riley and Will nudge each other. Capheus grins.

Then Nomi says, “Okay. we’re getting cake. Cake and champagne.”

There are excited murmurs of agreement. Lito, Nomi, Will, and Riley excuse themselves to find more appropriate clothes for walking around Berlin in search of a bakery. Riley is the first to return, and she squeezes Kala’s arm gently.

“Kala love, please don’t be offended, but I’m going to take a Blocker when you’re actually giving birth...”

Kala tucks Riley’s hair affectionately behind her ear, nodding. “No, no of course. I was actually going to suggest that.”

Riley smiles and nods. “Thank you.”

“Do you think we’ll feel the labor?” wonders Sun.

“I would imagine so,” says Kala. “We seem to share most intense feelings...”

Wolfgang grimaces. “Hadn’t thought about that.”

“Yes, you especially,” says Kala.

“Can I take a Blocker?” he jokes.
“You’re the one who got me pregnant,” says Kala, “so, you have to suffer with me.”

“You’re very heartless, you know that?”

Kala nods, playing along. “Completely devoid of kindness and consideration.”

“Evil, actually,” he agrees.

She smiles and kisses him quickly. “You can take one if you want. That may be a very good idea, actually, so one of us is clear-headed.”

“I’ll do whatever you want,” he replies.

Then Will, Nomi and Lito return, bundled up.

“Neets is going to knit you so many baby clothes,” says Nomi. “She’s literally already planning. She got out of bed to do sketches.”

“Oh, Amanita makes beautiful clothes, tell her thanks!”

Nomi grins. “Will do.”

“When says she is already shopping online,” says Lito, touching Kala’s arm and adding, “and Hernando is insisting that you let him take baby pictures.”

“Oh,” sighs Kala, “yes that would be lovely.”

“You two need a new apartment,” says Riley with a laugh.

“I know!” agrees Kala. “Oh my God, it’s barely big enough for us...”

Will grins. “Hey, we should visit and go house hunting with you. Riles has a great eye for that.”

Kala nods eagerly. “Yes, you should!”

“Okay, cake,” says Nomi. “It’s time for cake.”

Everyone nods in agreement, and Kala and Wolfgang get to their feet to put on their coats. But Lito gasps, pointing.

“Bump! Tiny bump!”

Kala blushes and puts her hands on her tummy. “Barely.”

“May I?” asks Lito.

“Yes, of course...”

“Me too?” asks Capheus.

“Yes, all of you,” says Kala, rolling her eyes fondly.

They all gather around her, gently pressing their hands to her belly, grinning, giggling, totally delighted. Kala looks at Wolfgang and rolls her eyes again. He smiles at her.

Then, tying coats tighter and pulling on thick gloves, the eight of them head for the door.
The Dandekars

Chapter Summary

Kala and Wolfgang visit her family in Mumbai.

Chapter Notes

Formerly I had Kala's aunt named "Riya" but then I found out canonically her name is "Ina." Oops! This detail has been fixed. :-)

“If we don't board this plane soon, I'm going to scream,” says Kala, leaning her head back on the wall.

Wolfgang glances at her, a smile starting at the corner of his mouth. He passes her a bag of apple slices.

“Oh, I see,” she says, opening the bag. “You think I'm grumpy because I'm hungry, when in fact, I'm just grumpy.”

He puts an arm around her. “I don't mind.”

She rests her head on his shoulder, crunching on a slice of apple. Then an announcement comes on the air.

“Flight 447 from Paris to Mumbai is delayed--”

Mumbled swearing and groans all around. Kala glances at Wolfgang.

“We're walking around, I can't sit still another second.”

He nods and they get up, taking hands. Paris is experiencing an unusually snowy winter and many flights are grounded. It doesn't help that it's Christmas Eve and the airports are inundated with travelers. They're on their way to visit her family, and though the Dandekars don't celebrate any of the holidays he grew up with, it's the first time Wolfgang will be with family for the holidays since his mother died.

Kala glances at her phone when it buzzes. It's a text from Daya.

Daya, 1:30 p.m. -- In the air yet?

Kala, 9:31 a.m. -- Delayed!

Daya, 1:31 p.m -- Mom is beside herself because Auntie said pregnant women shouldn't fly.

Kala, 9:31 a.m -- Tell Auntie our medical knowledge has improved since she last consulted women's health magazine in 1970.
Daya, 9:32 a.m -- Oooh. Someone's grumpy.

Kala sighs sharply. “Hold on, I have to call my family...”

Wolfgang holds his breath. Priya, and especially Auntie, have been a challenge lately.

Kala dials and her mother picks up immediately.

“Kala, Kala, listen to me--”

“Priya, it's fine!” says Sanyam in the background.

Her aunt jumps in. “No! I heard pregnant women should not fly! It was on Dr. Oz!”

“Auntie, Dr. Oz is a fraud!”

Wolfgang cracks up, glances at his wife and murmurs, “Dr. Oz?”

Kala grins and murmurs in German, “At least you can drink this week.”

“Kala, in Hindi, we've talked about this!” says her aunt.

“All of you, listen, please,” says Kala. “I'm only 5 months pregnant, I can fly just fine.”

“Listen to her!” says Sanyam. “She's a very talented pharmacist. She knows better than we do!”

“Is your husband there?” asks her aunt. “Let me talk to him!”

Kala passes her phone to Wolfgang as they walk down the concourse, pressing close to listen in.

“Listen, young man,” begins her aunt. “Kala has difficulty admitting if something is wrong, so you have to watch her very closely.”

“I'll make sure she's okay,” says Wolfgang reassuringly.

“Yes, you better.”

Sanyam sighs deeply in the background. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, don’t apologize,” says Priya. “We have a reason to be concerned, she’s having a baby, Sanyam!”

“Yes, Priya, she’s having a baby, not a hippopotamus!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” jokes Kala, taking the phone back. “I feel like I’m having a hippopotamus.”

Her family laughs. Even her aunt sighs in concession.

“Okay, enjoy your flight,” she says shortly. “Be safe.”

“Yes, Auntie,” says Kala. “Bye bye now.”

“Bye, darling!”

Kala pockets her phone, looks at Wolfgang, then bursts into a giddy smile. He laughs and puts an arm around her.
“You don’t look like you’re having a hippopotamus, babe,” he adds after a moment.

She raises her eyebrows, looking down at herself. “Oh, yes, I do.”

He glances at her. “A small hippopotamus?”

She shoves him, laughing, and goes on tiptoes to kiss him quickly. Then her expression softens and she murmurs, “Are you excited about this week?”

He nods, giving her a squeeze.

“I can’t believe we haven’t seen them since our wedding,” she says, turning down a new concourse. “This year passed so quickly, it seems impossible it’s been that long.” Then she gasps at a nearby coffee stand. “Hot chocolate.”

He nods in agreement.

“I haven’t been warm in days,” she adds.

They laugh at each other and walk over to the line. Kala leans heavily against Wolfgang, closing her eyes and nuzzling into his chest.

“Wake me up when we get to the front of the line.”

He laughs, holding her closer. She wraps her arms sleepily around his neck and he kisses the side of her head. She pulls back slightly to kiss him.

“I’m sorry about my aunt and my mother,” she says softly.

He shakes his head. “They care about you.”

“They’re insufferable,” says Kala.

His eyes crinkle. “I like them.”

Kala slowly shakes her head, starting to grin. “Who are you and what did you do with the gloomy misanthrope I fell in love with?”

“He’s still in here somewhere,” he replies.

She laughs. “Well. I never see him anymore.”

“Do you want me to be a gloomy misanthrope?”

She bites her bottom lip. “I did find him kind of sexy.”

Wolfgang snorts, gently pushing her along in line.

“A brooding kind of sexy,” she explains. Then she touches her nose to his cheek and presses a long kiss to the side of his mouth. “You’re happier. It’s nice.”

They take a few steps in line and order two large hot chocolates, then walk towards a sitting area near a window.

“We’re about to get on a plane, nothing like twenty ounces of caffeinated liquid.”

“I have to pee all the time anyway, Wolfgang.”
“Well, I don’t.”

“Hm, then you can see what it’s like!”

They sit near the window, which looks out on the runways, and Kala takes the lid off her hot chocolate so she can get acquainted with the whipped cream.

“You know what I just remembered?” she says, dipping her finger into the whipped cream and sliding her tongue along it. “Dad's food. I haven’t had his food in forever, oh my God...”

Wolfgang smiles, watching her, happy to listen. Her voice is different when she’s excited, somehow brighter.

“And the weather,” she says seriously. “It’s supposed to be in the mid-30s all week.”

He wrinkles his nose. “And I have to keep my clothes on despite that?”

Kala points her whipped-cream-covered finger at him. “You are to keep your clothes on at all times.” She pauses. “Except when we’re in my old room...recreating the time I didn’t get in bed with you the morning after you interrupted my wedding.”

He nods. “With a different outcome, obviously.”

“Obviously,” she agrees with a soft blush and an even softer smirk. Then she wrinkles her brow, leaning back in her seat, and huffs out a tiny, pained breath. “Oof. Everything hurts now.”

He leans closer and presses his hands to her tummy. She sighs and puts her hands over his.

“And he moves so much lately,” she says.

Wolfgang grins. “Especially at night.”

Kala closes her eyes, groaning. “Don’t remind me.”

He pats one side of her stomach, addressing the baby. “Go to sleep, mausi.”

“Yes, go to sleep,” she says, looking down at herself. Then she laughs. “No, stay awake. Otherwise you’ll be awake at night.”

“Mm, true,” Wolfgang agrees. He taps her stomach again. “Nevermind. Wake up.”

Kala leans her head back, laughing. Then she pushes Wolfgang’s chest lightly so he sits back in his seat. He picks up his hot chocolate and nudges her foot.

“What else?”

Kala grins. “Walking around the city, showing you everywhere I went as a child.”

“Stopping by Rasal Pharmaceuticals, making out obnoxiously in their lobby—”

Kala points at him. “Yes.” She giggles indulgently, then gasps. “Oh! We should go to the rooftop, where we had our first real conversation!”

He smiles, kisses her quickly, then nudges his nose against hers. They sit close for a few minutes, sipping their hot chocolate, glancing occasionally at each other and smiling. Then Wolfgang grins.
“Listen,” he says, gesturing upwards.

Kala perks her ears. The song playing on the speaker system is *Little Drummer Boy*.

“Do you know,” Wolfgang says dramatically, “how many times...I had to listen to this fucking song because of Felix?”

Kala shakes her head, bringing her hot chocolate up to her lips.

“Every Christmas growing up, I’d go over to his shitty apartment, and his mom would be out, and we’d put on the only CD they had, which was scratched, and the only song that would play properly is this one.”

“And he kept it on all night, didn’t he?” guesses Kala.

Wolfgang nods. “Yep.”

She laughs. “I’m sorry you’re missing Christmas with Felix.”

“I’d rather be with you. I'm tired of dancing to Little Drummer Boy.”

“Dancing?” whispers Kala, an eyebrow perked in interest.

“There was... usually some drinking involved. So yes. Dancing.”

Kala gets suddenly to her feet, sticking out her hand. “You shouldn't have told me that. Now you're not getting out of it.”

He shakes his head. “No, babe, we're in an airport--”

She pulls him to his feet with more strength than he expected.

“Bossy,” he murmurs, taking one of her hands and pressing his other hand to her waist.

She beams, putting her arms around his neck. He can't hold her close anymore without her tummy getting in the way and he laughs.

“April is getting close,” she mumbles.

He raises an eyebrow. “We need to talk more about names.”

She laughs. “We do.” Then she presses closer. “You’re not dancing.”

He rolls his eyes and moves his feet. “Happy?”

She nods. They dance for a while, Kala laughing, Wolfgang hiding a grin by pressing his face into her hair; other travelers stare, but they don’t notice the attention; they're in a bubble together.

Then Kala gasps as an announcement hits the air.

*Last Call for Flight 447 from Paris to Mumbai. Last call!*

She and Wolfgang lock eyes, frenzied, then grip hands and run down the concourse. They turn towards their gate, panting, and catch the flight attendant as she’s closing the jetway. She sighs deeply and opens it for them.

“Pregnant women are supposed to board first,” she says tiredly.
“Yes, we’re so sorry,” says Kala, pulling Wolfgang after her onto the jetway.

“Delayed?” he asks.

Kala clicks her teeth in annoyance and they proceed onto the plane. Once onboard, she texts Daya, and then she pulls a blanket from her bag, snuggles against Wolfgang, and throws the blanket over the both of them.

“I’m sleeping the whole flight,” she informs him.

He smiles, reaching into his own bag. “I’ll be reading papers.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Reading papers?”

“A lot of my kids are graduating so I told them I’d read their college essays--”

Kala grins. Sometimes Wolfgang refers to the kids at work as *his kids.*

“Be nice to them,” she says as she watches him pull out a red pen.

“I’m always nice,” he replies.

She raises an eyebrow.

“I’ll be extra nice,” he tells her, tucking the blanket more securely around her. “Go to sleep.”

Eight hours in the air is more difficult than Kala expected, and instead of sleeping, she spends most of the flight wandering back and forth down the narrow aisle, bargaining with the baby to *stop moving damn it.* Eventually, as the plane is descending, she sits next to Wolfgang again. By this time in Mumbai, it’s nighttime. Kala is exhausted, and Wolfgang holds her from behind as they shuffle off the plane, just to keep her upright.

They make their way, silently, exhaustedly, to the baggage claim. Wolfgang sheds several layers of clothes, already too hot, and Kala rolls her eyes. They wait sleepily for their bags. Kala yawns every few seconds, until Wolfgang playfully clamps his fingers over her mouth, resulting in a fit of giggles and several frowns from onlookers.

Their bags come around, Wolfgang picks them both up and then they head towards the exit. Kala leans on him as they walk, and as they step outside, a wave of hot air hits them.

“Fuck this weather,” he says softly.

“Language,” she murmurs.

He laughs. “Right. Sorry.”

They take a few steps towards the curb, and the Dandekars (including Auntie) appear to their left -- her father has a sign, brightly colored, hoisted high, names inscribed as if he’s a taxi service: *Welcome home, Kala and Wolfgang!*

Kala, even in her state of complete exhaustion, grins widely. She runs up to her father and hugs him, then her mother and sister. Sanyam drops his sign, and the family all embraces Kala, most of them crying -- especially Daya, who kisses her sister’s cheek, then throws her arms around Wolfgang.
Wolfgang laughs. “Hey, Daya Papaya.”

The name comes from an ill-fated experience with papaya at their wedding last year.

Daya beams, then says in a sing-song manner, “You got my sister pregnant, you got my sister pregnant!”

“Daya!” sighs Kala, breaking momentarily from hugging her mother.

“Yes really, Daya,” agrees Auntie Ina severely.

Wolfgang grins and shakes his head to signal to Daya it’s okay. He regrets this almost immediately, however, when Daya stands on tiptoes and whispers in his ear, “A movie theater bathroom? Really?”

Wolfgang steps back indignantly. “How the fuck did you find out?”

Daya shrugs. “I’m penpals with Lito, remember?”

“I have to kill him now,” murmurs Wolfgang. “I’m going to kill him.”

Daya grins, delighted she created drama, then returns to the group surrounding Kala. Most of them are now concerned with touching her belly. She pushes them off halfheartedly, grinning. Then Sanyam steps free of the group and hugs Wolfgang tightly. Wolfgang smiles and pats his shoulder.

“Good to see you,” says Wolfgang.

“You too,” agrees Sanyam. “Here, let me take one of the bags...”

Wolfgang passes him a bag. Then Kala takes a step back, cuddling against Wolfgang, smiling at her father.

“The sign is cute,” she says softly.

Sanyam smiles and shrugs. “Glad you think so. How are you feeling?”

“Quite tired,” admits Kala.

“Well, your mother laid out your bed, and we have dal shorva waiting for you..”

Kala beams. “Perfect. Thank you.”

Sanyam can’t help but smile at Kala. “You’re big.”

She glances down at herself. “And only getting bigger...”

“Congratulations,” he says, looking at both of them.

Wolfgang grins. “Thank you.”

Kala glances up at Wolfgang, nudges his jaw quickly with her nose, and adds, “Thanks.”

Sanyam rubs his hands together. “Okay. The car is waiting! This way, everyone.”

Kala leans against Wolfgang, eyes half-closed, as they make their way through the crowded parking garage and towards a large white van that Sanyam occasionally uses for catering.
“Mm, I get to go to sleep very soon,” says Kala happily.

“He finally stop moving?” asks Wolfgang.

She opens her eyes more fully, nose wrinkling as she smiles. “Don’t jinx it.”

He laughs and rubs the side of her stomach softly. They reach the van and all pile in. Daya and Auntie, who are in the two seats in front of Wolfgang and Kala, both turn around, eerily in sync.

“So,” says Auntie.

“Yes,” says Daya. “So.”

“Names,” Auntie demands.

“Oh my God,” sighs Kala. “I’m too tired--”

“You have a whole list, babe,” says Wolfgang.

“Oh my God,” laughs Kala, leaning forward. “Okay, mm, Dhirendra ... Akaash ... Inesh ... Abhi ... Kamal ... ooh, Jinesh. I like Jinesh. Um...Mahabala...”

She notices her aunt’s face twitch in surprise.

“What?” murmurs Kala.

“They’re all Hindu names.”

Kala nods slowly. “Yes...”

“Well, won’t that sound funny with his last name?”

“Actually, Auntie, we think we want his last name to be Dandekar...”

She looks at Wolfgang. “But, don’t you want your family name carried on?”

“Not really,” says Wolfgang, holding back the bite that would normally enter his voice at the mention of his family.

“Oh, won’t your son's friends at school be confused?” murmurs her aunt. “It -- it gives the impression you’re a single mother, Kala!”

“Ina!” sighs Priya. “Don’t hound her, she just got here!”

“I’m just giving you my opinion,” says Ina calmly, turning around again and crossing her arms.

“Yes, we can always rely on you for that,” teases Sanyam.

“I think it’s nice,” announces Daya. “It shows you’re a sensitive man. And besides, your last name is terrible! So harsh and discordant. Our last name is very nice. Musical, really.”

“We are basing this all on aesthetic,” jokes Wolfgang.

“As you should!” says Daya. “You don’t want your son to grow up, bullied on the playground for a funny-sounding name!”

Kala pats Wolfgang’s arm. “I don’t think any child of ours will be bullied.”
Wolfgang grins darkly. “And if he is--”

“Then we’ll kill whoever’s bullying him,” Kala interrupts cheerfully.

“Terrorize them at least,” says Wolfgang.

“No,” says Kala, patting her tummy affectionately. “No, we’ll kill them.”

Wolfgang looks at his wife for a moment, then spontaneously laughs and kisses her ear.

“What?” she murmurs in German. “Am I turning you on?”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Mm, yeah, any time you resort to violence you know I can barely keep my clothes on--”

Kala giggles and pushes him away. Daya rolls her eyes.

“You can’t speak German to hide from me,” she says crossly.

“You don’t want to hear what we’re saying if we’re speaking German,” says Wolfgang.

Daya wrinkles her nose. “Gross!”

“Almost there,” sighs Sanyam from the front. “You still awake, Kala?”

“Yes, barely!” Kala calls from the back.

“Hang in there,” he says. “Think of the dal shorva.”

“It’s all I’m thinking about,” she says with a grin.

Wolfgang nudges the side of her head with his nose. “I love your family.”

She smiles, snuggling closer. Then the van jostles.

“Sorry!” yells Sanyam. “Damn cyclists!”

“You don’t have that problem in Paris, do you?” asks Auntie Ina.

“Oh, sometimes,” says Kala. “But we rarely drive anywhere.”

“Well, don’t walk too much, or your baby will be breach.”

Kala frowns slightly, and says in as loving a voice as she can manage, “Auntie, where do you get your information from?”

“Her astrologist,” Daya and Wolfgang say together.

“Oh, you may think it’s funny, but my astrologist has been correct in everything so far,” Ina says firmly.

“Ooh, Auntie, speaking of,” says Daya. “Tell them what he told you last week.”

Ina beams. “You’re going to have four children, two boys, two girls. Isn’t that lovely?”

“Two,” agrees Wolfgang.

“No, four,” replies Ina.

Daya laughs. “Please, have more than two! Two is barely any!”

Wolfgang squints. “No, it’s two.”

“Barely! Any!” Daya clicks her teeth. “You two are no fun.”

The van slows to a stop outside Kala’s childhood home. She turns to Wolfgang.

“I just realized, you’ve never really been here,” she whispers.

He nods, eyes fixed on the flat, smiling distantly.

“Feels like home, though,” he replies quietly. “Because it feels like you.”

She smiles widely, finding his hand, entwining their fingers. Sanyam gets out, sliding the van door open, and Kala leads Wolfgang out of the van after her aunt and sister. It’s nearly midnight, and the streets are colorful, slightly damp, infused with the scent of street food and spice vendors. Kala leans her head back, breathing in jubilantly. The group follows Sanyam and Priya along the side of the driveway and up the stairs, then into the house, which smells delicious.

It’s dark until Sanyam finds the lights. Kala looks around the suddenly-illuminated flat, heart full of something needy and undefinable, then starts to cry.

“Oh, Kala, Kala,” murmurs Priya. “It’s okay--”

“It’s alright, she cried over a dog video for two hours last week,” says Wolfgang.

Kala laughs through her tears. “It’s true, I did.” She sniffsles and wipes her face, then bursts into fresh tears. “The dog fell into a pond and someone saved him it was beautiful!”

Daya stands by, laughing silently into her hands. Wolfgang gives Kala a squeeze.

“I just missed this so much...” she goes on, looking around, hiccupping. “Oh my God, I missed this so much...”

“C’mere, dear, let’s get you some food,” says Sanyam gently,

Kala nods, following her parents into the kitchen. Auntie and Daya follow too, but quickly excuse themselves, kissing Kala goodnight and insisting they need sleep. Kala and Wolfgang are left alone with her parents. They take seats at the table, and Sanyam removes a lid on a pot on the stove.

“Hungry?” he asks Kala.

“Yes, starving,” she agrees, drying her eyes on her scarf.

“I also have naan...”


Then she notices that her father has put up the ultrasound pictures they sent him on his fridge, and starts to cry anew.
“Oh no,” she murmurs to Wolfgang, pointing the pictures out. “Oh no, no, I’m going to cry this entire week...”

He gives her a squeeze, then gestures at the pictures, addressing Sanyam, “That’s nice of you.”

Sanyam turns, smiling. “I like to see him up there when I cook.”

“And regardless of what your aunt says,” adds Priya, “we think it’s lovely his last name will be Dandekar.”

“Frankly, we’re flattered,” says Sanyam.

Kala and Wolfgang share a brief smile. Sanyam sets two bowls of soups in front of them, then pulls some naan out of the small broiler on the counter. He lays that out on a cheesecloth, sprinkles on some cilantro, then gives it to them. Kala takes a huge bite of naan, then sinks the rest of it into her bowl of soup. She leans her head back.

“Oh my God,” she murmurs. “Oh, Wolfgang I’m sorry, but I’m moving back home.”

Sanyam beams and Priya laughs.

“Don’t blame you,” says Wolfgang, adding, “this is fucking delicious, thank you.”

“Language,” sighs Kala.

“Oh, we don’t mind,” says Sanyam. “We’re desensitized at this point.”

“You’ll learn your lesson when your two year old starts swearing,” teases Priya.

“Sorry,” laughs Wolfgang.

Kala laughs too, carding her fingers through his hair and kissing the side of his head. “She’s right, he’s going to take after you...”

Priya smiles warmly. “You must be so excited.”

Kala turns to look at her mother. She nods, smiling back. She and Wolfgang eat quietly for a few minutes, eventually scraping their bowls and licking their fingers. Then Kala leans her head on Wolfgang’s shoulder, and within a few minutes, falls asleep.

Sanyam chuckles. “Long flight?”

Wolfgang nods. “Yeah, she barely sleeps.”

“Well, we should let you go,” says Priya. “I made up Kala’s old room for you.”

“If you’re not too tired,” says Sanyam to Wolfgang, “I’d love to pour you a drink.”

Wolfgang nods. “Sure, I’m not, let me just...” He glances at Kala, then shifts out of his seat and scoops her up in his arms. “Give me a minute.”

Priya laughs, waving him out of the kitchen. “Here, follow me...”

Wolfgang follows her, carrying Kala who’s completely limp with sleep, into the back of the house where Kala’s old room is. Priya turns down the covers, and Wolfgang gently shifts Kala onto her bed. She grumbles a bit but doesn’t wake up, and he covers her with a light blanket and kisses the
side of her mouth. Then Priya turns out the lights, and she and Wolfgang tiptoe out, gently closing
the door.

“Silly girl,” says Priya. “Didn’t she sleep on the plane?”

“The baby was moving too much,” explains Wolfgang.

“Ah,” says Priya, smiling. “That was Kala, too. And once she was born, she never slept, simply a
terrible napper.”

“So we have that to look forward to, then?” asks Wolfgang.

Priya laughs. “Yes, most likely.”

They reach the kitchen again, where Sanyam is pouring two small glasses of clear alcohol.

“Oh,” sighs Priya. “Desi dara? Oh, Sanyam, don’t kill the man.”

Sanyam smiles. “He’ll be fine, Priya. We’ll just have one.”

Priya pats Wolfgang’s shoulder, then signals her departure for bed, leaving Wolfgang alone in the
small kitchen with his father-in-law.

“She’s right, this is quite strong,” says Sanyam, passing Wolfgang a glass. “But, it’s celebratory.”

“Thanks,” says Wolfgang. “Cheers.”

Sanyam smiles. “Cheers.”

They clink glasses, both take a drink, then sit across from each other at the table.

“It’s been too long,” says Sanyam. “Almost a year, right?”

“More than a year, we got married in June,” says Wolfgang.

Sanyam shakes his head. “It always surprises me how fast time passes. Especially with your children.
You’ll see that. One day they’re learning to walk, the next, graduating university, and the next,
having children of their own.”

Wolfgang smiles and takes another sip of his drink.

“So,” Sanyam goes on, “over time, you learn to enjoy everything in the moment.” He pauses, then
leans forward slightly. “You know, I never thought I would see my daughter happier than she was
when she married you last year, but...she seems even happier now.

Wolfgang smiles and nods. “It’s been a good year.”

Sanyam smiles too. “So it seems.” Then he holds up his hands. “Now, I’m not going to overwhelm
you with advice—”

“No, please,” says Wolfgang.

Sanyam shakes his head. “I only have one thing to say of any importance, and I’m sure you already
know this...but, whatever your child wants to do, let him do it. Priya and I, we saw how talented
Kala was since she was very little...and it would have been so easy for us to discourage her,
especially here in India, but...we knew it was our job to support her. So...no matter how crazy your
little boy’s dreams sound initially...he’ll be okay, as long as you’re there for him.”

Wolfgang nods, thumbing over the lip of his glass in thought. Then he says, “I was never able to talk to my parents, was always made to feel I was...taking up too much space. I’m not going to do that to him.”

Sanyam smiles. “No, I’m sure you won’t.”

Then Wolfgang laughs. “I’m going to let him get away with everything.”

“Oh, as you should,” says Sanyam, also laughing. “Kala will keep him in line.”

Wolfgang grins, taking another sip. “She will.”

“That’s how Priya and I were,” says Sanyam, chuckling. “I let the girls do whatever they pleased until Priya had enough. Oh my goodness, Kala...Kala loved to experiment with kitchen supplies...she’d come home from the restaurant covered in flour and eggs and...and she never made anything edible! She made glue, and slime...one time she lit something on fire, and singed off her eyebrows. Oh, Priya had my head on a plate after that.”

Wolfgang grins hugely. “Did you take pictures?”

“Oh, yes, we have a whole album of Kala as a girl, I’m sure Daya would be more than happy to show you,” says Sanyam. “And yes, we have a few of her without eyebrows, smiling away, clearly proud of herself.”

Wolfgang shakes his head. “That’s Kala.”

Sanyam nods, laughing. Then he says, “She’s going to be a wonderful mother, don’t you think?”

Wolfgang smiles. “Yeah. I’ve never met anyone with so much empathy. She’s so kind.”

Sanyam nods again. “She believes in the world, too, despite everything she’s seen. That can’t be said for everyone.”

“Yeah, I don’t have that,” agrees Wolfgang. He finishes his drink. “I’m so grateful she does, I don’t want our children to be disconnected from that.”

“You’ll have a good balance,” says Sanyam warmly, patting Wolfgang’s shoulder. “Anyway, not to keep you, I know you’re tired too.”

Wolfgang nods in agreement. “Thanks for the drink.”

“Of course my son, sleep well,” says Sanyam, calling as Wolfgang walks away, “we turned the air conditioner up extra high for you!”

Wolfgang laughs, shouts back a thank you, and then goes into Kala’s room. She turns over as he gets in bed next to her, eyes sleepy and bright. She smiles.

“Did you carry me in here?”

“Yeah, you fell asleep at the table, babe.”

Kala laughs. “Thank you.” Then she pulls him close by his shirt and kisses him, murmuring, “Get some sleep, I have plans for you in the morning.”
He raises his eyebrows. She grins and presses another kiss to his mouth, then turns over again and snuggles her back against him. He shakes his head, laughing, and hugs her closer.

“Glad to be back?” he asks as he drifts off.

She nods sleepily. “Very much.”
Mumbai Part 1

Chapter Summary

Kala and Wolfgang visit a familiar location. Daya continues to pose problems.

Chapter Notes

This is pure fluff let's be real. 18+

Their first morning in Mumbai dawned hot, muggy and filled with the summer chorus of street vendors, buses, mopeds, and birds. Despite the temperature in Kala’s small old room, she and Wolfgang spent two hours before the house awoke to make good on their plans to replay their first meeting here. By the time the house begins to creak with activity, Kala is draped over Wolfgang, slowly coming down, drenched with sweat. She wrinkles her nose in the flood of morning light, still laughing, still sticky and shaking. Her laugh softens into a stream of quiet giggles and she buries her face into Wolfgang’s neck, kissing up his jawline and lingering for a moment on the side of his mouth, hair falling around his face. He puts his arms around her and squeezes her ass, nuzzling his nose into her hair.

“You taste so sweet,” he mumbles.

“Mm, stop, you’ll make me want to start again...”

He runs his hands up her back. She rests her chin on his chest, lifting her eyes to meet his. Her lips form a tiny, sated smile.

“I needed this,” she says.

He nods. “Me too.”

Kala smiles softly, turning over to hug him from the side. Then she gently bites his earlobe.

“You can wake me up like that whenever you want,” she says.

He turns his head to look at her, then presses a long, messy kiss to her mouth.

“You know I had to fuck you in your old room,” he says.

She grins, blood flushing her cheeks and the tip of her nose. “I know. You were thinking about this since we’ve been here.”

“So were you, süße,” he says.

She laughs and nods. “True.”

Her gaze trails to his mouth, eyes bright and mischievous, and she sucks briefly on his upper lip.
Then she puts her legs around his waist, sitting up, and slides her hands over his chest.

“You have a lot of energy for a pregnant woman,” he teases, moving his hands over her tummy.

She raises her eyebrows, looking down at him. “You know, I have you in a very vulnerable position...you ought to be careful not to insult me.”

“What could you possibly do to me—”

She digs her thumbs under his ribs and he jumps, laughing.

“Fuck, Kala!”

“You asked for it!” she says triumphantly, pushing her thumbs in deeper.

He laughs harder, then gently pushes her off of him, pins her, and tickles the inside of her thigh. She gasps for air, also laughing, and then they both jump when the lamp on the bedside table falls. They pause, locking eyes, then burst into fresh laughter.

“What was that?” yells Auntie from downstairs. “Did you break something?”

This does nothing to stifle their laughter. Kala is nearly in tears.

“It was just a lamp!” calls Kala.

“What are you doing?” yells her aunt.

“You don’t want to know!” chimes in Daya.

Kala gasps. “How dare she.”

“I’ll get her back for you,” says Wolfgang.

Kala clicks her tongue affectionately. “This is why I love you. You always avenge me.”

He nods. Then he pulls her gently closer and kisses her, suddenly without a trace of humor. She moans automatically into his mouth, pleased when he moves his hands up her body. He pauses on her belly, his habit now when they're having sex, then slides briefly over her breasts. She responds with an enthusiastic, open-mouthed smile and he presses a careful kiss to her arched throat. She nods her approval, surprised (and yet unsurprised) that she wants him again.

Then her aunt bellows, “Breakfast has been ready for nearly half an hour!”

Wolfgang pulls away. “Just like being a teenager.”

Kala laughs, then says, “Oh my God, if we met as teenagers...” She gestures at a nearby window. “I would have made you sneak in every night...”

“Huh, what for?” he asks, pretending to be confused.

“So I could have my way with you,” she says, nodding sagely.

“Your parents would have loved that.”

“Oh, yes,” she laughs. “Somehow I think meeting you in secondary school would have been rather detrimental to my grades as well.”
“Mm yeah, skipping fifth period to make out under the bleachers? I would have been a terrible influence.”

“You’re still a terrible influence.”

“Kala Jalahansini Dandekar!” yells her aunt.

“That’s exactly what she would have sounded like if she found out you were dating the school dropout...”

She shakes her head. “I can only imagine what you put your professors through...”

“Felix and I drove them all to drink,” says Wolfgang, chuckling. Then he sighs. “We should go eat.”

She agrees reluctantly, going into the bathroom, assessing the damage. Her hair is wild, her cheeks are flushed, and her skin is bright with sweat. She blushes at the soft pink mark he left under one of her breasts, then glances down at herself, searching for any hickeys that Daya (or worse, her mother) might notice.

“I was careful,” says Wolfgang, stepping into the bathroom with her.

She lifts her gaze up, smiling shyly. “Were you?”

He raises an eyebrow. “…I think so.”

“No, I’m asking,” she says. “Because I can’t see past my stomach.”

He pauses, surprised by this response, then grins wide and pulls her closer. He shakes his head softly. “No, you’re good.”

She sighs, looking down at herself again, running her hands over her tummy. “For someone who weighs only a pound, he needs a lot of room.”

“He needs to be able to stretch, Kala,” Wolfgang jokes.

“Oh, yes, he does plenty of that...” she responds. “I think he has long legs.” Then she returns her focus to the mirror and sighs. “Should we shower?”

“No, I think we should go eat breakfast with your extended family looking like this.”

Kala laughs and reaches to turn on the shower, waits for it to get hot, then pulls him in after her.

“Plans for today?” he asks after a while, massaging some shampoo into her hair.

“Mm,” she begins, touching her nose to his. “I was going to help my father cook something...otherwise, nothing in particular. Where do you want to go?”

“That rooftop,” he says.

“I’ll cry,” she warns him.

He chuckles and guides her under the water. “That’s alright.”

She smiles as the water pours over her, then leans her head back.

“Do we have to go downstairs...?” she murmurs.
“You’re here to see your family, not me, Kala...”

“But I like you.”

“Damn, I like you too.”

“That means we have to spend all day together, right?”

“It does,” he replies.

“Good, that’s settled...”

She reaches for some shampoo, lathers it in her palms, and starts to wash his hair.

“You’re going to smell like...” she looks at the bottle, “mango sunrise.”

“I’ve always wanted to,” he says and she grins.

Twenty minutes, a tug-of-war match using a towel, and a messy, against-the-counter kiss later, Kala and Wolfgang show up downstairs, bright-eyed, slightly self-conscious. Kala tightens her robe, smoothing the fabric over her belly, and they sit down.

Daya looks up from the breakfast table, popping a grape into her mouth, searching them for signs of guilt or discomfort.

“Did you enjoy sleeping in?” she probes.

“Very much,” says Kala, reaching for some methi ka thepla.

Daya narrows her eyes, but goes back to eating her breakfast. Wolfgang leans forward.

“If you embarrass my wife in front of everyone, I’ll tell them about the time you were in Paris and sat in goose poop in the Parc de Buttes-Chaumont and walked around the entire day before you noticed.”

Daya’s eyes darken. “You wouldn’t dare.”

He raises an eyebrow, sitting back and pouring Kala some tea. “Try me.”

Kala sticks her tongue out at Daya, then kisses Wolfgang’s cheek. “Could you pass me the cream, babe?”

“So!” calls Sanyam from the other end of the table. “How did you sleep? Good? Did the monkeys wake you up early?”

“It’s good practice for having a baby!” says Kala cheerfully.

Priya laughs. “Is the food okay? We have some coffee at this end, would you like some?”

Wolfgang nods, reaching for the thermos of strong black coffee. Breakfast passes quickly -- Kala trying every food and drinking copious amounts of darjeeling tea, Wolfgang distracted by an under-the-table kicking match with Daya, which he loses because Daya is wearing heels-- and then Kala returns upstairs to get ready for the day. This leaves Wolfgang alone at the end of the table with Daya and Auntie Ina, who turn their gazes on him like two gossipy lionesses.

“Now tell us, honestly, how is she?” asks Ina. “Is she having nightmares? I had terrible nightmares
when I was pregnant with my first.”

“She’s fine,” says Wolfgang evenly, catching Sanyam’s eye at the other end of the table.

“What about her blood pressure? High blood pressure can signify preeclampsia—”

“She’s perfectly healthy.”

“What about dizziness?” asks Ina.

“And what about the baby’s heart?” asks Daya. “Fetal arrhythmia is very common—”

“Wolfgang!” Kala yells from the top of the stairs. “Can you help me?”

Wolfgang smiles coolly at Daya and Ina and excuses himself. He jogs upstairs to find Kala in front of the standing mirror. The back of her dress is unzipped.

“Could you?” she asks.

He nods, pulling her closer to zip her up. “Good timing.”

She looks at him in the mirror, smiling in understanding, and turns her head for a kiss. Then she slides on her shoes, takes his hand, and takes her purse off the bedpost. She pulls him at a run downstairs, kisses her mother’s head as they pass the table, and tugs Wolfgang with her out onto the street.

“We’ll be back in a couple hours!” she shouts.

Wolfgang glances at her in surprise as they make their way down the sunny street. She beams, nose wrinkling in mischief, and pulls him at a faster pace.

“This is the way I would walk to the restaurant every morning, well, nearly every morning, I liked to get a chai there before going to classes or work...”

He glances around the streets, which are so colorful that walking between buildings is like being in a paintbox. The streets themselves are filled with small cars, buses, buggies, dogs, and bicycles. Street vendors line the curb. Kala squeezes Wolfgang’s hand gently, then points to a temple to their right, obscured by large trees.

“That’s where I would pray most of the time, although there was another temple closer to where I lived with Rajan...but this is the one that I loved,” she explains. She pauses, sniffing. “It’s the one you interrupted me in.”

“Mm,” he says. “I said something sacrilegious, didn’t I?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“No, I just remember you,” he says.

She rolls her eyes. “Well, you did say something sacrilegious -- gods don’t give a shit about us, to be precise.”

He laughs, then cups his hand around his mouth and yells towards the temple, “Sorry!”

Kala grins and bumps against him, then rests her head on his shoulder.
“I like being in this city with you,” she murmurs.

He nods. “Me too, süße.”

She blushes. “You usually call me that in bed...”

“Well, do you like it?” he asks.

She glances up. “I do...”

He kisses the side of her head. “That’s how I always thought of you in my head, before we were together.”

She smiles and looks down, then says softly, “Can you believe we’re having a baby? And...I don’t mean the baby, exactly,” she goes on, rubbing her belly. “I mean...that we’re starting a life together. Our lives together. A house and a family and...” She grins indulgently. “I never thought I wanted this. But I want this with you.”

He takes a breath, then murmurs, “After growing up the way I did I never understood what family meant, whether I wanted it...Kala, this means everything to me.”

“I love you,” she says openly, full of affection.

“I love you, too,” he replies, pulling her slightly closer as they walk.

“Oh, there it is,” she murmurs after a moment, pointing. “That’s the rooftop....”

One elevator ride later, they’re sitting on the same wall they sat on three years ago -- when Kala was unsure, almost frightened, and Wolfgang was drunk with hope.

“You know, I thought about proposing to you here,” he says as the noise of a siren and several pigeons in flight wash over them, the white-topped, sun-bleached city expanding around them, glowing in the morning sun.

Kala glances at him. “You did?”

He nods.

“That’s very sweet,” she replies, taking in the endless cerulean sky. "But I'm glad that happened how it did.”

He smiles softly and looks down.

“But, if you had proposed to me here, what would you have said?” she asks.

And, surprising her, he shifts off of the low wall and settles on one knee. She laughs loudly, and he shakes his head, smiling slightly, then looks up at her.

“I would have said the same thing... I’ve never loved anyone like I’ve loved you.”

She breathes out, trying to hold on. Then she sniffs hard, tears pooling. “I love you, too. God, I love you.” She laughs at herself and wipes her face. She looks around, pulled under by the familiar architecture, by his warmth. “I know how confused I must have sounded...but I knew I would end up with you, even then.”

He looks down and nods, smiling. Then he gets to his feet, pulls her close, spins her, makes her split
in two with laughter. She throws her head back, frizzy hair flying, crimson lips extended to the sky. 

When he sets her down, he slides his hands over her stomach.

“Three more months,” she murmurs.

“Three more months,” he says.

She grins against his lips, and then they begin a lazy walk back to the Dandekar home.
Mumbai Part 2

Chapter Summary

The family has lunch, and Wolfgang and Kala spend time with their niece and nephews.

Chapter Notes

Since I've decided to make this fic compatible with Diary of a New Life Together, I had to make some changes in this chapter about ages -- I realized Daya's kids would be WAY younger than I originally wrote them.

By the time Kala and Wolfgang get back to the Dandekar home, it's early afternoon (they stopped for samosas and slowly wandered through Kala's university on their way back.) They find Priya and Sanyam loading a basket of food in the kitchen.

“We’re going to Ina's for lunch,” explains Sanyam.

“A picnic, dad!” yells Daya from the pantry. “It’s a picnic, not lunch!”

Sanyam blinks and smiles slightly. “A picnic lunch.”

Ina appears from the pantry, holding two jars of jam, and places them in the basket. “We just redid our patio, it’s lovely outside, it’s a garden-view and there’s a little fountain--”

Ina and her husband moved in with their daughter and her three children a few months ago.

“--yes, we know, it’s a nice home,” says Kala.

“Well, nicer than your 800 square foot flat,” says Daya. "Where are you even going to put the baby?"

“On the top of the refrigerator,” says Wolfgang, nodding with confidence.

Kala sighs. “We’re buying a bigger home, don’t worry, Daya.”

“You are?” gasps Daya, pausing on her way back into the pantry. “In Paris? Isn’t that quite expensive?”

“No more expensive than here,” says Kala patiently.

“Well, still,” murmurs Daya.

“She’s got it,” says Wolfgang, touching Kala’s arm.

“You’re a lucky man,” Daya says, pointing at him. “My husband? If he didn’t have to work he would be in a much better mood--”
“I do work, I just don’t make what Kala does,” interrupts Wolfgang.

Sanyam glances at him and shakes his head to apologize.

“You,” Daya goes on, “are a trophy husband.”

Kala can’t hold in a grin. She glances at Wolfgang and smooths his hair. “Mhm. My own personal Adonis, wonderful at parties~”

Wolfgang turns towards her, laughing. “Is that all I am to you?”

She nods, grin widening, eyes crinkling. He shakes his head, nudging her softly.

“Make sure she doesn’t work too hard while she’s pregnant!” Ina says, coming out of the pantry bearing ingredients. “Of course, I’m sure you want to work as much as possible before the baby comes, because, after that, you won’t be able to.”

Kala hesitates, glancing at Wolfgang for guidance. He shakes his head slightly and she nods. They can wait to explain to her family that she plans on working while raising their children.

“But, tell me about the house!” Ina goes on. “What houses are you looking at?”

“Well, we haven’t started,” says Kala, stepping over to where the food is being gathered and helping shore it up. “Our friends are coming next month to help us.”

“Oh, which friends?” asks Daya. “Make sure the gay ones help!”

“Yes!” agrees Auntie. “Remember those lovely wedding planners, Kala? Well, it turns out they are gay, and I asked them for an opinion on redoing my den -- oh, you should see it.”

Kala and Wolfgang share a short, patient smile, letting the stereotypes go by unaddressed for now.

“Yes, Lito and Hernando are invited,” agrees Kala. “And so are Riley and Will, do you remember them?”

“The handsome one and the girl with the, you know, that hair?” asks Ina. “Well, frankly, all your friends are quite good-looking, but you know the one I mean.”

“Yes, that’s them,” chuckles Kala.

“Well, that’s exciting!” says Ina. “Are you looking in the country at all? I’ve always felt children do better when they’re raised outside of the city. The city is so corrupting.”

“Well, not too far out, we both work in the city,” says Kala carefully. “But far enough that maybe we could...build a treehouse. And have bonfires. Oh, and I want a swing! I loved swings when I was little and I think he will too,” she goes on, addressing her belly. “He likes it when I sway back and forth, at least, it’s the only way to make him go to sleep...”

Just then, Sanyam steps up to take hold of the basket of food. “Is everyone ready?”

Everyone nods in agreement, except Daya, who runs upstairs to find her sandals.

“Did you have a good morning?” Sanyam asks Kala as he and Wolfgang load the back of the van with food.

“Lovely,” says Kala. “I miss this city terribly, you know.”
Sanyam smiles. “I know. You’re welcome home any time you want.”

Kala smiles back, then says softly, “You know, you and mom can come to Paris, too. We’ll have enough room for you soon and, well, I’m sure you want to meet your grandson.”

Sanyam nods and helps her get in the van, and they all begin the journey over to Ina's, stopping first at a cousin's house to pick up Daya's two sons, Sai and Sanjay -- Sai is nearly two, and Sanjay is only three months. Both children cry loudly on the way to Ina's, and Kala and Wolfgang share a wary, foreboding glance, relieved to finally step out of the van and travel the bright walkway to Ina's townhouse.

“Now, my husband is at work, so it’s just the babysitter and my grandchildren,” says Ina, cautiously approaching the door to her home with the key outstretched. “Everyone brace yourselves.”

She unlocks the door with a slight, preemptory grimace. Then three small children burst out of the door like a tidal wave and surround them, yelling about everything they did, the babysitter standing in the background, exhausted and shaking her head. Ina sends the babysitter on her way, and then the oldest boy, Hiran, perks his head up and stares at Kala. Hiran is skinny, big-eyed, and permanently smirking. His eyes widen briefly, and then he and his two siblings are upon her.

“AUNTIE KALA!”

They're actually cousins once removed, but every female is an auntie to them.

“Oh dear--”

The rest of Kala’s sentence is cut off because she has the air effectively knocked out of her by Hiran’s forceful hug. She throws her head back, laughing, and hugs him tightly, then does the same to the other two -- Sahil, age 5, quieter than his brother and slightly smaller, and Anaya, age 3, excitable and erratic like a honeybee.

Then Hiran glances up at Kala. “When is your baby due?”

“Pretty soon...”

He looks hard at her stomach, then says frankly, “Will you always be that big?”

“Hiran, silly question,” says Daya. “Was your mother that big after she had you?”

“Yes, because then she had Sanjay.”

Daya folds her arms. “You’re too smart.”

“No, I won’t be,” answers Kala.

“Unless you have another one right away!” sing-songs Daya.

Kala glares, then goes back to addressing the children. “And how are you all?”

They all clamor to speak at once, all sentence fragments.

“--lost a tooth!--”

“And then we--”

“--seven dogs and--”
“Spilled it all over mama’s computer--”

“--broke my arm!”

“You broke your arm?” Kala asks Hiran in concern.

Daya glances at Kala, smiling, and whispers, “He cried for hours.”

He holds up his left arm proudly. “It healed.”

“Okay, good,” says Kala gently.

“But look,” he goes on, sticking his arm farther out. “You can see the bump where the bone was sticking out!”

Kala covers her mouth. “Oh my God, Hiran, that’s -- I can’t look at that.”

“Don’t show them that, Hiran!” sighs Daya.

Wolfgang kneels down, nose wrinkled in interest. “That looks terrible, can I see?”

Hiran nods happily. “I fell off of my bike. It’s cool, right?”

“Very,” agrees Wolfgang. “Did it hurt?”

Hiran hesitates. “A little.”

“Yeah, I bet,” chuckles Wolfgang, nudging him. “I also broke my arm.”

“You did?” asks Hiran excitedly.

“Yep,” Wolfgang replies as everyone starts to make their way inside, Kala carrying Anaya, Daya carrying Sahil.

“How?” asks Hiran.

“Well, I was climbing out of my window to--” Buy Felix a pack of cigarettes so my father couldn't see. “--get something from the store, and I lost my grip. Pretty boring, really.”

“A window?” asks Hiran.

“Yes. But my bone stayed in my arm.”

“Lucky!”

Wolfgang snorts. “Yeah.”

They all make it through the entryway (Ina talking as quickly as an auctioneer as she describes each renovation as they pass it) and then settle outside on the patio. Kala, Daya, and Priya begin to unpack things and set the table.

“Sit down, have a beer,” Sanyam offers Wolfgang, settling at one end of the table.

“Sure,” he agrees, accepting the can Sanyam passes him. He’s about to sit when Hiran commandingly grabs his arm and drags him into the house. “...okay.”

Kala raises her eyebrows at him. “Have fun?”
“Look,” says Hiran, wandering towards the living room (taking a jagged path, the way children who are too small to have good depth perception tend to.) He pulls Wolfgang towards a corner with a small table and many art supplies. “Shh, this is a secret.” He picks up one of the numerous papers on the table and hands it to Wolfgang. It’s a drawing of what is (barely) recognizable as a baby, surrounded by trees, flowers, faces, cats, suns, and stars. There's also some unintelligible Hindi. “We all did it. Don’t show Aunt Kala yet.”

“Oh, I won’t,” says Wolfgang seriously, “thank you, that’s beautiful.”

Hiran beams. “I know.”

Wolfgang shakes his head, laughing. Then he squints at the Hindi. “What does that say?”

“Congratulations! Mama spelled it for us.”

Wolfgang folds it up and pockets it, then ruffles Hiran’s hair. Then Kala, still carrying Anaya, enters the living room.

“Auntie and Mama are fighting about how to spice the dal, I'm hiding in here until it's over,” she explains, sitting down with a sigh. Then she glances at Anaya and squeezes her. “Do you feel like coloring?”

Anaya nods happily, so Kala shifts to the floor with her and helps her select a marker.

“Me too!” yells Hiran, getting on the floor.

“Here, use this,” says Kala, passing him a green marker. “Draw a... lizard. A frog? Wolfgang, what do little boys like?”

“Giraffe,” Hiran says decisively.

“A green giraffe,” murmurs Wolfgang.

Hiran turns to stare at him, then defiantly sticks his tongue out. Wolfgang grins widely. Hiran grins too, then sits back on the couch with a pad of paper on his lap.

“Do you know how to draw a giraffe?” he asks in a tone that suggests this knowledge is crucial.

“No, show me,” says Wolfgang.

But then Anaya looks around for paper, and seeing her brother has it, yells loudly in distress.

“Oh, oh okay, hold on,” says Kala. “I'll get you a piece.”

But Hiran chucks the entire pad of paper at her, grabs Wolfgang’s hand, and turns it palm-up. “I'll use this.”

Wolfgang meets Kala's eyes, shaking silently with laughter.

“What the fuck, man? That's my hand. That’s not paper.”

Hiran just nods, drawing a long green line on his hand. Then he frowns, noticing the large scar in between Wolfgang’s thumb and index finger.

“How did you do that?”
Wolfgang hesitates, breathing out softly, looking at the scar. He could lie, but he's never felt that's the right approach with children, and this is good practice regardless. He feels Kala's eyes on him, but doesn't look up.

“Do you and your friends ever play soldiers?” he begins softly

Hiran frowns and nods.

“Okay, so you know that, sometimes, soldiers get caught, right? By the bad guys? The guys on the other side?”

Hiran nods in understanding.

“And when you’re caught, the bad guys don’t treat you very well, do they?”

Hiran shakes his head. “No. Is that what happened to you?”

“Yeah. But I got away. And I’m okay now.”

“And the bad guys are gone now?” asks Hiran.

“They’re gone now,” Wolfgang agrees.

“Good,” says Hiran, then continues to color. “It can be part of the giraffe,” he goes on, coloring along the scar so it looks like one side of the giraffe’s neck. “Then you don’t have to have a scar anymore.”

Wolfgang blinks, processing this somewhat slowly, overwhelmed with gratitude and moved by the simplicity of this logic. He breathes out, surprised how emotional he suddenly is, and glances unsurely at Kala, who has a hand on her heart. She looks back with wet, bright eyes and nods softly to reassure him.

“Okay! Is everyone ready to eat?” says Priya, appearing in the doorway.

Wolfgang glances up, catches his mother in law’s endeared expression at the fact he’s letting a child draw on him, and grins. Priya glances at Kala and they share a brief, satisfied smile. Then Kala picks up Anaya, sighing slightly as she gets to her feet (the norm now) and Wolfgang follows her out of the room, one hand gently on her back.

Anaya toddles after Priya when Kala sets her down, and Hiran runs after her. Wolfgang is about to go out onto the patio as well, but Kala holds him back for a moment beyond the doorway. She doesn’t speak -- she merely nuzzles her nose against his, arms wrapped tightly around him, then presses her face into his shoulder and smiles. He smiles too, nesting his face into her hair and holding her closer. Finally, she glances up, presses a careful kiss to his mouth, and holds his face in her hands. She doesn’t have to speak to communicate what she’s feeling -- relief that, after a year, it wasn’t merely in her imagination that he survived; relief that he’s here, in her arms, not just in her mind; relief that the memories are fading to distant aches, no longer sharp, debilitating. He smiles softly, kisses her, and then lets her go.

They walk onto the patio, where Sanyam, Priya, Daya, and Auntie have laid out the table. Wolfgang helps Kala into a seat, then reaches for his beer which was left behind earlier. Sanyam stands up at the head of the table.

“Okay, now, I know that this is ordinarily a day you would celebrate,” he says to Wolfgang, who glances at Kala in confusion.
She frowns at her father. “What day?”

Sanyam makes a face. “Christmas? Isn’t it?”

“Fuck, that’s right,” says Wolfgang, adding hastily, “sorry.”

Kala giggles. “Oh my God! How did we forget that? How on earth did we forget that? I’m sorry, Wolfgang.”

He shakes his head, smiling. “I don’t mind.”

“Did you know it was Christmas?” she asks.

“i forgot,” he admits, adding in German, “what did you get me?”

Kala eyes him, then pops an eyebrow flirtatiously. “You’ll see...”

He grins and takes a sip of beer. Then Sanyam clears his throat.

“Well, this is rather less...impactful...seeing as you both forgot--”

“Dad!” protests Kala.

He smiles patiently. “--however, we do have a surprise for you...I’ve never made this before, so go easy on me...”

Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other, then watch spellbound as Sanyam reaches into the picnic basket they brought and takes out a large Stollen, a rich Christmas bread filled with fruit and nuts, a German staple during the holidays.

“Kala mentioned to me that your mother used to make this, so if she isn’t here to make it anymore, the least I could do is try. As you might have guessed, this isn’t the type of cooking I’m used to, but...”

He trails off at their expressions -- Kala covering her face, touched, and Wolfgang looking down, trying hard not to smile too widely -- and brightens.

“We want you to feel at home,” Priya adds to Wolfgang.

“Always,” agrees Daya, “even if we are a bit annoying.”

“I may have had my doubts,” says Auntie Ina, “but I see now. You’re family.”

“And we love you,” says Daya.

“We do,” whispers Kala, holding onto Wolfgang’s arm and pressing a kiss to his cheek.

Wolfgang just shakes his head, not trusting himself to speak in case his voice breaks. He puts an arm around Kala, then smiles at Sanyam.

“Thank you,” he finally says. “All of you.”

Daya beams, then shouts, “Cut the cake!”

“It’s not cake, dear, but here we go,” Sanyam says bracingly, reaching for a knife and cutting a slice.

He transfers it onto a dessert plate, which he hands to Wolfgang. He pauses before relinquishing his
“We hope that you know we consider you to be our son, and we are thrilled -- truly -- Priya and I are thrilled...that Kala ended up with you, because above all, we want our daughter to be happy. And she is.” He lets go of the plate, then chuckles to himself. “And, we can’t say we aren’t surprised, but we can barely wait to meet our grandson. So, congratulations again, and... I hope I’m getting this right... *Guten Appetit!*

Wolfgang laughs freely. “That’s right.”

Sanyam smiles. “Good. Kala taught me.”

He continues to cut everyone else a slice, and they all look at Wolfgang before beginning.

“Oh,” he says in surprise, hastily picking up a fork and taking a bite.

The rest follow suit, all exclaiming about the taste.

Kala presses close to Wolfgang and whispers nervously, “It’s good, right? Tell me it’s good. I don’t know how it’s supposed to taste...”

“It’s really good,” he says quietly.

They look up to see Sanyam, anxiously anticipating their response.

“Better than my mother’s, if I’m honest,” says Wolfgang.

“It’s very good, Dad,” agrees Kala.

“Thank you,” Wolfgang adds.

Sanyam grins and clasps his hands together. “Excellent. You’re welcome.”

Wolfgang nods, then turns to Kala and mumbles into her ear, “How the fuck am I this lucky?”

She smiles softly, blushing, and squeezes his hands under the table. Then she kisses him, and he chuckles when she pulls away, brushing some powdered sugar off her upper lip.

“It’s not luck,” murmurs Kala. “You’re meant to be here.”

He shrugs slightly. “Whatever it is, I’m...grateful. For you, for him,” -- he puts a hand on her tummy, she smiles -- “for your family. I love your family.”

She sniffles and squeezes his arms. “Stop, you’ll make me cry.”

He shakes his head softly, taking another bite of stollen. “Just...never thought I would have this.”

She nods, leaning her head on his shoulder. The group continues to eat lunch, remarking on various aspects of the cooking, making sure the children don’t spill things. Hiran and Wolfgang give Kala the folded up drawing halfway through lunch, and she kisses them both hard on the cheek and vows to put the picture up on the fridge. After this, she spends most of lunch eating lazily, happy to snuggle against Wolfgang, and he keeps catching himself smiling; by the end of the afternoon, he’s given in, no longer hiding, laughing openly at all of Daya’s jokes, clinking glasses raucously with Auntie and Sanyam.

He and Kala decide to walk home afterwards, and as they step into the Dandekar house that night
and quietly make their way upstairs to Kala’s room, she nudges him.

“What would you think about staying here until New Years?” she asks sleepily.

He nods. “Love to.”
Kala trudges through the front door, dropping her briefcase by the kitchen table, and kicks her shoes off with a feeble moan. It's been two months since returning from Mumbai, during which time she learned what it means to be “heavy with child.” She's sure that she's spent half the time sleeping, curled up with a body pillow and some tea. Wolfgang, meanwhile, spent the time taking extra shifts and working out, suddenly compelled to quit smoking and get in better shape before the baby comes, which Kala finds desperately sweet on one hand, and rather annoying on the other, because lately he’s taken to coming through the front door, sweaty and grinning, throwing a towel over his shoulder in a slick, charming way, only to find her on the couch, in pain, grumbling. She knows she works too much, she knows she would have more energy if she simply came home at five, but as the lab manager, she can’t do that.

Wolfgang glances at her from the couch while she hangs her jacket near the door.

“You only worked...” He checks his watch. “Twelve hours today.”

“I had shipping reports to catch up on...” Kala explains, walking over to the couch, going slow to be gentle on her feet.

She sits down next to Wolfgang with a heavy sigh, then glances at him. He lifts her chin up with his index finger.

“You know I'm not complaining,” he mumbles.

She grins softly and kisses him. “It sounded like a complaint...”

“I’m impressed,” he replies. He smirks and runs a hand over her belly. “I think he's worked more 80 hour weeks than most adults.”
Kala laughs. “He's not very helpful... I knocked over my assistant because I keep forgetting how big I am.”

Wolfgang shakes his head, chuckling. Then he takes off his glasses and sets aside the book he had been reading (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which he began earlier in the month, a book which Kala found to be an unusually academic choice for her husband, prompting her to say, “Oh hello, Hernando” every time she caught him reading it, causing him to lightly smack her with the book, or cheekily push his glasses up his nose, depending on his mood.) Kala bites the tip of her tongue, eying the book, but Wolfgang kisses her gently behind her ear before she can tease him. She shivers at the touch and blinks slowly, holding still, indulging. Then she tilts her face towards his and kisses him deeply, pressing closer, smiling against his lips when he cradles her face in his hands. When they break apart, he takes a moment to kiss each side of her mouth, her cheeks, her nose. She grows breathless with laughter, rapidly turning pink.

He pulls back, looking pleased with himself. “Dinner?”

Kala purses her lips, but she can't keep it up and she laughs again. “Yes, please.”

He squeezes her knee, presses one more kiss to her cheek, and gets up with a groan.

“Fuck, I'm sore...ran too far today,” he mumbles.

“Mm, it's paying off,” says Kala.

He glances over his shoulder at her with a satisfied smirk. She laughs in response then lightly kicks his backside to tell him to speed things up.

He shakes his head and goes into the kitchen. “Soup or noodles?”

“Noodles!” she calls.

He plates some up for her, then returns to the couch. She puts her feet on his lap and he thumbs over her knee.

“Didn't you want any?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “I ate earlier.”

Kala smiles to herself and presses a gentle kiss to his mouth. “But you want dessert, don't you?”

He steals a noodle off of her plate. “What's dessert?”

Kala’s eyes darken in mischief, but a sharp pain cuts her response short. She wrinkles her nose and Wolfgang presses closer in concern.

She shakes her head. “Just a cramp...”

“You know some babies come early...”

Kala nods, shutting her eyes against the pain. “No, this is normal. It's my back. Just a muscle cramp.”

Wolfgang hesitates, then nods. He jumps to his feet to retrieve Kala's heating pad, then plugs it in and helps settle it against her back. She glances at him and smiles.

“Thank you,” she murmurs.
He nods and she leans against him. She finishes eating, and after setting her plate aside, rests her head in his lap. He flicks on the television. Kala wrestles the remote away from him when he turns the channel to soccer, selecting a cooking show instead because it reminds her of home.

“You can watch as much Fußball as you want when Lito gets here tomorrow...”

“Mm, plus Dani and Felix...you’ll get no peace for a week.”

“Exactly,” she replies.

She nudges the back of her head against his middle, and he runs his fingers through her hair.

“Feeling better?” he asks.

She nods. He pats her tummy, then slides a hand over her hip.

“Maybe I'm on my feet too much,” she says with a yawn.

He frowns. “Maybe?”

She cracks a small smile. “I think at 36 weeks I'll take some time off...”

“I know you won’t,” he retorts and her smile widens.

They spend a few moments in silence, filling the space with tiny touches. Kala yawns hugely and puts her hands on her tummy.

“At least he’s sleepy when I am now...I was worried he was going to be a night owl like you.”

Wolfgang chuckles and slides his hand over her tummy once more, then locks his fingers with hers. “He’s finally on schedule now that we’re a month away from your due date.”

Kala laughs sleepily. “Yes, perfect.” She turns over so she can look up at Wolfgang. “When does everyone get here tomorrow?”

“Let me look...” he trails off, taking his phone off the table and opening up a list.

Kala stares. “Wolfgang, is that a list?”

He meets her eyes. “Yes...”

“Like, a list? With reminders? And important dates? A real list?”

He starts to turn slightly pink, and evades the questions by saying, “Maybe having a kid is bringing out the stereotypically fastidious German in me...”

“No, no, you’ve always had that, you can’t go out without polishing your boots for seven hours,” says Kala, now positively beaming. “But this? This means you’re becoming old and boring.”

He nods, trying hard not to laugh, and shows her his phone. “Look, it’s color-coded.”

Kala covers her face, grinning hugely, then stretches up to kiss him. It’s more intense than he expected, and he groans a little when she pulls away.

“You’re not old and boring,” she tells him, voice full of affection. “You’re dependable. It’s nice.”

One corner of his mouth twitches in amusement. “I think the one thing I never expected a woman to
say to me is *you're dependable."

Kala smiles, kissing him again. “You are.”

She lingers on his bottom lip for a moment, then reaches her arms around him to pull him down next to her on the couch. He settles around her, nuzzling the back of her neck.

“You know we’re going to fall asleep here by accident now,” he says.

“Mm, definitely,” she agrees. Then she laughs. “Oh. What time do they get here?”

“Oh,” he says, shaking his head and lighting up the display on his phone. “Two...”

“Good, we can sleep in...” she mumbles.

***

As expected, they do fall asleep on the couch and wake up around nine the next morning. This is unusually late for Wolfgang, and unusually early for Kala, who whines when Wolfgang gets up, leaving her exposed to the chilly air of the apartment. He turns up the heat, then goes to make coffee, and Kala sits up and looks down at herself.

“Oh my God,” she murmurs, seeing she’s in her work clothes from the night before. “I must have needed sleep...”

She gets to her feet, smoothing her hands over her skirt, and catches Wolfgang looking at her from the kitchen, clearly about to make a joke.

“Don’t you dare--”

“Kala, I know you take your career seriously, but you don’t have to *sleep* in business attire, did you know that?”

Kala grins, then throws one of the couch pillows at him. He dodges it, then picks it up and lobbs it back at her, and soon, they’re engaged in a pillow-fight-to-the-death in the kitchen, Kala laughing wildly, Wolfgang swearing like he won’t have the chance again -- until their coffee pot gets knocked off the counter and shatters on the floor. They both drop their pillows, panting, and stare at the coffee which is rapidly spreading on the tile.

“Oh, dear, who let us become parents...”

“Don’t you dare--”

“The nice thing about breaking things as an adult,” he says, picking up a towel off the counter, “is that you don’t get the shit beaten out of you for it. Of course, I usually broke things intentionally as a kid, especially Steiner's shit.”

Kala rolls her eyes and reaches for a towel. “Well, if I had lived in that house, I would have broken as many of those elaborate knick knacks as possible...”

He laughs. “Yeah, they didn’t have the best taste.”

They kneel down and start to wipe up the spill.

“Still, even if it was intentional,” says Kala, “he should have treated you better...”
Wolfgang pauses, glancing at her. “You know I’m going to a huge fucking pushover, right?”

Kala smiles, leaning over and kissing his cheek. “I know. It’s okay.”

“There will be finger paint murals on our walls, Kala. Kid shows up with a dog? I guess we have a dog now. A bottle of sprinkles for dinner? Sure...”

She laughs. “There are worse things.”

He watches her for a moment, then looks down and smiles to himself. “I love you.”

Kala smiles too. “I love you, too.”

***

Two hours later, having taken showers and walked to the nearest cafe for coffee, Kala and Wolfgang get into a rental car (their BMW is too small to accommodate their friends) and start a leisurely drive to the airport. They know it would have been easier to simply visit with their Cluster, but it’s been so long since seeing them in person that they convinced Lito, Will, and Riley to come to Paris to help them with house-hunting. Hernando agreed to come with Lito, expecting a vacation, perhaps miscalculating exactly how relaxing it is to be around multiple Sensates. Felix and Dani also agreed to come, Dani because she hadn’t seen Lito and Hernando in months, Felix because “you can’t pick out your first home without your best friend, you asshole.”

Kala curls up in the passenger seat, sipping her coffee, watching the city go by.

“I can’t believe we waited this long to look for a house,” she muses, rubbing her hands over her belly.

Wolfgang shakes his head. “I can’t believe we’re going to move when you’re eight months pregnant.”

“Well, we’ll have plenty of help,” she reassures him. “Although we could wait until after he’s born. But then we would be moving with a newborn.”

Wolfgang starts to laugh. “This is why most people plan having a baby, isn’t it?”

Kala turns and grins at him. “Yes. But...I wouldn’t have wanted this to happen any other way.” She glances down at herself, addressing her tummy. “You’re perfect. Even if you’re a bit of an accident. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Wolfgang watches her, trying not to smile too widely. She talks to the baby regularly now -- so often, in fact, that he’s sure it’s become an unconscious habit and that she unwittingly subjects her coworkers to a daily, infinite monologue.

He reaches to put a hand on her stomach and she smiles at him. Then she leans her head on the seat and tucks her legs into a pretzel shape.

“We still haven’t decided on a name...” she murmurs.

He nods. “Any more ideas for it?”

She shrugs, pulling her notebook of names out of her purse and scanning it. “I thought we could ask
Wolfgang raises his eyebrows. “Are you sure about that?”

“I’ve already told Felix we’re not naming him Conan.”

“Won’t stop him from asking again.”

Kala laughs. “No. But Will and Riley may have some good suggestions. And Lito and Hernando...”

She hums in thought. “I think I like something that starts with a J...”

“Just as long as his initials spell out something embarrassing.”

Kala nods, continuing to laugh. “Yes, of course. That’s the most important thing.” Then she sighs and puts the notebook away. “When we find the right one, we’ll know.”

He nods in agreement, then swears and jerks the car into the next lane, noticing their exit is coming up. Kala gasps. She hoped that after being married to him for more than a year, she would have gotten used to his driving, but she isn't and now doubts whether she'll ever be.

“Wolfgang, please learn to drive before we have this baby...”

“Fifteen years of bad habits, it’s irreversible now.”

Kala sighs and sips her coffee for the rest of the drive. Once in the airport, they pick a bench near the baggage claim and check their phones for updates.

“We need a new group chat...” remarks Kala. “This one doesn’t include Felix or Dani or Hernando...”

“This one’s just for the Cluster. That’s why it’s called--”

“Yes, I know what it’s called, Wolfgang.”

It’s called Clusterfuck, a name decided on primarily by Nomi, Wolfgang, and Will.

Wolfgang grins. “How have you been with me this long and you still won’t swear?”

“I swear sometimes,” she says, a faint blush touching her cheeks.

He smirks. “I know you do, because I make you...”

Kala turns a delicate shade of crimson, then primly says, “We are in an airport. You are not allowed to turn me on right now.”

He leans over and kisses her gently behind her ear. “Sorry.”

“This isn’t helping,” she murmurs, tilting her head back as he moves his mouth along her jawline.

“Isn’t it?” he asks, pressing a final kiss to the side of her mouth.

She giggles feebly and gives him a playful nose-bump before leaning back and pulling up her phone. She has several messages.

Lito, 2:04 p.m. -- Landed safely! Now to sit on the runway for no apparent reason for at least twenty minutes...
Riley, 2:10 p.m. -- *We’ve landed too. We are ALL the way in the back (by the bathroom, easy access for airplane shenanigans, not ideal for getting off the plane quickly.)*

Will, 2:11 p.m. -- *Shenanigans? We slept the entire time.*

Riley, 2:12 p.m. -- *We’re becoming the old married couple I’ve always seen us as.*

Kala sets her chin on Wolfgang’s shoulder after texting them back. “Anything from Felix?”

He nods, showing her his screen.

Felix, 2:07 p.m. -- *A baby cried the whole fucking flight you poor assholes you have no idea what you’re getting into also we landed but we’ve got to get some coffee but we’ll be there soon enough also congrats on living in Paris but this airport is the fucking worst*

“He loves his run-on sentences,” says Kala.

Wolfgang shakes his head fondly and checks the time (now 2:30) then leans heavily against Kala. She smiles to herself and puts an arm around him.

“Wake me up when they get here,” he murmurs.

She laughs. “We slept in so late this morning!”

“Still tired, babe,” he replies.

She cards her fingers through his hair. “I told you. Old and boring.”

He elbows her lightly, grinning, and she smiles, satisfied. They wait in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Kala occasionally glances around for signs of their friends, and finally spots Lito and Hernando, looking just like themselves -- Lito in a nicely tailored button down and cowboy boots, Hernando in a plum-colored cardigan, still slightly disheveled from the plane, still carrying a loose book and a neck pillow. Kala nudges Wolfgang excitedly, then stands up as quickly as she can manage and jogs towards them. Lito drops his bag to pull her into a hug, nearly lifting her off her feet, squeezing her and rocking her back and forth.

“You’re huge!” he shouts into her ear. “You’re so beautiful! I can feel the power radiating off of you.”

Kala giggles, beaming, and wipes her eyes. “We missed you!”

Then she hugs Hernando, freeing Lito up to pull Wolfgang into his arms in an exuberant, bone-crushing way.

“We have to do this more often,” he says seriously. “We need to visit you more often. And you should visit us, Mexico City would be a perfect break from the cold.” Lito frowns. “What temperature is it, exactly?”

“About 2,” says Wolfgang, grinning. "Cold spell."

Lito hangs his head, gripping Wolfgang’s arms. “Oh, you’re lucky we love you.” He glances at Hernando. “My love, jacket?”

Hernando hands over a jacket, then steps over to hug Wolfgang. He glances at him and Kala, eyes full of warmth, and then smiles.
“Are you getting excited?” he asks.

Kala laughs breathily. “Yes. To be honest, I’m excited to be...smaller, soon.”

“It’s weird,” admits Wolfgang, putting an arm around Kala. “Knowing there’s a baby that actually looks like a baby in there.”

Kala looks down at herself. “He’s almost ready to come out...”

“Well, good for him, I wasn’t ready for that until I was nearly thirty,” replies Lito.

Kala laughs loudly and Hernando covers his face, groaning.

“Do you see this?” asks Hernando. “We aren’t parents, and yet, dad jokes abound.”

Lito grins, pleased with himself, and kisses Hernando’s cheek.

“No yet,” he says.

Hernando smiles. “True.”

Kala gasps excitedly and takes Lito’s hands. “Are you two thinking about it?”

“Well, years from now, and it involves Dani, so...it will take some planning.” explains Hernando.

Lito nods. “Unlike you two, we can’t just make a little mistake and, aha, baby!”

Kala rolls her eyes lovingly, then squeezes Lito’s hands. “So, how was the trip?”

“It went by in the blink of an eye,” he says cheerfully.

Hernando nods in agreement. “We were so excited to see you, the flight seemed very quick. Though we are hungry.”

“Starving,” says Lito. “I will cook for us all.”

Kala moans happily. “Oh, yes. What?”

“Whatever you want,” says Lito.

“Hmm, you know what I want,” she replies with a small smirk.

Wolfgang glances at her and raises an eyebrow. “Huh, I thought you only said that to me--”

Kala shoves him, laughing, holding Lito’s gaze. “Well?”

“Tortilla de papas,” he replies assuredly.

Kala nods, grinning, but her response is cut short when Dani and Felix appear around the nearest baggage claim, waving. Dani drops her bags when she’s still a few feet out and breaks into a run, immediately throwing her arms around Lito and Hernando and speaking in rapid Spanish. She and Lito hold each other at arm's length after a moment, in tears, nodding raptly at each other as they speak. Felix patiently carries his luggage and Dani’s, exchanging a knowing smile with Wolfgang.

“This goddamn airport,” he says when he reaches them.

Wolfgang pulls him into a hug. “You could have driven.”
“Eight hours?” asks Felix. “I’m telling you, man, just get a house in Berlin. I know you miss it.”

Wolfgang laughs. “Not my city anymore.”

“No, it’s mine, but I’ll let you come back,” jokes Felix.

They grin at each other, then hug again. Felix hugs Kala after this and raises his eyebrows when he looks more closely at her.

“You’re fucking huge now! What happened?”

“That’s what happens at eight months,” replies Kala, pleased, looking down at herself.

“That, or he grew an extra head,” says Hernando sagely.

Kala nods, playing along. “That could explain it.”

Felix cracks up, shaking his head. Dani returns to his side, pulling Kala close and kissing her cheek several times, then exclaiming about her belly.

“Do you know how freaking powerful you are right now?” she asks. “You are a goddess of light and fertility. You are glowing. I know, it’s a stereotype, but you are.”

Then she looks at Wolfgang and wrinkles her nose slightly. “Have you been working out?”

“Yes, thanks,” he says.

“I wasn’t complimenting you, I was hoping we’d get to see the dad bod.”

“Mm, don’t discourage him,” says Kala, turning her eyes on him appreciatively and biting her bottom lip.

“Oh, okay Kala,” teases Dani. “You’re already pregnant.”

Kala blushes to the roots of her hair, but manages to say, “Why would that stop me?”

Dani’s eyes crinkle and she laughs warmly. Kala laughs too and they hug once more, touching their foreheads together.

“Mm, give me some of your magic pregnancy energy so it happens to me,” says Dani.

Wolfgang glances at Felix and whispers, “You’re trying to have a baby? Now?”

Felix shrugs. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Hearts don’t make babies, sweetheart,” says Dani with a sharp smirk. “You know what does?”

Felix grins. “I don’t know.”

Dani grins back. “Maybe I can show you later.”

Hernando and Lito exchange a glance, torn between delight and embarrassment, and finally both break into a chuckle.

Wolfgang puts his hands on Felix’s shoulders. “I’m happy for you, but if you two fuck on our couch, we’re never inviting you over again.”
“Noted,” says Felix.

“As if you’d ever find out...” murmurs Dani.

Kala hides an amused smile by looking down, and then she glances at the time and wonders aloud, “Where are they?”

“Probably detained by the TSA for bringing drugs into the country,” replies Wolfgang, looking at his watch.

“Well, I’m going to sit down,” says Kala.

Dani immediately overturns her suitcase and pats it for Kala to sit on. Kala smiles warmly at her, and Dani takes a seat next to her and rests her head on her shoulder.

“You smell amazing,” says Dani. “As usual.”

Kala laughs. “Thank you. It’s the magic pregnancy energy.”

“Mm, who knew pregnancy smelled like jasmine...”

“I’ll text them,” says Wolfgang. “Hold on...”

Hernando glances around at the group. “Would they bring drugs? Isn’t Will a police officer?”

“Yeah, police officers never break the law,” murmurs Wolfgang.

“But who will you have your yearly homoerotic experience with if Will is detained?” asks Lito, putting on a devastated, dramatic expression.

Wolfgang snorts.

“Are you volunteering?” Kala teases Lito.

Lito holds his hands out in a self-sacrificing manner. “I could never take Will’s place.”

Felix shakes his head. “Another reason you should be glad your father’s dead,” he tells Wolfgang. “Can you imagine?”

“Can I imagine fucking around with my father’s reputation by flirting with guys? Yeah, can’t believe I never did that. Missed opportunity.”

Felix grins. Then Will appears to their left, sighing deeply, and pats both Lito and Wolfgang on the shoulder.

“Are you done drooling about me?” he asks.

“Where the fuck are you?” replies Wolfgang.

“We just got off the plane,” huffs Riley, also appearing.

“No, I am still not used to this,” reports Hernando to no one in particular, watching his husband and friends talk to the air.

“We’ll be there in ten, hold tight,” says Will, and he and Riley disappear.

“Ten minutes,” Kala tells Hernando, Felix, and Dani.
They nod, and then Hernando volunteers to get coffee for everyone. He’s just returned with two trays of coffees when Riley and Will appear around the baggage claim, grinning hugely. Riley embraces Kala, radiating warmth, and simply holds her without speaking. Will watches them, touched, and then hugs Wolfgang tightly.

“How’re you holding up?” he asks.

Wolfgang laughs. “Okay.”

“Not having a heart attack yet?”

“Not yet, will be by the time she’s at 40 weeks...”

Will laughs, patting Wolfgang’s back before releasing him. Meanwhile, Riley is still hugging Kala.

“You’re so beautiful,” she murmurs, snuggling her face into Kala’s hair. “I can feel the energy.”

Kala laughs, then says, “You give the best hugs.”

Riley laughs too and pulls back to look at her. She grins, her eyes crinkling.

“May I?” she asks, holding her hands near Kala’s belly.

Kala nods, watching Riley’s nose wrinkle in delight as she slides her hands over her belly.

“Oh, wow, you’re big.” She meets Kala’s eyes. “Congratulations, I’m so excited for you.”

Kala smiles, sniffling, and nods. Riley and Will hug the rest, and then everyone gathers their luggage and belongings and heads for the exit. Will nudge Wolfgang’s arm.

“You been working out?” he asks.

“Well, but it’s harder now,” Wolfgang admits.

“Because you’ve damaged your lungs beyond repair,” says Will, nodding.

Wolfgang shakes his head. “I haven’t had a cigarette in weeks.” He shrugs. “I feel like my joints don’t fit together properly anymore, so many broken fingers and the goddamn broken leg...”

“It’ll go away eventually,” says Will reassuringly. “Keep in mind, that was only a couple years ago. Recovery takes a while. Are the scars getting better?”

Wolfgang smirks suddenly. “I’m sure you’ll find out.”

Will grins, relieved that Wolfgang can joke. “I’m sure I will.”

“Are you two flirting already?” asks Riley, coming up behind them and putting her arms around their waists.

“Barely,” says Will and Wolfgang laughs.

Riley passes by them, pointing warningly at Wolfgang. “I’ll go for your wife if you’re not careful.”

Kala looks over her shoulder and grins in movie-star-fashion at Wolfgang. “Do you hear that?”

Riley beams, then steps even with Kala and squeezes her ass -- Kala throws her head back and laughs wildly -- and Riley skips ahead to walk next to Lito after winking saucily at Will and
Wolfgang.

“You know, your kid is going to have four dads and four moms,” says Will. “More, actually,” he adds, looking at Dani and Felix.

Wolfgang smiles. “I think that’s good, right?”

“Definitely,” says Will.

***

Bringing six guests into their flat reminds Kala and Wolfgang how tiny it actually is. They tried to convince the others that a hotel was necessary, but none of them would hear of that. “This is a family activity,” Riley had said. “Of course we’re staying with you!” But, once confronted with the 800 square foot flat, everyone balks.

“Oh, okay, couch...we have an air mattress...” Kala trails off. “I think we have some sleeping bags?”

“Air mattress!” calls Lito, explaining in a softer tone, “I have a sensitive spine...”

Dani rolls her eyes. “You do not.”

Hernando nods. “She’s right, Lito. Don’t be a baby.”

Lito sighs and folds his arms. “Fine. But, the tallest should get the air mattress.”

Will and Lito glance at each other, assessing their heights, squaring up for a fight over the best sleeping space.

“Will’s taller than you,” says Wolfgang to Lito.

“Don’t play favorites, Wolfie!” shouts Felix from the kitchen.

“Hm,” says Kala, staring at each of them intently. “You look the same to me.”

“Okay,” says Dani, taking a change purse out of her bag. “Lito, heads or tails?”

“Wait, what about us?” calls Felix.

“Couch, dummy!” she hollers back. “So that we can sully it and never be invited back!”

“Tails,” says Lito, his face morphing into an expression of deep hope and concentration.

Dani flips the coin and it lands neatly on the coffee table. “Tails!” She stretches and kisses Lito’s cheek. “Lucky you.”

“I don’t mind sleeping bags,” says Riley, perching her chin on Will’s shoulder.

He smiles, shaking his head, and kisses her nose. “Me neither.”

Felix wanders out of the kitchen, eating a cookie, and looks at Kala, “These are delicious, but what are you doing making vanillekipferl in fucking March?”

Kala shoots him a smile. “We always have Christmas cookies around.”
“And she didn’t make them,” adds Wolfgang. “I did.”

Felix frowns deeply, looking at the cookie in a new light. “When the fuck did you learn how to do that...”

“He’s getting pretty good, isn’t he?” says Kala proudly, hooking a finger in one of Wolfgang’s belt loops and pulling him in to kiss him quickly.

“Speaking of cooking...I will make dinner!” says Lito. “We are all hungry, yes?”

“Starving,” says Felix around a bite of cookie.

Dani rolls her eyes and steals the remaining bit of cookie out of his hand and pops it into her mouth. Kala grins approvingly at her, and Riley pipes up.

“I could eat,” she agrees, looking at Lito and adding, “Tortilla de papas?”

Lito grins. “Absolutely.”

“But first,” says Hernando, reaching into his backpack and extracting four bottles of Spanish wine, “I thought we could split this. Except for you Kala, my apologies.”

Kala smiles. “It’s alright. I’m used to being the sober one at this point. And actually...with all of you drinking...I’m sure I’ll be able to feel something.”

“Oh,” sighs Riley. “Interesting! I’d never thought of that. Sensate mothers can party through their cluster-mates...”

Kala nods. “I hope I haven’t made any of you too miserable with the nausea, and the pain, and the strange cravings...”

“Well, the first three months of nausea wasn’t awesome,” admits Will.

“You have gotten me to appreciate peanut butter in a whole new way,” adds Riley.

Kala smiles at them both, content to simply drink in the sight of them. They beam back at her, all giddy from being together in person, and then Lito calls for them from the kitchen, hoisting one of the bottles of wine over his head.

“Let’s celebrate, c’mon!”

Everyone packs into the small kitchen. Kala opens the shades on the window, letting in the last feeble stream of evening sunlight, and then she searches for wine glasses. Lito, meanwhile, begins to set ingredients on the counter - onions, potatoes, eggs - and Riley, Felix, and Dani explore the record collection in a nearby credenza. Wolfgang sidles out of the kitchen to start a fire in the fireplace, and Hernando uncorks the wine bottles. Music suddenly fills the apartment, an album by Nina Simone, and Kala looks across the kitchen at Riley and mouths good choice! Will, taking two glasses of wine, goes to sit by Wolfgang near the fire.

Wolfgang glances up at him, several logs stacked in his arms. “Are you going to help or just watch?”

Will sips his wine and raises his eyebrows. “Just watch. Isn’t it a bit dangerous to have a fireplace considering you’re married to an arsonist?”

Wolfgang laughs. “She's not an arsonist. She just likes explosions.”
He can feel Kala’s amusement, so he turns and smiles at her. She laughs.

“We’re going to miss this place,” Wolfgang goes on.

“But it’s not great for kids,” says Will, looking around.

Wolfgang finishes stacking the logs in the fireplace, then sits back on the hearth and takes a glass of wine from Will.

“No, definitely not,” he agrees, moaning when he takes a sip of wine. “I hate wine, but that’s really good.”

“Right?” says Will, clinking his glass on Wolfgang’s. “Hey, congratulations.”

Wolfgang smiles and nods. “Yeah, thank you.”

“What’s the game plan with the house?” asks Will.

“Kala says she wants something big,” replies Wolfgang, concealing a smile by taking another drink of wine.

Will grins. “So, maybe more than one kid...?”

“Yeah,” says Wolfgang. “Two or three.”

“So, you went from wanting no kids to wanting a whole battalion of them.”

“No, I always wanted kids,” says Wolfgang, looking at Kala as she helps Lito cut up potatoes, smiling to himself. “But I think the idea of a big family’s growing on her.”

“Did she suggest the big house?” asks Will.

Wolfgang nods, cocking an eyebrow. “She takes a while to decide how she feels.”

Kala looks up at him from the kitchen, smiling suddenly, and blows a kiss. Wolfgang laughs and turns slightly pink, and Will kicks him, grinning outrageously wide.

“She’s so good for you,” he says.

“She is,” replies Wolfgang, tilting his glass back to finish his wine.

“Yeah, you haven’t committed any crimes this year,” Will jokes, then frowns and looks at Wolfgang intently. “Have you?”

Wolfgang raises his eyebrows. “You tell me, you’re the cop.”

Will smirks and takes a sip of wine. “Bad answer. That means you definitely have.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll get a confession out of me somehow...”

Riley walks by with a bottle of wine and tops up their glasses. “You’re supposed to be lighting a fire.”

Will and Wolfgang glance at the unlit logs in the fireplace.

“We are lighting a fire, Riles,” says Will, his voice slowing down the way it does when he’s about to make a dreadful joke. “A metaphorical fire. In our hearts.”
Wolfgang chokes on his wine and starts to cough. Riley rubs her face and continues on her way, murmuring *oh God help you.* Will pats Wolfgang’s back.

“Hand me the matches,” Wolfgang finally says, voice rough from coughing.

Will grins and hands them over.

***

An hour later, empty plates and glasses are spread throughout the living room, and the eight of them are lying, leaning, and slouching on the couch and floor. It’s dark, and the lights of the city filter through the windows and cast long shadows; the music has petered out, and the record is crackling quietly; the wine bottles sit empty on the coffee table, glistening in the light from the television, which is playing a match between Germany and Argentina. Wolfgang, Lito, Felix, and Dani are on the couch, all leaning forward, watching intently. Will and Riley are on their sleeping bags -- Riley reading Will’s palm, pretending to be serious -- and Kala is curled up in an armchair, giggling quietly, one hand over her face.

Wolfgang glances at her. “What?”

“I feel so irresponsible!” she replies, running her hands over her belly. “I know I didn’t actually drink, but oh my gosh, I’m...drunk.”

“That’s what happens when we all drink...” sighs Riley. “Oh my God, remember our birthday three years ago? I’ve never been so drunk...“

“I had to drink the terror of my new marriage away that night,” replies Kala, nodding.

Wolfgang grins. “He lit your name up in huge letters on a beach, Kala. Didn’t that fix everything?”

Kala sighs. “Oh, Rajan.”

Wolfgang starts to laugh, and suddenly can’t stop. “Can we just take a minute,” he replies through laughter, “to appreciate the memory of Kala literally breaking her new husband’s--”

“Do *not* finish that sentence! We all remember, and it is still extremely embarrassing to reflect on!”

Everyone else starts to laugh, too.

“I didn’t do it intentionally!” Kala goes on. “And it wasn’t my fault!”

“It wasn’t mine!” says Wolfgang. “You overreacted!”

“Overreacted? You -- you were -- you were interfering!”

He bites his bottom lip. “That’s one word for it.”

“You two were so dramatic,” says Will, shaking his head.

“More dramatic than me,” agrees Lito. “*Me.*”

“I told Wolfie he should have been an actor,” says Felix wistfully. “Told him he had to channel that Shakespearean shit somehow. But he just channeled it in his real life. Dumbass.”

Wolfgang glances at him. “Shakespearean? What the fuck are you talking about, Felix?”
Felix points at him. “Iago. That’s who you are.”

“Iago?” says Hernando, wrinkling his nose. “Iago was motivated by jealousy! No, no, if he’s anyone, he’s Edmund. Edmund’s motivations were more complex.”

Wolfgang groans. “Stop comparing me to fictional characters.”

“Edmund?” asks Felix. “Nah, Wolfie never fucked up that badly.”

Kala smirks. “My goodness, Edmund must have really done something terrible then.”

Wolfgang fixes her with an overdramatic, offended stare. She beams, and everyone breaks into a laugh. Then Riley yawns loudly.

“We should sleep,” she says.

Everyone murmurs in agreement, and soon they’ve all picked out pajamas and settled in around the living room. Kala and Wolfgang say goodnight to everyone, then fall into bed, look at each other, and break into a quiet laugh.

“Oh, I missed them,” sighs Kala, stretching her arms above her head.

Wolfgang nods, shaping his body around hers and resting his head on her chest. She smiles and nestles her face in his hair, and he squeezes her.

“I like having so many people in the house,” she says as she drifts off.

“Me too,” he murmurs, then opens his eyes a sliver to look up at her. “Is that why you want a big house?”

Kala smiles widely, eyes bright and wide. “A big family doesn’t sound like the worst thing…”

He stretches and kisses her. “Good.”
Househunting Part 2

Chapter Summary

Wolfgang confides in Will. Kala and Wolfgang finally pick a name and buy their new home.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is short (and maybe a little odd) but hopefully it works. I figured there has been plenty of Cluster interaction lately, so didn’t feel the need to write out all the details of househunting. I also figured, because this fic is angst-free and I am a devil, that I needed to include some realistic parenting angst.

The next chapter is also up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wolfgang wakes up the next morning with fiery panic in his chest -- not an unusual occurrence, though one he is still not used to -- so he quietly slides out of bed and rearranges the blankets around Kala. He puts on his running clothes, then pads into the kitchen in search of coffee. The rest of the Cluster and their friends are still asleep, except for Hernando, who waves quietly at Wolfgang, then goes back to reading. Wolfgang glances at Will, who’s in a blissful slumber, and is consumed by a sudden need to talk through his current state of anxiety. So he makes two coffees instead of one, and then goes over to Will’s sleeping bag and kicks him in the side.

“Why,” mutters Will in a long-suffering way, blinking against the light. “Why are you like this.”

“Get up, we’re going running.”

Will squints at him. “What?” He checks the time. “Are you kidding?”

Riley turns over beside them, opens her eyes, and then gently raises an eyebrow. “Running?”

“I’m not going alone,” Wolfgang says.

Will meets Riley’s eyes -- Riley bites the tip of her tongue, absolutely beaming -- and Will groans, knowing he has to go. Wolfgang pulls him to his feet. He gets his workout gear out of his bag.

“You’ll pay for this,” he says meaningfully as he trudges towards the bathroom.

“Doubt it,” says Wolfgang, going back to the kitchen.

He leans against the counter, sipping his coffee, and Will reappears a moment later in shorts and a tight-fitting tee-shirt. He accepts the cup of coffee Wolfgang hands him, then smiles mischievously.

“Ready to get your ass kicked?” he asks, his dark eyes flashing up.
Wolfgang grins. “You’re underestimating how competitive I am.”

“You,” says Will, “are underestimating my arduous police training.”

They drink their coffee in silence for a moment, fighting an urge to taunt each other some more, and then Will nudges Wolfgang with his foot.

“You always run this early?” he asks, knowing the answer.

Wolfgang shakes his head. “I’m just...” He shrugs. “Antsy.”

“Well, a new house and a baby? It’s a lot at once.”

Wolfgang nods, tapping his fingers anxiously against his mug. “I don’t like waiting, because that gives me time to...”

“Think about all the horrible possibilities?” guesses Will. “Yeah, you’ve never been good about that.”

“I’m too used to thinking about what could go wrong,” replies Wolfgang, rinsing out his empty mug and overturning it in the dish rack. “I’ve always had to think about that to stay alive.”

Will nods. “I know how that is.” He finishes his coffee, then sets the cup aside and squeezes Wolfgang’s arm. “Running clears your head?”

Wolfgang shrugs. “Sometimes.”

“Well, it’s pretty dense in there,” jokes Will, patting the side of Wolfgang’s head. “C’mon, let’s go.”

Wolfgang nods, relieved that Will recognized the run is an excuse to talk, even more relieved that he didn’t bring up that recognition and merely went along. They tighten their laces, then quietly exit the flat and go down the chilly stairs.

“You start at this pace?” asks Will as Wolfgang takes off down the sidewalk.

Wolfgang turns around, running backward for a moment. “What was it about that arduous police training?”

“Fuck you,” laughs Will, catching up.

They jog parallel for a moment, and then Wolfgang mutters, “What do we do if this was a mistake?”

“Having a baby?” asks Will. “It’s not. You and Kala are solid as a rock, you’ll both adore that kid.”

Wolfgang shakes his head. “I thought I had...dealt with most of my shit about my father, but I think I just buried it deeper after BPO...it wasn’t exactly at the front of my mind to deal with that when I was already dealing with...never sleeping, and nightmares, and all the reexperiencing bullshit.”

“That still going on?” asks Will.

Another shrug. “Sometimes. Kala doesn’t think it will ever completely go away.”

Will nods slowly. “It may not. Some of my buddies on the force were in Afghanistan, and man, it takes a long time for experiences like that to fade.”

“The war never really goes away,” says Wolfgang. “Just gets replaced with a new one in your
They turn a corner and Will watches his feet move for a moment, thinking. The sidewalk opens up into a large park and they cut off onto a gravel path. Will glances hesitantly at Wolfgang.

“Do you think you’re too fucked up to be a parent? Like you won’t see things the right way?”

“I think I was too fucked up before anything happened with BPO, and now with that...” He shakes his head. “My parents were both too fucked up to have a kid, they took it out on me...”

“But you won’t do that,” Will points out. “And what does too fucked up mean? I mean, you’re functional--”

“What if that changes?” asks Wolfgang, frustrated. “What if the stress of having a kid is too much and I...” He trails off, panting.

Will wipes his forehead, catching his breath, and says, “The way Riles explained it to me, what it’s like for her, living with what happened...the hardest part to get used to is the uncertainty. You wake up and you don’t know if it will be a good day or a bad day. She felt so powerless, she felt like she failed herself because she couldn’t control how she felt...and what helped her was changing her definition of strength.” He pauses and wipes his brow again. “For people like us...it’s not about having a good day or a bad one, it’s about living with that variability, and getting up every day despite it. And you do that. You do that better than anyone I’ve ever met. You always keep going.”

Wolfgang picks up his pace, running a hand through his sweat-damp hair, and doesn’t respond for a moment. The path turns to rejoin the roadway, the cars generating an ever-present rush that they have to shout over.

“What if I don’t?” yells Wolfgang. “What if I stop doing that?”

“Why would you?” asks Will.

“Because I’m exhausted! I’m fucking exhausted, all the time, because this is always in the background!”

Will stares, momentarily at a loss for words. Wolfgang shakes his head, running even faster, and Will swears but keeps pace with him.

“Could I have a day?” Wolfgang goes on. “One fucking day where I don’t think about this? I want to be there, actually be there, for Kala and the kid...”

Will takes a needy breath, fatigued, surprised at the intensity of Wolfgang’s panic, though entirely unsurprised that he managed to conceal it from them all.

“That’s what Riley means,” huffs Will. “It’s not about...not having these fears, not feeling like shit...that’s not what recovery is.” He wipes his face with his shirt. “Listen, if I’m honest, I don’t think the feelings will ever go away, alright? You had a lot of serious shit happen to you. But that doesn’t mean you failed. Always feeling good isn’t the goal...the goal is being there despite everything, being there when you feel like shit...and I know you’ll do that.”

Wolfgang runs a few more feet, then stops, leaning over and bracing his hands on his knees. Will does the same, panting hard, and they don’t speak for a while. Then Wolfgang slowly nods, sweat dripping off his nose.

“Okay,” he says finally. “Okay...”
Will squeezes his shoulder. “You’re not alone in this, okay? And I don’t know if this means anything coming from me, but you rock with kids.”

Wolfgang looks up at him with wide, cautious eyes. Then he nods again.

“Thanks for listening.”

Will smiles and nods, then smirks. “Hey, thanks for talking. You know, actually talking. Using words. Like, in a sentence—”

Wolfgang shoves him hard, then takes off running again. “You’ll regret that!”

Will hangs his head, panting, and then forces himself after Wolfgang. “I thought you said working out is harder for you now!”

“Yeah, it is!”

Will sighs. “You’ve had too much practice enduring pain!”

“No shit! Keep up!”

They continue along the roadway and then turn back into the park, towards a lake with a large pavilion, shaded by massive, old-growth trees. There’s a stand nearby offering lemonade and ice cream.

“Oh, fuck, finally,” mutters Will. “I thought you were going to make me run back.”

Wolfgang chuckles, slowing down and wiping his face, then admits, “I’m tapped out, I need something to drink.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t sprinted here, and had jogged like a normal person...”

Wolfgang makes a face. “Don’t complain, I’m buying you lemonade.”

Will shakes his head and slings an arm around Wolfgang’s shoulders. “Kala deserves, like, international recognition for putting up with you every day.”

Wolfgang laughs, pulling his wallet out of a pocket in the arm of his shirt. “She does. I give you way more shit than her, though. I treat her okay.”

Will smiles at the understatement. “Yeah, you do.”

When they return to the flat, they find Kala and Riley in the kitchen, making breakfast, and Lito, Hernando, Dani and Felix all watching a mid-morning soccer match.

“Oh, that’s where you were,” murmurs Kala, whipping some eggs with a fork.

Felix glances over his shoulder at his friend. “You didn’t invite me?”

“You skinny thing?” asks Dani. “Why?”

Felix grins. “I could use the exercise. It’s fucking invigorating, okay?”

“Invigorating is one word for it,” says Will, taking off his shirt and drying the sweat from his face with it.
Lito gets to his feet, passing the two men to reach the kitchen, and he pats Will’s shoulder on his way. “I’m sure you are in excellent shape, Will, but no one can outrun Wolfgang.”

“You need to find something to run from,” jokes Wolfgang.

Will grins and throws his balled-up shirt at Wolfgang. “Now that sounds like an unhealthy coping strategy.”

Wolfgang throws his shirt back at him, also grinning. “I could give you something to run from.”

Will shakes his head, laughing, then strips his shorts and heads towards the hot tub on the patio.

Wolfgang makes a face. “You’re filthy, you can’t go in there right now.”

Will throws his shorts and continues on his way, now wearing only some under-armor boxers. "What? I can’t hear you!

Wolfgang swears, then goes after Will, who playfully inches closer to the patio. He reaches the door before Wolfgang bodily grabs him and shoves him towards the bathroom.

“Shower, what’s wrong with you?”

Will disappears into the bathroom, and then Wolfgang walks into the kitchen and hugs Kala from behind. She giggles and pushes him away half-heartedly.


He kisses her behind her ear. “What are you making?”

She turns around, looking up at him. “Quiche.” Then her brow dips in concern. “Are you okay?”

He looks down and nods earnestly. “For now.”

Kala smiles, rubbing her hands over his arms. “Will is good at picking people up.”

He smiles too. “Yeah.” He kisses her gently and puts his hands on her stomach, then meets her eyes and gives her a tiny smirk. “Ready to find a house?”

A grin bubbles over on her lips and she nods exuberantly, bumping her nose against his and kissing him hard. “Yes.”

***

One Week Later

Kala stands in the doorway of her and Wolfgang’s new home, biting her bottom lip, arms folded tightly.

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can carry?” she asks for the fourth time that morning as Wolfgang passes her, carrying a large box. “A lamp, a rug, something?”

“Already carrying something, süße,” he says, nodding at her stomach.

“We’ve got it!” Riley adds happily, also coming through the door, two chairs balanced in her arms.
Kala grumbles and unfolds her arms. “Okay. I suppose I’ll go call my mother...”

Riley and Wolfgang exchange an exasperated look as Kala walks outside into the lawn to sit in the sun while she makes the call. The April morning is filled with new insects and birds whizzing through the milky sunshine, and the sounds of the city are distant in this neighborhood, which is sheltered by trees. Kala sits on the lawn with a soft groan, patting her stomach in case the sudden movement disturbed the baby, and waits a moment before she calls her mother, reflecting.

The week was a mad rush of driving around the city, everyone regularly commenting that Wolfgang drives as if he’s on the run. They stopped at houses with for-sale signs, Riley or Dani hopping out to grab a flyer, Kala and Wolfgang scrutinizing the information. They avoided meetings with realtors until the very end, when deciding between two places. They eventually picked the slightly larger house in Sèvres, a neighborhood surrounded by parks. Nomi, Capheus, and Sun visited in order to get the full tour of the new place. Capheus was a reassuring force, exclaiming about every empty room they showed him; Nomi was predictably cheerful but analytical, pointing out good places around the house for security and surveillance. At one point, Sun spontaneously chuckled and said, “Why didn’t you do this before Kala was this far along?” and everyone raised their eyebrows at Kala and Wolfgang, who broke down laughing after a moment.

The house is situated on a corner, red bricks with huge elms in the front yard, an arched front door and an expansive back porch, a backyard with a garden that is home to a tall tree with wandering branches (Kala is certain it will become the favorite climbing tree); inside, the rooms are small but plentiful, except for the kitchen, which is massive and styled in sapphire and white tiles, with wide windows to let in the easterly sun.

Initially, Kala hesitated; this house was slightly farther from work, and slightly too old, but she found confidence and clarity in a moment with Wolfgang. They were standing in one of the upstairs bedrooms, Kala leaning on the doorway with her hands clasped on the top of her tummy, Wolfgang looking out of the window. He offhandedly pointed at one of the trees in the front and mentioned putting up a swing, and Kala was inexplicably stunned. Perhaps she was finally fully realizing how their lives were changing; it was strange how this was all becoming incrementally real; strange that it wasn’t apparent to them the moment she came home and said she was pregnant; but, with the wild hustle of every day, with weeks that passed more like minutes, it was sometimes hard to reflect, to sincerely consider all the implications.

Kala had met Wolfgang’s eyes, a small wrinkle on her brow, surprised by the sudden influx of emotion. He didn’t speak, merely crossed the room to take her hands, and they had gone downstairs a moment later and signed the papers.

Out on the lawn, Kala sighs deeply and lays back in the grass, her eyes wandering the hazy azure sky, listening to the chatter between her cluster-mates and friends as they unload the moving van. She toes off her sandals, stretches her legs, presses her heels into the soft, slightly wet grass. Then a packing peanut hits her squarely on the side of her head, and she looks in feigned outrage at her husband, who replies with a “not me!” expression that is far from convincing. Kala giggles and grins and then unlocks her phone to dial her mother.

A moment later, her mother asks how she is, and she finds herself saying, “I never thought I would be this happy.”

That evening, Kala and Wolfgang are left unexpectedly alone, Riley and Will having gone out to pick up dinner, Felix and Dani in the backyard, and Lito and Hernando out on a mission to explore the neighborhood. Wolfgang drops a box with a heavy *fwump* on the carpet, then stands up and puts his hands on his hips, looking around, scrutinizing.
Then he glances at Kala with a soft grin.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey what,” she murmurs from her place on the couch, which is sitting haphazardly in the center of the room, where she is flipping through a recipe book.

“Last box, truck is empty,” he announces.

Kala looks up excitedly. “Oh my God, really?”

He nods. Kala smiles widely, then sets aside her book and gets to her feet. She crosses the room to where Wolfgang is standing, puts her arms around his neck while he pulls her closer, and kisses him exuberantly. She sways in his arms after a moment, tilting her face, leaving a trail of kisses down to his jaw. Then she nuzzles into him and he squeezes her waist.

“Things happen so quickly lately,” she mumbles.

“That’s what they say,” he replies. “Soon as you start having kids, time passes differently.”

Kala hums in thought at this, then looks up and says spontaneously, “Mom reminded me of a name I loved as a little girl. It’s what I would have been named if I was a boy.”

He raises his eyebrows. “What’s that?”

“Jalesh,” says Kala. “It’s nice, don’t you think?”

He grins. “Yeah.” Then wrinkles his brow, sounding it out in his head. “Actually I like that more than the ones we’ve come up with.”

Kala nods with a big, open smile on her face. “Okay.” She kisses him. “Good.”

The others return after a while, and everyone sits downstairs, leaning against boxes and clinking beer bottles, eating wide rice noodles and curry and tom yum soup. By this time, everyone is bone-tired and sore, especially Lito and Wolfgang, who had moved the dining table and were nearly crushed under the weight of it. Wolfgang leans against Kala, focusing on the feeling of her fingers in his hair. Then, realizing he’s about to fall asleep, he sits up and rests his chin on Kala’s shoulder. She looks at him attentively, her eyes bright, her lips slightly shiny from slurping a bowl of tom yum.

He was going to say something, but now he forgets what, and he simply kisses her behind her ear.

She smiles and tangles her fingers with his. He drifts to sleep, listening to the murmured celebratory voices, the squeak of utensils on to-go boxes, the hum of Kala’s pulse.

Chapter End Notes

Jalesh, depending on who you ask, means lord of water/born of water...yes, my symbolism IS rather obvious. I wanted to pick something symbolic as well as connected to Kala's family (i.e., Priya considering the name for Kala herself.)

It was hard not to break the fourth wall with this chapter given the themes of homoerotic jogging, police, and pregnancy. Some of y'all know what I'm alluding to LOL.
I have no idea how much a nice house costs in Paris. Good thing that Wolfie can steal something from the Louvre to pay for it. :)
Chapter Summary

Wolfgang has last-minute doubts. Kala refuses to believe she's in labor. The Cluster is as supportive as ever. TW for descriptions of childbirth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kala wakes up with a soft gasp, immediately looking to her side where Wolfgang is asleep; she can tell by his expression that he’s gripped by a nightmare, but she need not look at him to tell -- she can feel the panic and terror in her own chest, as if something is sitting on her, squeezing out the air. She puts her hands on his shoulder and shakes him.

“Wolfgang, honey, wake up! Wolfgang!”

She shakes him harder, and his eyes flash open suddenly, staring at her; his fingers clench her arms, unintentionally hard, and she winces.

“It’s me!” she whispers hastily. “Wolfgang, it’s me!”

His grip loosens and he leans back, rubbing his face, letting out a harsh sigh.

“I’m sorry, Kala,” he says feebly after a moment.

She shakes her head to say she understands, then leans closer, her eyes searching his.

“What was it tonight?” she murmurs.

He shrugs. “Usual.”

She continues to stare at him, studying his expression for more detail, but he throws the covers off of him and gets up.

“Need some water,” he says gruffly, disappearing out of their bedroom.

Kala sits up, listening to his footsteps fade as he walks towards the kitchen. Then she sighs, looking down at her tummy and smoothing her hands over it. She’s been gritting her teeth against powerful cramps throughout the night, but now Wolfgang has her attention. He doesn’t have nightmares as frequently as he once did. When they first rescued him, the nightmares happened almost every time he slept. Kala remembers how difficult it was to convince him he wasn’t at BPO; it took minutes, not seconds, to coax him back into reality. At first, he insisted Kala didn’t sleep next to him, in case he woke up confused, in case he hurt her. She had refused, of course, because she couldn’t bear to leave him alone, and because she was the only one who could convince him he was safe. It’s easier now, but every time he has a nightmare, Kala still feels as though her heart is being pulled apart by each fiber.

She looks down at her tummy once more -- it obscures her view, she’s nearly due -- and then she gets to her feet with a soft groan. She waddles into the kitchen, her hands on her back to support the
weight of her tummy, and sees that it’s early morning, pink light rising over the city, birds blurring
the clear skies.

She finds Wolfgang hunched over the sink, shaking slightly. She swallows her urge to cry, then
walks up behind him and puts a hand on his back. He glances over his shoulder at her, jaw tight.

“I just -- I just need a minute, okay?”

Kala gently pulls him away from the sink and puts her arms around his neck. “Wolfgang, I know that
I am very pregnant, but you don’t have to protect me. I know you need to talk.”

He looks down, his whole body stiff and shaking.

Kala presses closer, looking up at him, eyes full of warmth and concern. “I know you don’t want to
scare me, but I know what you’re thinking.”

He smiles slightly and nods. “I know.”

“I know you don’t think you can be a good father if you’re still so affected by what happened to
you,” she murmurs. “I know it makes you feel weak.” She squeezes his arms softly. “But you will be
the best father because the fact that you’re here with me shows how strong you are, how much you
survived.”

He starts to slowly nod, and then pulls her into his arms and snuggles his face into her hair.

“Sometimes I feel like I can’t do this, Kala,” he mumbles.

“I know,” she says quietly, rubbing his back.

“Like I won’t be able to see what my kid needs because I’ll be in my own head.”

She shakes her head. “Wolfgang, you have always been there for me, and you’ll always be there for
him. I know you.”

“I haven’t always been there for you, süße...”

“Always when it mattered,” she replies in a whisper.

He breathes out, then nods.

“And it’s okay,” she goes on, “if this overwhelms you sometimes. You’re allowed to have bad days
because you aren’t alone in this. He has both of us. All of us.”

“I just wish...” he trails off, so Kala rubs his back again and holds him closer. “I wish he had a father
who isn’t so fucked up, I can’t even go into a fucking doctor’s office, Kala, I jump out of my skin
when I get shocked by static, I...”

“He’s your son, he’ll understand,” she says.

“Will he? What the fuck do we tell him?”

“The truth,” she says gently. “He’ll learn how painful life can be like we all do...and he will be
confused and angry like we all are...but he will have two parents who adore him, and our friends
who adore him, and aunts and uncles and grandparents and godparents...” She pauses, then pulls
back so she can meet Wolfgang’s eyes. “Wolfgang, listen, there is more light and love in our lives
now than fear and darkness. We can’t shield him from the darkness that exists, but we can...
“But what if he thinks I should have been...”

“Stronger?” asks Kala.

Wolfgang nods.

“You couldn’t have been,” she murmurs. “You were barely alive when we found you...”

He shrugs. “Okay, not stronger. Smarter. I could have...avoided everything, kept you all out of danger if I had just--”

“Wolfgang, everything you did, you did to protect us,” she says firmly.

“Should have listened to you about Lila,” he mutters.

“Yes. And I never should have married Rajan. We all made mistakes.” She looks up at him. “And Wolfgang? If I understand? If I love you? I met you as an adult, I took all of my predispositions with me when I met you...and even then, I understood you and fell in love with you. But Jalesh?” She smiles, looking down at herself. “Well, he won’t have predispositions. Of course he’ll understand.” She meets his eyes again. “And you did what was right. As hard as it was for me at first to see that...you did what was right.”

“I’m not sure if...some of what I did is ever right, Kala,” he mumbles.

But she shakes her head. “You did what you had to.”

“Does that make it right?”

She sighs, running her hands up his chest, and gently cups his face in her hands. “Maybe not. But...” Her eyes fill suddenly with tears. “But I know who you are. I know your heart.”

He holds her gaze for a long time, his eyes glassy and cold with doubt. But then he breathes out and she feels the tightness leave his body. He wraps his arms around her and holds her as close as her tummy will allow.

“I love you,” he murmurs.

She smiles into his chest. “I love you.”

“I love you so much, fuck, I love you,” he continues.

She shakes her head, grinning and sniffing at once. Then she looks up at him, touching her nose to his. “Do you want to go back to bed?”

He glances at the time - 7:30 - and considers. Then he kisses her, lets her go, and decisively grabs a mug out of the dishrack.

“No, it’s morning,” he replies.

Kala laughs, pulling the cup out of his hands and pushing him towards the cabinet with the coffee in it. They make coffee together, both quiet, and then sit on the window seat together which overlooks the city.

“I want to go somewhere...” he mutters, eyes narrowing slightly as he looks out.
Kala glances at him, sipping her coffee. “Where?”

He frowns at himself. “The zoo.”

Kala raises an eyebrow. “The zoo?”

He nods slowly, chewing on the inside of his cheek. Then he looks at her, his features forming a soft, roguish expression. “Want to?”

She looks down at her tummy, unsure whether she should, but then she grins. “Yes, okay.”

***

An hour later, after a lazy cup of coffee and a few minutes of lazy kissing, after showers and bagel toasting and more coffee, after packing a lunch, an extra jacket, an umbrella, and double-checking the OB-GYN’s phone number, they step out of their front door and get in the car. Kala giggles at their impulsive plans, putting a hand on Wolfgang’s knee and leaning to kiss the side of his mouth.

“So,” she says. “I am nearly nine months pregnant, and we are going to the zoo.”

“Since when did we have good judgment?” he replies, pulling out of the driveway.

“Mm, never,” she says, leaning back in her seat and smiling indulgently in the morning sun. She catches him watching her after a moment, and her mouth twitches into a smile. “What are you looking at?”

He shrugs. “You’re so beautiful.”

She looks down, smiling hugely and turning pink. “I’m huge.”

“Yes,” he replies. “And you’re beautiful. I’ve never seen you smile like this before you were pregnant.”

She meets his eyes, then runs her hands over her belly, smoothing the fabric of her cerulean dress. “I’m excited,” she admits. “We’re going to have a baby soon.”

He looks down, smiling. “I still can’t believe it.”

“That we’re having a baby?”

“That I met you, that you wanted me too, that you married me, that we bought a house, and yeah, that we’re having a baby.”

She bites her bottom lip, grinning hard, then leans to kiss him quickly. They look at each other for a moment, fixated and smiling, and then Kala squeezes his knee, leans forward, and puts on the radio. She finds a station with music, then sighs and leans back, soothing a sudden cramp by rubbing her stomach. Wolfgang takes her hand after a moment, and they drive to the zoo with Kala quietly singing along to the radio, Wolfgang quietly complaining about the traffic. They reach the zoo after twenty minutes, and Kala excitedly dashes up to the welcome kiosk to get a map.

“Oh, okay,” she says commandingly, unfolding the map. “Elephants, obviously, the penguins, the wolves, that beautiful greenhouse...”

Wolfgang watches her fondly. She looks up at him, sticks her tongue out playfully, then shows him the map.
“What do you want to see?” she asks.

“I just want to follow you,” he replies, putting an arm around her waist as they walk towards the entrance.

Kala gestures at a nearby couple who is pulling a wagon with their children in it. “We need that.”

Wolfgang frowns at her. “For a newborn...?”

“No, for me,” she says matter-of-factly. “My poor feet.”

He grins. “I don’t think a wagon is elegant enough for you.”

“No,” she agrees as she pulls out her wallet, “I need one of those fancy boxes that they carry royalty around in...”

Wolfgang nods, playing along. “Gold-plated.”

“With air conditioning,” she adds.

“And a flatscreen.”

“And sushi.”

They both start to laugh as they step up towards the ticket booth.

“Deux billets, s’il vous plaît,” says Kala, turning towards Wolfgang while they wait and running a hand through her hair.

“Your French is sexy,” he tells her.

Kala pushes him, shaking her head and blushing, and then reaches out to accept the tickets. She takes Wolfgang’s hand, pulling him along at a fast pace, and he smirks to himself.

“So, greenhouse, or penguins?” she asks.

“Penguins, tuxedo-ed fuckers,” replies Wolfgang.

Kala grins. “I just think of Lito...”

Wolfgang nods, laughing. Kala squeezes his hand, then twines their fingers together. She leans her face back to catch more of the sun while they make their way down the path. She notices several other zoo patrons look at her and Wolfgang and smile, which she still isn’t used to -- she can scarcely believe how excited strangers get about seeing a pregnant woman, but she doesn’t mind the attention. She stretches her toes in her shoes, deeply at ease, and puts her free hand on the side of her tummy. Then, like a lock clicking into place, she feels something shift inside of her. A wave of tightness and pain radiating from her back, through her tummy, down her thighs.

Oh no.

She ignores it. She’s had minor cramps for the last few weeks, which her doctor assured her were harmless. This one, like the ones she had all night, is slightly stronger. It feels slightly different. But it must be a cramp.

Wolfgang glances at her and she smiles assuredly at him. They keep walking. The pain subsides, and they step up to the penguins. Kala, as usual, watches Wolfgang more than she watches the animals.
because his expression amuses her -- at the zoo, it’s always a delicate blend of analytical and affectionate.

“Look at their dumb feet,” he murmurs.

Kala keeps back a laugh. “What’s dumb about their feet?”

“They’re huge,” he replies.

“Maybe they need them to swim,” she says.

“So,” he says. “Who wants to swim while looking that dumb?”

“Wolfgang, I know you like to insult the animals, but every time you talk, I just hear look how cute they are.”

He grins, shoving her lightly, and they move onto the next exhibit. Kala moans quietly when another contraction -- cramp, she corrects herself -- overtakes her, but she shakes her head when Wolfgang looks at her. He frowns but doesn’t question her.

They make it through the pumas, zebras, lions, and giraffes in the next hour, and Kala breathes more easily by the time they step up to an ice cream stand. She hasn’t had a cramp in a while, and the sun has grown brighter and warmer; the sky is bright, crystal blue, and a warm breeze stirs the new leaves of the trees which crowd the pathways. She feels exuberantly awake, giddy even, and she beams when Wolfgang hands her a mint chocolate chip ice cream cone. They sit at a nearby picnic table, and Kala stretches her feet out to reach the seat opposite of her. Wolfgang runs his hand along her calf, and they glance at each other while they eat, lips quirking, both hiding smiles because they’ve smiled too much today.

“I can’t believe I fell in love with a woman who likes mint ice cream.”

Kala scoffs. “I can’t believe I fell in love with a man who hates it.”

“You know what I miss?” he asks, licking a stray droplet of chocolate ice cream off of his finger.

“Hm?” she murmurs, sliding her sunglasses down from her head as the sun shifts in the sky.

“That butterscotch ice cream you make,” he replies.

Kala grins. “Oh, yes.”

“Is that what you call it?” he asks. “Butterscotch?”

Kala nods. “Yes, I do...there’s really no translation of that.” Then she wrinkles her nose, pressing her teeth together in pain, and grips the table. “Oh, my.”

“Kala?” asks Wolfgang, leaning forward, worried.

“It’s...just a cramp,” she murmurs.

“That didn’t seem like a cramp,” he replies carefully.

“No, no, a contraction would be stronger.”

But before he can respond, Riley appears and slides into a seat next to Kala. They both watch her as she looks around, her hair shining white in the sunlight.
“Are you at the zoo?” she asks, voice light and drifting with wonder.

“Yes,” says Kala.

Riley nods, continuing to look around. Then she puts a hand on Kala’s leg.

“You are about to have this baby—”

Kala shakes her head. “No, no.”

“—so, I’m going to take a Blocker, alright?”

“I...” But Kala trails off, knowing she’s right, and goes on in a small voice, “okay.”

Riley smiles. “Okay.” She kisses Kala’s forehead, squeezes her hands, and then winks at Wolfgang. “Good luck.”

She disappears as suddenly as she came, and Kala and Wolfgang look at each other.

“Kala—”

“Wolfgang, labor takes hours. Sometimes days. And I may not even be in labor.”

Wolfgang sighs, then rubs his face. “Riley thinks you are, and she’s the only one who’s ever had a baby...”

“Even if I am, it’s early,” says Kala stubbornly.

“Okay, but if it gets worse—”

“Yes, yes,” says Kala, pulling Wolfgang to his feet and leading him back towards the main path.

Wolfgang holds back the urge to pull her towards the exit and take her to the hospital. He trusts her, but he also wonders whether she’s lying to herself to put off the inevitable pain and fear that come with having a baby.

“Kala,” he says carefully, “you know I’ll be with you the whole time.”

Kala takes a deep, shaky breath. “I just want a little longer, okay? Just a little more time.”

Wolfgang puts an arm around her waist and forces himself to nod. Then the realization hits him, a heady, chilling wave. She’s having the baby. She’s having the baby and we’re walking around a zoo.

“Kala.”

“Wolfgang.”

“Promise me you’ll go to the hospital when you need to.”

“I promise,” she murmurs, adding, “just hold me, okay?”

He pulls her closer as they rejoin the main path. He glances at her, black hair shining in the sun, brown eyes wide and lips soft, nervous.

“Scared?” he murmurs.
“It’s...very painful,” she replies softly.

He nods. “I don’t have to take a Blocker, you can put the pain through me—”

“No, no,” she mumbles. “I want you to be present for me.”

He nods again. “Okay.” Then he rubs a hand over her belly. “I know I don’t know how this feels, not the way you know...but babe, you’ll be okay.”

She turns her eyes on him. “I hope so.”

“You will,” he says gently, kissing the side of her head.

She breathes out, then nods. “I think this may have been a false alarm, in any case...”

“Is it going away?” he asks.

She nods again. “I think so.”

“Okay,” he replies, pulling her closer.

“Let’s just go slowly...” she mumbles, looking down at herself. “Maybe he’s just restless...”

But Wolfgang can feel Kala’s heart pounding uncomfortably against her ribs and he knows it’s more than this, and Kala knows he can feel every slight palpitation, every increasing cramp.

*Just walk with me,* she says in their shared voice. Kala’s fear is unmistakable, but Wolfgang puts up a wall in his mind, forcing himself to let her go at her own pace, ignoring his instincts.

They walk past several enclosures and exhibits until they reach the elephants. Kala, as he expected, changes at the sight of the elephants. Her heart seems to open. Her eyes grow bright and she presses against the fence separating her from the bus-sized, wrinkled creatures.

“They’re beautiful,” she murmurs, and he smiles to himself; he knows her well enough that he could have mouthed those words along with her.

He watches her grip the fence in her fingers, hair falling and bouncing on her shoulders, her tummy keeping her from her usual intimate distance with the elephants.

“Look at their eyes...” she mumbles.

This, too, he expected her to say. *Their eyes!* She exclaimed one night when everyone was drunk, watching a nature documentary years ago. *They’re like little raisins. Look at their eyes. Look at how much they’ve seen.* Back then, he found her attachment to this animal endearing and humorous, but then he reflected on the way his mother watched the tigers at the zoo in Berlin, and something changed. He realized that her emotion was more than enjoyment. He realized that elephants are Kala’s talismans, her guides; and now, standing in front of these massive animals, he somehow knows exactly what is about to happen.

Kala takes a step back from the fence, again gasping in pain. Her dress is suddenly soaked and fluid pools on the dusty ground under her.

Wolfgang puts his arms around her, keeping her up. “Okay, Kala, süße, we need to go.”

Kala nods hard, reaching blindly for Wolfgang’s hand.
“Okay, this is happening,” she says softly. “Oh my God, I’m having a baby...I’m having a baby, okay...”

Wolfgang supports her around her waist, walking as quickly as she will let him. Suddenly the rest of them are there, even Riley, all crowding her, soothing her with soft touches.

“We’ll be with you,” murmurs Nomi.

“You’re going to be a mother!” yells Lito, laughing joyously.

“Just breathe,” says Capheus. “Big, deep breaths.”

“Keep the pain in your mind,” says Sun. “Be mindful of what the baby wants. Listen to him.”

“We’re here with you,” reiterates Will, squeezing both Kala and Wolfgang.

Riley looks quickly at both of them, tears in her eyes, and murmurs, “I’ll be there for you, too. I want to be.”

Kala smiles, then clenches her teeth hard. Wolfgang meets everyone’s eyes, nodding. The warmth of her Cluster soothes her, but Kala still struggles against the pain.

“Are you driving?” she gasps at Wolfgang.

He nods. “Unless you want me to call an ambulance.”

“No, no, I just want you,” she huffs, then cries out softly. “Wolfgang!” she goes on, panicked. “I think we waited too long! I waited too long, I ignored this all last night, all this morning!”

He glances at her. “How...how close are you?”

“I don’t know,” she says desperately, putting her hands on her stomach.

He nods, increasing their pace, pushing others out of the way. The fact that he’ll see his son, this abstract treasured thing she’s carried for nearly a year, actually see him, hold him, almost overtakes him, almost trips him up.

“Do you want me to carry you?” he mumbles.

Kala laughs and shakes her head, then winces. “No, no. How far are we?”

“Almost there,” he tells her, needing her closer.

Kala looks at Nomi. “What -- wh-what does five minutes apart mean?”

“With contractions?” asks Nomi, extracting her phone from her back pocket. “That’s active labor.”

“And how long does that last?”

“About an hour,” replies Nomi.

Kala nods, then looks at Wolfgang. “I’m-- I’m sorry, I should have--”

He shakes his head. “Shh, it’s okay, you’re okay. We’ll make it.” He frowns and looks at Nomi. “Won’t we?”

Nomi hesitates, then murmurs, “Hurry.”
They do. By the time they reach the car, they’re nearly jogging, and Kala collapses into the passenger’s seat, panting. She hunches over her lap, eyes shut tightly, and Wolfgang jams the key into the ignition.

“Breathe,” he says nervously, punching the gas.

Kala nods, holding her body tight against the pain; already, she knows she’s never experienced pain like this; the shock of it strangely numbs her. The rest of her Cluster places soothing hands on her shoulders and tummy, crowding and stretching in the tiny car. She focuses on the warmth of their touch, particularly Riley’s, as Nomi directs Wolfgang towards the nearest hospital.

“Just over this bridge,” says Nomi, checking her phone. “And pull in at the second right.”

He nods, gripping the steering wheel, looking at Kala every few seconds; her face is contorted in pain -- pain which creeps up in him like a cold fog, prompting him to fish in his pocket for a Blocker. They agreed he should be clear-headed while she gives birth, so he takes the small pill. Then he puts one hand on her stomach, and then a distant chorus hits his ears.

“Der Mond ist aufgegangen...die goldnen Sternlein prangen...”

It’s a children’s lullaby, one his mother sang. Riley is singing it, joined by Nomi, Capheus, and Lito.

“Am Himmel hell und klar...”

Sun joins, and so does Will.

“Der Wald steht schwarz und schweigt, 
Und aus den Wiesen steiget 
Der weiße Nebel wunderbar...”

Kala’s breathing evens out and she reaches for Wolfgang’s hand. He squeezes her fingers in his, then turns into the hospital parking lot. Their cluster-mates’ voices linger in their minds like sweet smoke, and then the reality of their situation breaks over them, bright white light. Wolfgang swerves in front of the emergency room, flying out of his seat and running around the car to open Kala’s door. Two attendants run out of the emergency room and Wolfgang helps Kala out of the car.

“My wife’s having a baby,” he explains, apparently needlessly given the way they nod and hastily help Kala into the emergency room.

He stares briefly after her, then hurries to park the car, and after this, sprints into the hospital, asking whoever he sees for directions towards the maternity ward. He explains that his wife is in labor, tersely, to nurses who question him why he’s rushing up the stairs. Then he bursts into the maternity ward on the third floor, running along the rooms, finding Kala through the pyscelium, the Blocker not yet entirely in effect. He enters her room, pushing back the curtains, and she leans forward to grip his hands. In the short time he was gone, she’s changed into a hospital gown, has been surrounded by nurses, and looks utterly lost and afraid. He presses close to her, kissing her hands, and feels her relax.

“Who’s your OB-GYN?” asks one of the nurses who is affixing a blood pressure monitor to Kala’s finger.

“Dr. Marsielle,” says Wolfgang quickly.
The nurse nods. “She’ll be here as soon as she can, okay?”

He nods, then sits on the bed next to Kala. The nurses are around her like attentive bees, pulling her hair back, spreading her legs, checking that she’s comfortable.

“Are you planning on an epidural?” one asks.

Kala turns to Wolfgang to discuss, but then the nurse examining Kala murmurs, “Oh, you’re nearly at nine centimeters...”

“What does that mean?” asks Kala.

“I’m not sure we can do an epi,” replies the nurse. “Let’s wait for the doctor to see--”

But then Kala wrenches forward, gasping and crying out. The nurse meets Wolfgang’s eyes unsurely, guides Kala onto her back, then looks at a fellow nurse and asks, “How long until the doctor is here?”

Kala yells again, head thrown back, the peak of her neck shining in the glaring medical lights. She grips the sheets, then sobs.

“Oh my God, oh my God...”

Wolfgang instinctively leans closer, holding her gently, looking at the nurses.

“Is she...?”

“About to have this baby?” queries one. “Yes.”

Kala grips Wolfgang’s hand tightly and the Cluster appears around her, one wave of pain and push and desperation.

Kala gasps, then pushes on instinct, her mouth wide, a single string of saliva caught between her top and bottom teeth. Then her effort subsides and she leans back, panting. Wolfgang presses closer, frightened by the steady *blip blip blip* of the medical monitors.

“Is a doctor coming?” he asks insistently.

One of the nurse nods, and just then, Dr. Marsielle rushes through the door, her gray hair flying. She throws her file onto a nearby chair, then hastens towards Kala.

“How long has she been in labor?” she asks the nurses.

They look unsurely at Kala, who chokes out, “Since last night, I think.”

Dr. Marsielle nods, pulling an elastic band from her coat pocket and tying her hair back.

“Okay, sweetheart, listen,” she tells Kala. “You’re nearly there, alright?”

Kala nods, sweat collecting on her throat. Dr. Marsielle goes to the end of the bed, crouching down.

“Okay, I need you to push, as hard as you can, whenever you feel a contraction. Can you do that?”

Kala nods again, fatigued, and squeezes Wolfgang’s hand. He stares at her, her skin bright with sweat and concentration, and sees a brief smile flicker on her lips.
“We’re having a baby,” she murmurs.

“We’re having a baby,” he replies softly.

Then she moans, leaning up, gasping.

“Push!” yells Dr. Marsielle encouragingly.

Kala softly shouts from the back of her throat, her face contorted in pain, her nails digging white crescents into Wolfgang’s palm. The abruptness of this moment feels like an attack, and Wolfgang braces himself, gaze torn between the agonized expression on his wife’s face and the doctor. Then Kala yells again and he leans forward squeezing her hands.

“I’m right here,” he murmurs, and his voice is echoed by six others, all moving with her, all in pain.

Wolfgang watches them, one irrepressible wave, mirroring Kala’s movements. Then, despite the Blockers, he can feel a wave of nausea-inducing pain ripple through him, just as Kala leans forward, shouting, sobbing. Her chest heaves up and down and Wolfgang is reminded briefly of the full-body anguish he endured at BPO, the helplessness, but this doesn’t frighten him; this is different.

“Yes, almost there!” yells Dr. Mariselle

Kala catches her breath, only to yell, crying; she shakes, shaking her head, stunned by pain; then she yells again, a hot-white sensation seeming to rend her in two.

“Ah!” she pants, looking down at herself.

“Just one more,” murmurs the doctor, adding to Wolfgang, “Do you want to watch? Come here...”

He hesitates, but Dr. Marsielle coaxes him towards her, and he stares, stunned by the raspberry-colored head somehow pushing through his wife’s body.

“One more, Kala,” says the doctor. “Just one more.”

Kala regains her breath in the brief respite between contractions, then moans as the next one overtakes her, body shuddering in waves. The power of her Cluster suddenly radiates through her, and with a battle cry, she pushes harder than before and suddenly, the pain recedes. Distantly, she hears a baby crying. She whips her head to the side to look at Wolfgang, who’s watching the nurses with an expression of open-mouthed awe that she’s never seen on his face.

The nurses clip the umbilical cord and transfer their son to an exam table. Then, having pricked his foot and recorded his measurements, one of the nurses hands the damp, crying creature to Kala, who intuitively cradles him close to her chest. He’s wet, his hair matted, but his eyes are bright with life and Kala bursts into tears, thumbing gently over his forehead, kissing his face everywhere, murmuring *hi, hi you, hello*, bringing him closer to keep him warm. Wolfgang shifts onto the bed next to her, putting a hand on his tiny son’s side, watching as his crying subsides, as he nestles instinctively into his mother’s chest. He’s reminded suddenly of the sun-drenched rooftop where he nearly kissed Kala, where they discussed miracles, where he almost admitted that, somehow, he loved her, and in this moment as that one, the sadness, the deep black roots...they fade; in this moment, nothing exists beyond Kala and their son.

“Look, look,” says Kala, as if she’s asking Wolfgang to look at the origin of the earth, the explosion that created them all. “We made him...”

They stare at the tiny human in their arms, at his fingers, at his slowly moving toes...his eyes are
bright, light blue, awake, searching. Wolfgang’s eyes. His smile is expressive, cautious. Kala’s smile. He has a shock of brilliant black hair on his head, plump cheeks, and little wrinkles under his eyes.

Kala pulls their son closer, and Wolfgang gently squeezes his foot, overtaken by how fragile he is, how small. Kala grins, touching her nose briefly to Wolfgang’s, then looks back at their son.

“Jalesh,” she murmurs.

Wolfgang nods. “Jalesh.”

And then they feel the Cluster around them, blessing this new member with soft words, unspoken prayers and promises.

Then Wolfgang mumbles, “He’s so small.”

Kala grins, watching Jalesh blink at them with wide eyes. “He’s new, of course he’s small.”

“Look at this,” says Wolfgang, carefully lifting their son’s hand, showing off the tiny fingers, dumbfounded.

Kala starts to laugh, eyes crinkling, and then she gasps softly when Jalesh curls his miniscule fingers around one of Wolfgang’s fingers.

“Oh,” sighs Kala, crying again. “Oh, look.”

Wolfgang leans his head on hers, staring, astonished. Kala looks up at him and notices that his eyes are bright and slightly wet, which causes her to cry even more. They both look back at their son for a moment, and then an enormous smile spreads on Kala’s face.

“We love you,” she says softly, rubbing her thumb over Jalesh’s eyebrow. “Yes, we do…”

Wolfgang kisses the side of Kala’s head, then tucks the blanket more securely around the baby. They continue to stare at him, along with the rest of their Cluster, all immoderately delighted by each tiny movement he makes. Then Dr. Marsielle steps up to the side of the bed and looks at them.

“He’s perfectly healthy, 6 pounds and 7 ounces, little thing! Now, I’m sure you’ll want to sleep, but he will probably want to eat something soon. Are you breastfeeding? If not we can get you some formula. Also, I’m assuming you would like to change clothes?”

Kala nods tiredly. “Uh, yes, breastfeeding, and yes, clothes would be nice. Here…” She shifts the baby into Wolfgang’s arms and two nurses help her sit up.

Wolfgang walks in a slow circle, looking down at Jalesh, cradling his head. “This is new, huh? Brighter out here, isn’t it? What the fuck is happening, huh?”

Dr. Marsielle looks at Kala in alarm, but Kala rolls her eyes fondly.

“I’m not supposed to swear,” says Wolfgang, still talking to Jalesh. “I’m not always going to remember that, and you can’t talk to remind me…what a dilemma…”

Kala grins, shaking her head, then moans in pain as the nurses help her to her feet. They assist her into a new hospital gown, then wrap her in a fluffy white robe; meanwhile, some assistants change the bed, and another nurse rolls an infant-warmer for the baby to sleep in into the room. Kala gets back into bed, forcing her eyes to stay open against a wave of intense fatigue, and then looks at Wolfgang, who is still speaking softly at Jalesh, pausing to grin when Jalesh yawns.
“Why are you tired? Your mama is the one who deserves to be tired. Was that a lot of work, putting her through that? Is that why you’re tired?”

Kala looks at Riley, Nomi, and Lito, who are with her on the bed, all beaming and amused. Capheus laughs at the foot of the bed, shaking his head.

“This is more than I have ever heard you talk,” he tells Wolfgang, who looks up, surprised to find them all watching.

He grins in response, blushing slightly, then goes back to looking at Jalesh.

“Come here,” Kala calls softly, patting the bed.

Wolfgang walks carefully to her and sits beside her. The Cluster gathers around, all intent on interacting with the baby.

“He’s beautiful,” murmurs Lito tearfully. “He’s the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life.”

“His nose,” says Nomi, gently pinching it. “Look at that tiny little nose...”

Sun, smiling more fiercely than she has in years, leans forward and kisses the baby’s forehead. Capheus shakes his head again, still grinning, and kneels down for a better look.

“I love babies,” he says exuberantly. “Incredible. Nine months in the darkness and then one day!” He snaps his fingers. “Here, full of vim and vigor!”

“And you instantly love them,” adds Riley.

Will rubs Kala and Wolfgang’s shoulders, then comments, “He looks just like you two.”

“Even the wrinkles right here,” says Wolfgang, tracing a finger under the baby’s eyes.

“Yes, from working those long days,” jokes Kala.

Everyone laughs, and then Kala turns to Riley and hugs her gently. “Thank you for being here.” Riley nods solemnly and Kala smiles. Then Wolfgang nudges her.

“Want to call your parents?” he asks.

Kala nods, reaching for Jalesh. “Facetime Daya, please, she’s the only one who knows how to use her phone...”

Wolfgang nods in agreement, pulling out his phone, and a moment later, the room is filled with Daya’s whining voice.

“Why are you Facetiming me, Wolfgang? I’m in the middle of making kachumbar -- why are you smiling like that, God, are you drunk, it’s the middle of the day--”

“Daya,” says Wolfgang in a slow, calming voice. “Stop talking.”

“Oh, stop talking! As if--”

Wolfgang rolls his eyes and simply turns the phone around to show her Kala and Jalesh. She positively shrieks.
“Oh my God! Oh my God! When did this happen? Why didn’t you call earlier, I could have gotten on a plane!”

“It was pretty sudden,” says Wolfgang, sitting by Kala so Daya can see him too.

Daya starts to blubber on the phone. “Oh, oh Kala, oh look at you! Look at him! He’s lovely! How was it? Was it terrible? How much does he weigh? Oh my God, what’s his name? His name! Did you pick a name?”

“It’s Jalesh,” says Kala. “He weighs six pounds and seven ounces, little thing.”

“He’s beautiful, oh, oh my God, here, let me find mom and dad!”

Daya screams for her parents to join her, and Kala and Wolfgang exchange a long-suffering smile. A moment later, Sanyam, Priya and Auntie appear in the background, all squinting.

“Are you Timefacing?” murmurs Auntie. “Where are my glasses?”

“Okay, brace yourselves, no heart attacks, alright?” warns Daya.

“Why? What’s going on?” asks Priya.

Daya waves them all closer. Priya gasps, immediately exclaiming, and Sanyam puts a surprised hand over his heart. Auntie shrieks in delight.

“When did you go into labor?” Priya sighs. “You were supposed to call! Oh my goodness, oh my love, he is just beautiful, is he healthy, is everything good?”

“He’s perfectly healthy, and well, we would have called but I thought the contractions were cramps...”

“Oh, Kala,” says Auntie, but she’s too pleased to be cross.

Sanyam simply smiles and says, “Hello, my grandson.”

Kala wipes her eyes, beaming, and then yawns.

“Oh, you’re probably so exhausted,” says Priya. “We’ll let you sleep. But pictures! Lots of pictures!”

Kala nods tiredly, and they get off of the phone after saying several I-love-yous. Then Kala leans her head on Wolfgang’s shoulder.

“Oh, I’m tired,” she murmurs, gently petting Jalesh’s nose. He grows agitated and Kala sighs. “Oh dear, you don’t like me petting your nose?”

He begins to cry and Kala pulls him closer.

“Oh, he’s hungry...” she says after a moment. “Let’s see...” Kala looks around at the nurses, wanting more privacy, then motions at the curtain.

Wolfgang draws it, watching Kala adjust her gown, a wrinkle of deep concentration on her brow as she fusses with Jalesh, who is crying loudly now.

“Oh, okay,” she says, voice intoning upwards. “That’s -- oh, that’s strange.”

“Did you get it?” murmurs Wolfgang, squinting.
“I think so...”

Jalesh quiets down and closes his eyes.

“Must have,” says Wolfgang with a shrug.

“Oh my goodness,” murmurs Kala affectionately, holding the baby closer. “There, that’s good...” Then she looks up at Wolfgang, mouth twitching in humor. “He’s like a little vacuum, oh my God...”

Wolfgang grins and shakes his head, then sits beside them again. He watches them for a while with an attentive frown, and then looks at Kala, who has a deeply inquisitive expression on her face, the expression she wears when mixing chemicals or writing out a formula, Wolfgang cracks up and Kala looks up at him reproachfully.

“It’s fascinating!” she says, though she laughs at herself. Then she frowns. “Now, don’t laugh, but I think my breast is falling asleep...is that even possible?”

He covers his face, laughing, and shakes his head. “Would you like me to ask the doctor?”

“No, no!” says Kala, giggling. Then she squeezes Wolfgang’s arm lovingly and goes on, “Would you please go get me some tea?”

He nods, kissing the side of her head. “I’ll call Felix while I find the cafeteria...”

Kala agrees, and he leaves the room, pulling out his phone.

Felix answers, as usual, with, “Wow, you remembered I exist.”

And Wolfgang responds, as usual, with an affectionate “Fuck off.”

“What’s new?” asks Felix.

“Not a lot,” says Wolfgang. “We woke up early, went to the zoo, had some ice cream. Oh, and Kala had the baby.”

Silence, then, “Are you fucking with me?”

“No,” says Wolfgang. “Six pounds seven ounces, loud crier.”

“Wait. Are you serious?”

Wolfgang laughs. “Yes, Felix!”

“Holy shit!” yells Felix, voice exploding with excitement. “Congratulations! Shit, man! How did it go?”

“Fine, fast,” says Wolfgang. “Kala ignored her contractions all day, got here too late to have an epidural.”

Felix groans. “Of course she did. Lot of screaming?”

“Yeah, it was kind of...magnificent. She was like this fierce goddess.”

Felix laughs. “I can see it.”
Wolfgang gets to the cafeteria, searching around for tea, then murmurs, “Felix, you know what?”

“What, dad?” asks Felix.

Wolfgang snorts, then smiles to himself. “This is the best fucking feeling in the world.”

He and Felix talk for a few more minutes, he buys Kala a large cup of chamomile tea and a coffee for himself, then returns upstairs to the maternity ward.

“I put some honey in--”

He stops speaking when he pushes back the curtain and finds Kala and Jalesh both asleep, cocooned in blankets. He smiles hugely, shaking his head, and sets the tea aside. Then he pulls a chair to the side of the bed and sits down, watching.

Chapter End Notes

The lullaby is translated as follows:

The moon has risen,
The golden stars are bright and clear in the sky;
The forest stands black and silent,
And out of the meadows
The white mist rises wonderfully.

Reminded me of something Riley would sing because it is very calming and the imagery is so beautiful.
April through August

Chapter Summary

Kala and Wolfgang navigate the first five months with Jalesh: sleeplessness, lost chess games, sock shenanigans, eating the inedible, hose fights, and the flu.

Chapter Notes

So, quick gameplan here! There will be one more chapter like this following the first year month by month, and then it will turn into a year-by-year format because...maybe there are more kids in the works that I want to introduce ;)

Hopefully this sits well with all of you! I wasn't entirely sure how to format this after the delivery, but I think the next few chapters will be entertaining or at least interesting.

Thank you thank you thank you for all of the sweet comments!! :) <3

April: No Sleep

Kala blinks feebly and sits up in the darkness, hoping she imagined the frenzied crying in the room down the hall. She sighs deeply when she realizes it’s not in her imagination and feels around for a light switch.

“Three times,” mumbles Wolfgang from beside her, rubbing his eyes. “Three.”

“I don’t know what he wants,” says Kala worriedly, spending one last second in bed before she has to get up.

“I’ll get him,” says Wolfgang, giving her leg a squeeze.

Kala nods in thanks, then shimmies further under the covers and leans her head back. She thought she was tired in graduate school. She thought she knew what exhaustion was after she spent so many sleepless nights keeping watch with Nomi or Lito while they all searched for Wolfgang. She didn’t think it was possible to be any more fatigued than she was in her last month of pregnancy. But having a newborn baby proved her wrong.

For the past few weeks she’s been in a state of such debilitating exhaustion that she’s never sure what time it is, or even what day, and whenever she is lucky enough to sleep, she spends the time restlessly wondering whether Jalesh is sleeping enough (“He is,” Wolfgang would repeatedly insist, pointing out Jalesh in his crib, who was always asleep.) Still, Kala worried, because the baby seemed to wake up far too often.

“Wish I could scream for attention and some doting adult would help me,” Wolfgang mumbles to Kala as he carries Jalesh into their room.
Kala smiles weakly, then stretches out her hands for the baby and tucks him close to her.

“Why are you crying this time?”

“Spite,” suggests Wolfgang, sitting next to her.

“He can’t be hungry again...” sighs Kala, snuggling Jalesh closer. “Shh, shh. You’re safe, you’re with us...”

Wolfgang leans his head on Kala’s shoulder, watching, then gently tickles Jalesh’s tummy.

“You’re so loud,” Wolfgang says defeatedly after a moment.

“Perfectly developed lungs, hm?” Kala asks Jalesh.

The crying abates slightly, and Jalesh reaches out two unsure hands, so Wolfgang sticks out a finger for him to hold onto. Then Jalesh begins to suck on Wolfgang’s little finger (Wolfgang snorts in delight) and Kala gasps (“Oh! Pacifier!”) and jumps to her feet to find one.

She comes back with a tiny blue one and hurriedly offers it to Jalesh, who cries for a moment before contentedly closing his eyes and sucking on the pacifier. Kala groans in relief and sinks back into bed next to Wolfgang. She reaches for the light, then leans against Wolfgang and stares at Jalesh.

“Look at his eyelashes...” she murmurs, exhausted but infatuated. “They’re so beautiful...”

Wolfgang chuckles and reaches to support Jalesh’s head more securely. Kala kisses the side of Wolfgang’s mouth, then snuggles into bed and closes her eyes.

“Don’t wake me up,” she mumbles.

“Wouldn’t dare.”

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May: Intellectual Prowess

Amanita’s eyes widen excitedly as she carries Jalesh around the kitchen. “I cannot believe this baby,” she says for the umpteenth time. “He is so uninhibited. He tells you what’s up.”

Nomi and Amanita, en route to visit Nomi’s dad in Italy, decided to stop in Paris to see Jalesh. Kala nearly cried in relief when they suggested staying a week because she and Wolfgang would finally have some help.

“By uninhibited do you mean he cries at every little thing?” murmurs Kala as she takes a tray of biscotti out of the oven.

Nomi and Wolfgang both chuckle from the table, but Amanita shakes her head.

“No, it’s in his expressions,” she says seriously, turning him around so Nomi can see. “I call this one the Obama. Look, he’s got that same intellectual focus.”

“As Obama?” asks Nomi. “He’s two weeks old.”

“So,” Amanita says, bouncing Jalesh soothingly and stepping around Kala to glance at the biscotti. “Ooh, those look amazing...”
“Want to help me with the chocolate dipping?” asks Kala.

“*Yes,*” agrees Amanita, walking over to the table where Wolfgang and Nomi are playing chess. “*Here, help your papa checkmate my wife-*”

“*Hey,*” says Nomi.

“With the intellectual prowess this baby has you stand no chance,” says Amanita, kissing the side of Nomi’s head.

She hands Jalesh to Wolfgang, who takes a moment out of the game to snuggle him and adjust the blankets around him.

“He looks like Kala,” says Wolfgang. “That grumpy look she has when she’s working and her nose wrinkles up.”

“Oh, yes,” says Nomi forcefully. “He’s got the Kala-the-chemist look.”

“Or he’s just gassy,” replies Amanita, wrapping her arms around Nomi from behind.

“I think Neets just suggested you look gassy when you’re concentrating,” Nomi tells Kala.

“I probably do,” says Kala, unfazed, and everyone laughs.

Then Amanita points at the chess board. “Babe, that pawn.”

Nomi looks over her shoulder at her wife. “I know, I have plans for it.”

Wolfgang sighs. “You could let me win one time.”

“No chance,” says Nomi. “Even though your son is very cute and is distracting me a bit.”

Wolfgang laughs and glances at Jalesh. “He’s distracting me too.”

“Goody,” says Nomi, moving a knight.

“Amanita, are you coming?” calls Kala, and Amanita dashes into the kitchen to help.

Ten minutes later, everyone sits around the chess board, munching on biscotti. Kala cradles Jalesh, playing with his wispy hair and kissing his feet and hands, and Wolfgang diverts his attention from the game to watch her. Nomi makes a final, winning move, but he doesn’t notice, too absorbed by Kala and Jalesh. After a moment, Kala looks up to meet his gaze, and they both break into a huge, giddy smile, lost to the world.

Nomi and Amanita glance at each other knowingly.

“So...” murmurs Nomi as she clears the chess board. “When are you having the next one?”

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*June: The Park*

Wolfgang sighs and rests his forehead against the side of the bed. “Kala?”

Kala glances up from putting in an earring and sees Wolfgang kneeling defeatedly at the foot of the bed. Jalesh is on the bed, wearing one sock, the other sock haphazardly sticking off of his toes. He
seems pleased with himself for making it so difficult for his parents to dress him.

“Oh, damn,” says Kala savagely, kneeling by Wolfgang. ” Socks .”

He raises an eyebrow, surprised by her language, then says, “Help me please.”

“He always wiggles his toes,” sighs Kala, looking at Jalesh. “Sweetheart, don’t wiggle your toes.”

He wiggles his toes. Wolfgang starts to laugh.

“Oh, you hold his foot, I’ll put on the sock,” suggests Kala.

Wolfgang forces himself to stop laughing and he nods. He grips Jalesh’s tiny ankle and Kala attempts to put the sock on, but Jalesh pulls his foot away.

“Wolfgang, you have to actually hold his foot.”

“I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Hold his foot!”

“Bossy...”

“Oh, I’ll show you bossy...”

Wolfgang chuckles, then holds his son’s foot again.

“If he starts crying, it’s your fault,” Wolfgang murmurs.

Kala fixes her husband with a dark stare. “If you don’t hold his foot properly, you’ll be the one crying.”

Wolfgang frowns. “I believe you.”

He grips Jalesh’s foot more firmly and Kala slides the sock on, then sits back, sighing. Wolfgang glances at her, then jumps to his feet and pulls her up.

“Let’s take him to the park, you said,” murmurs Kala as she snuggles into Wolfgang’s arms. “It will be fun, you said. We haven’t even gotten him dressed and I’m exhausted.”

He rubs her back and gives her a squeeze. “The park is near the cafe you love.”

“Mm, coffee,” agrees Kala. “Okay. Caffeine-content of my breast milk be damned.”

“You’re swearing a lot lately,” he tells her.

She pulls back and looks at him with a supremely self-possessed expression. “And?”

He shrugs. “It’s hot.”

She pushes him away with a laugh, then scoops up Jalesh and exclaims, “First time out! Are you excited? Yes, you are, because you have a booger...that means you’re excited...”

Wolfgang hands her the new baby sling -- “hand-sewn in Portugal, isn’t it gorgeous?” Dani had yelled over the phone as they opened the enormous baby package she and Felix had sent them -- and helps her fit Jalesh into it.
“There, there,” murmurs Kala, kissing the top of Jalesh’s head. “Is that comfy?”

Wolfgang chuckles when Jalesh rests his head against Kala’s chest and promptly closes his eyes.

“Maybe we can actually talk to each other while we walk,” murmurs Kala. “Maybe he’ll sleep...”

They walk out of their room and into the hall, then go out of the front door into the milky sunlight. Kala dashes back inside for sunhat to protect her and Jalesh and grabs Wolfgang’s sunglasses while she’s at it.

“Movie star,” she says fondly, stepping in front of him to slide the glasses onto his face.

He smirks, tugs her closer by the sash around her waist, and kisses her hard. She giggles against his lips and pushes him away.

“Don’t start, you,” she murmurs, but she kisses him again before taking his hand and heading down the sidewalk.

He puts an arm around her waist after a while and they slow their pace, glancing occasionally at each other with unprompted smiles.

“I think I may be caught up on sleep soon,” remarks Kala. “He only woke me up twice last night. I think the crying phase may be over.”

“He’s getting so expressive, too,” says Wolfgang.

“Oh, he’s smiley, I know!” says Kala with a laugh. “And this morning he giggled.”

Wolfgang glances at her. “He did?”

She nods. “He thinks my hair is funny. He likes to pull it. I have a feeling he’s going to be one of those babies who pulls and bites everything.”

“Yeah, he’s very tactile.”

“That’s how I was. One time I bit my mother’s earlobe so hard she cried.”

Wolfgang laughs and squeezes one of Jalesh’s feet. “Are you going to bite your mama? Get her back for how she behaved as a baby?”

“He doesn’t have teeth yet,” says Kala.

“He will soon,” says Wolfgang ominously.

Kala laughs, then glances at him. “Well, I can’t imagine you were well-behaved as a baby.”

“I was, not as a toddler though.”

“Oh, so if we’re very lucky, he will be a terrible baby and a terrible toddler.”

“Yeah, and we’ll let him get away with it all.”

“Oh yes,” agrees Kala. “What made you a terrible toddler?”

“Oh my God, you didn’t.”

“I did, was never upset, just cried and looked helpless until my mother got me what I wanted.”

“What a little actor,” says Kala.

“She caught on eventually,” he says, laughing. “She would smack me with whatever she had in her hand and say no one likes a liar. Wolfgang.” He pauses. “But she did that once when I was actually crying and felt so bad she never did it again.”

Kala shakes her head. “Poor thing.”

“No, I deserved it,” he says, laughing again. “I was a shit kid. Part of me’s glad she never knew me as a teenager.”

“No,” agrees Kala, adding cheerfully, “but I’m sure she would have been very proud that the only girl you’ve ever gotten pregnant is your wife.”

“As far as I know.”

“Wolfgang Alexander.”

He grins. “Just you, babe.”

“You’re lucky that I love you terribly,” sighs Kala.

“She would have loved you, my mother,” says Wolfgang. “Would have thought you’re too good for me.” He laughs. “I can hear her. I’ll cut your toes off if you hurt that girl.”

“She threatened to cut your toes off?”

“Yeah, it was her favorite threat,” says Wolfgang. “But if she was really pleased with me she’d say I could just eat your toes. Confusing as a child.”

Kala looks at Jalesh. “We won’t cut off your toes.”

“Maybe we will,” says Wolfgang. “You have ten. You don’t need all ten.”

“Hmm, baby toes,” muses Kala. “Maybe we can sell them on the black market.” Then she giggles and squeezes Jalesh. “Mwahaha.”

Wolfgang snorts and puts an arm around Kala’s waist. She looks up at him, full of affection.

“It’s his first day out,” she murmurs. “Paris is going to spoil him, he’s going to think everywhere is this beautiful and warm and vibrant...” She laughs. “It’s funny, isn’t it? All a baby sees is people who love him. It’s like a little self-contained world where everything makes sense and everything is good...”

“Unless there are siblings.”

“Mm, yes, I terrorized Daya when she was little. I would always spook her to see her do the startle reflex or to see if she would make a funny noise. She was like an experiment to me. I wanted to see what output I would get with different inputs...my mother made me stop after I fed her a big bite of peanut butter because she nearly suffocated.”

Wolfgang looks at Kala with narrowed eyes and she smiles in a seductive, suspicious way.
“Sometimes when I watch you sleep,” he murmurs, “you have this deadly, secretive expression and I wonder if you’ve fooled me this whole time.”

Kala nods. “Yes, I am an assassin, biding my time.” Then her expression softens. “You watch me sleep?”

“All the time,” Wolfgang admits. “Always wake up earlier than you and...well, once I look at you I can’t look away.”

Kala stops, then pulls Wolfgang against her and kisses him gently. “When did you start doing that?”

“First time we were in Paris, the time you fell asleep on the porch in the sun.”

“Oh, I remember that,” murmurs Kala. A faint blush touches her cheeks. “I remember how you woke me up, too.”

Wolfgang looks down, laughing at himself. “I don’t always have innocent thoughts when I’m watching you sleep.”

Kala touches her nose against his, beaming. “I don’t mind. I remember it because it was good.” A pause and her blush deepens. “Everything tasted so sweet on that trip.”

He trails his fingers down her arms and takes her hands. “Makes sense, we had just escaped.”

Kala nods. “And I wanted you so badly after waiting so long. Although...” She trails off, mouth curving into a distant, curious smile. “I still want you like that. I used to sit on my balcony in Mumbai and let my mind wander and I...thought I would stop doing that once I had you...but I still dream like that.” She pauses, her fingertips twitching on his knuckles, and then she looks up to meet his eyes. “I guess you do too.”

He nods, moving his hands to her waist, pressing a lingering kiss to her mouth. She smiles against his lips, then forces herself down the park path. She twirls a few feet in front of him, dress swirling around her knees, a few wild curls caught in the sunlight.

“Are you coming?” she calls.

He nods, looking down to hide a smile which is so wide he finds it a bit embarrassing, and hurries to catch up with her. As soon as he reaches her, she grins playfully and darts off of the path and down a grassy hill towards a large pond.

“Slowpoke!” she yells.

Wolfgang shakes his head and runs after her. She reaches the bank of the pond and spins around a few times, snuggling Jalesh.

“Did that feel like flying, hm?” she asks him. She wrinkles her nose in laughter as her son blinks up at her, expression filled with wonder. “Wolfgang, Wolfgang look...I think he liked that...”

Wolfgang steps up behind her, holding her close, and looks down at Jalesh.

“He always looks so astonished,” murmurs Kala. “The world must seem so big...”

“I think it’s you,” mumbles Wolfgang. “He’s looking at you.”

Kala hums in thought, and then tucks her hair behind her ear. Her earring catches the sunlight, twirling slightly. Jalesh watches the movement, and after a pause, giggles.
“Oh my God!” says Kala. “See! Oh, listen to that...”

Wolfgang grins and presses closer. “Here...”

He flicks Kala’s earring and Jalesh giggles again. Wolfgang shakes his head, stunned, and rubs his thumb gently over Jalesh’s forehead.

Kala looks at Wolfgang with fierce happiness, then kisses his cheek, leans her head on his shoulder, and goes back to watching Jalesh.

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July Pt. 1: Back to Work

Wolfgang loves surprising Kala at work -- admittedly, this is the first time the surprise involves an infant and doesn’t involve an invitation to spend her lunch break in the backseat of their car with him-- but nevertheless, he’s happy to find himself walking down the gleaming halls. The lab she runs is part of a larger medical complex near the city center, and is the largest lab in the city. She may not have her name on the building yet, but he’s sure she will soon; for now, she settles for a modest silver placard near the entrance -- Director of Pharmaceutical Research and Development: Kala Dandekar.

“That’s your mama,” Wolfgang says to Jalesh as they approach the sign. “Impressive, right?”

Jalesh looks around, eyes bright and warm, then goes back to playing with Wolfgang’s keyring, which he became fixated on during the drive into the city. Wolfgang rebalances Jalesh, a baby bag, and an infant carrier which Jalesh refused to ride in, insisting on being carried instead. As always, Wolfgang has dressed nicely for a visit to Kala’s office -- dark jeans and a fitted tee-shirt. Kala asked him once whether he does that to be courteous or because her female lab assistants have an outsized reaction whenever he shows up, and never got a straight answer. Wolfgang would have made a point to dress Jalesh nicely too, but he couldn’t think of a way to dress up a dinosaur onesie.

He opens the door to the lab and, as expected, Kala’s receptionist Diwata, a small Filipino woman whose personality is equal parts Dani and Daya, jumps to her feet and exclaims loudly.

“Oh my God! The baby! You brought the baby! Everyone, hurry now, it’s Kala’s baby! Hurry!”

Wolfgang laughs and holds Jalesh more securely. “We thought we’d surprise her.”

Diwata gushes. “Oh, she will be so surprised, oh my God! He looks just like her, and he’s so healthy and chubby, can I hold him?”

Wolfgang is suddenly surrounded by a sea of young scientists, all clamoring.

“Oh my God! The baby! You brought the baby! Everyone, hurry now, it’s Kala’s baby! Hurry!”

Wolfgang laughs and holds Jalesh more securely. “We thought we’d surprise her.”

Diwata gushes. “Oh, she will be so surprised, oh my God! He looks just like her, and he’s so healthy and chubby, can I hold him?”

Wolfgang is suddenly surrounded by a sea of young scientists, all clamoring.

“Um--”

Then he catches sight of Kala in a doorway to the left. He glimpses a tight magenta pencil skirt and a floral blouse hidden under her white coat, and sees her lips quirk into an amused smile as she watches her lab personnel in tumult over the arrival of Jalesh.

“Oh, everyone will get a turn,” says Kala, crossing the lobby to reach Wolfgang and Jalesh.

She kisses Wolfgang quickly, then pulls Jalesh into her arms, and he immediately grips her coat and snuggles into her.
“Oh, he misses me,” murmurs Kala.

“Yeah,” laughs Wolfgang. “He cried for two hours when you left this morning.”

Kala frowns. “Oh, I’m sorry.” She hugs Jalesh and kisses one of his ears, then looks back at Wolfgang. “How did you calm him down?”

“Walked around with him for a long time,” says Wolfgang, leaving out the part about singing to him on and off.

“Hm, poor thing,” says Kala. “I’m sorry I have to work.” She smiles at Wolfgang, then surreptitiously squeezes his hand. “Thank you for bringing him.” She looks around at her employees. “Okay, we don’t want to overwhelm him, so how about I walk around and you can say hi to him? He doesn’t really like to be held by anyone but us…”

They learned this at his three-month checkup when they handed him to Dr. Marsielle and were treated to an hour-long, hysterical crying session which only abated when Kala started crying too, though her crying was out of understandable frustration and Jalesh’s crying was, in Wolfgang’s words, “for the hell of it.”

Kala walks around the lobby, each of her employees fawning over Jalesh, who’s thankfully in a good mood and gives everyone a winning smile or gassy laugh. Several women dash back into the lab to retrieve packages they’ve been saving for this moment, and then pile them up in Wolfgang’s arms, saying things like “if they’re too big I can do an exchange” “I just had to knit something for him” “we love your wife” “these are for Kala, she must be so tired” “we can babysit anytime you like so that you two can, you know” “I think he’ll look so beautiful wearing this color”...

Kala thanks everyone profusely, then excuses herself to bring Jalesh into her office after he yawns and starts to fuss.

“I’ve never seen anyone like her,” the receptionist whispers to Wolfgang. “I can’t believe she had a baby just four months ago.”

Wolfgang chuckles, going to follow Kala. “Almost like she isn’t human.”

“That’s just what I was thinking!” says the receptionist, and Wolfgang slips into Kala’s office after her.

Kala meets Wolfgang’s eyes as she sits down with Jalesh on her lap.

“Did you make the joke I think you just made?”

Wolfgang grins and sets down the various packages. “Maybe.”

Kala shakes her head fondly and pulls him slightly closer by his shirt. She kisses him, then pushes him away teasingly and turns back to Jalesh.

“Sleepy now?” she asks, fixing his hair and kissing his forehead.

His eyes wander around her office, lingering on anything bright or shiny, and he points at a gold Ganesha figure Kala keeps on her shelf.

“Ba ba!”

So far, ba! has been the only vocalization Jalesh has mastered. Lito likes to take credit for it, because
it resembles his pre-scene vocal warm-up.

“Can I?” asks Wolfgang, going to reach for the figure.

Kala nods, and Wolfgang hands the figure to Jalesh, who instantly puts one of the ears in his mouth.

“Oh -- oh, well.” Kala pauses to think. “Okay.”

Wolfgang laughs quietly. “Is -- is that allowed?”

“I don’t think Ganesha minds,” says Kala, also laughing. “Does that taste good, Jali?”

Wolfgang rubs his face, continuing to laugh, then yawns loudly. Kala glances at him, then at Jalesh.

“Babe?” she murmurs. “Do you want to go home and take a nap? He can stay here with me...”

Wolfgang hesitates, then says, “Really?”

“Really,” says Kala warmly.

“Fuck, yeah, thank you, I love you.” He leans down to kiss her, then kisses the side of Jalesh’s head. “Haven’t slept in a week.”

“I know, you’ve been doing all the night shifts,” says Kala, keeping him close for a last kiss. “I love you. Go get some sleep.”

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July Pt. 2: Babypoofing

Wolfgang has picked up the same stuffed giraffe sixteen times -- he counted. He hands it cautiously to Jalesh for the seventeenth time, locking eyes with his son, an unspoken showdown. Kala comes in, heels clicking on the tile, struggling into a cardigan and searching around for her purse. Then she stops.

“What...what are you doing?”

“He keeps dropping this fucking giraffe,” murmurs Wolfgang, not breaking eye contact, fascinated.

Kala pauses to watch, and sure enough, after examining the giraffe, Jalesh drops it over the side of his high chair, then lets out a bubbly giggle.

“Why?” asks Wolfgang, picking it up again and handing it over.

Jalesh kicks his feet and continues to laugh. He drops the giraffe again.

“Ooh, I have an answer,” says Kala, leaning against the counter and reading from her phone. “Four-month-olds discover themselves as unique individuals. Many babies delight in dropping the same object over and over and over again, just to watch their parents repeatedly pick it up...”

Wolfgang hands Jalesh the giraffe. “What kind of game is that?”

Kala continues to read. “It’s related to object permanence. He likes to see the object disappear and reappear.”

Jalesh drops the giraffe and giggles wildly, and Wolfgang rolls his eyes and pulls him out of his high
chair. He looks around for the giraffe -- Wolfgang picks it up again -- and then he settles down contentedly in Wolfgang’s arms, studying the toy.

“Ready?” asks Wolfgang, reaching for his mug of coffee and taking a long drink.

“Yes,” says Kala, affixing her earrings. She steals the mug out of Wolfgang’s hands and takes a sip. “Where are we going first?”

Wolfgang pulls a list out of his back pocket. “Gedimat for the basics.”

Kala nods and they head towards the car. Four hours of picking out locks, gates, foam pads, smoke alarms, and other babyproofing necessities, they come back through the door, exhausted. Jalesh falls asleep in his crib, and Kala and Wolfgang share quiet a cup of coffee, leaning against each other on the couch. Then Kala gets up and puts an old University of Mumbai tee-shirt and jeans with a few rips in them. She ties her hair back and reappears in the living room with a tool box she pulled from a shelf in the garage.

“That’s a good look for you,” says Wolfgang, squeezing her ass as they walk into the kitchen.

Kala turns to look over her shoulder and says, as seriously as she can manage, “We have work to do.”

Wolfgang responds with a lively smile and smacks her ass. Kala giggles and runs away from him.

“You behave yourself,” she says, fighting laughter as she kneels and opens the toolbox.

“I’ll try,” he says, kneeling next to her with a couple of bags from the hardware store. “Okay, stove knob covers...”

They work quietly alongside each other, covering the stove knobs, removing table clothes, installing locks on the lower cabinets, securing the furniture to the walls, and unplugging appliances. They check things off the list on the fridge, and then glance around.

“Okay, living room,” murmurs Kala. She pauses and meets Wolfgang’s eyes. “We...could make this more fun...since Jali is asleep.”

Wolfgang perks an eyebrow in interest. Kala gives him a small, inviting smile, then pushes past him to open the fridge.

“We haven’t had date night in so long...” she says, searching one of the bottom shelves. She pulls out a large bottle of white wine she had been saving. “We can have a drink or two while we babyproof, can’t we?”

Wolfgang folds his arms, watching her, smirking.

“Put on some music,” she adds. “I’ll go shut the door to the nursery...”

Wolfgang shakes his head, laughing to himself, and puts on some quiet jazz. He pours two glasses of wine and hands one to Kala when she returns. She replies with a playful smile, takes a sip, and kisses him.

He holds up a package of electrical outlet covers. “What’s sexier than installing these?”

Kala laughs and takes the package out of his hand. “I can’t think of anything sexier. I can barely keep my clothes on, just looking at these...”
Wolfgang bites his bottom lip, then twirls the screwdriver he has in his hand and gestures at the package.

“Go on,” he says.

Kala opens the package and scatters the outlet covers on the counter.

“Okay, six for the living room, four for the kitchen, four for our room, and two for the bathroom...”

They divide the covers between them, going about the house, sipping wine, trading lighthearted glances. They move onto furniture pads and have a second glass of wine, and Kala pauses in her pursuit to put pads on the dining table when she notices Wolfgang lying on the floor for a better angle to fix the coffee table. She bites her lip, blood rushing to her cheeks. The image of him in an old soccer jersey, paying too much attention to such a simple project, goes right to her heart. True, she hasn’t had this much wine in a long time, and she’s been deprived of her usual constant contact with Wolfgang, and she’s been bitten by an unusual mischievous bug tonight, but none of this logic is about to stop her. She sets down her tools, walks over to him, and simply settles on top of him, snuggling her face into his neck and waiting for him to wrap his arms around her, which he does with a laugh and kisses her jaw.

“What are you doing?”

“Wanted a hug.”

He holds her tighter. “We’re on the living room floor.”

“Mmhm, but I wanted a hug.”

He laughs and she pulls back, resting her hands on his chest and carefully kisses him.

“I miss you,” she tells him.

“I miss you too, babe,” he says, kissing her with more heat and running his hands down her back.

She murmurs her approval into his mouth, and he turns her over and pins her arms lightly above her head.

“Oh, hi,” she whispers, nudging him with her knee, urging him to put his weight on her.

“Hi,” he replies, peppering kisses along the side of her mouth.

She stretches up for a more lingering kiss. “Don’t be shy.”

His mouth twitches. “Be patient.”

She shakes her head, reaching to put her arms around him, but in the process, knocks a hammer and several nails off of the coffee table with a clatter. She and Wolfgang both freeze, waiting for the inevitable sound of Jalesh crying, but after a moment, the air is still silent.

“He must be very asleep,” murmurs Kala, frowning. She sighs and pushes Wolfgang gently off of her. “I’m going to make sure he’s alright...”

She tiptoes into the nursery, sees that Jalesh is asleep, snoring faintly, and comes back with a wide smile.

“He’s snoring,” she informs Wolfgang, who by now is on his feet, scrutinizing the sharp corners on
Wolfgang laughs and pulls her into his arms again. “Good, because I would have done bad things to you if you woke him up on one of the only nights we’ve had alone together in months.”

“Mm, what bad things?” asks Kala, pressing closer.

He runs his hands over her ass. “I’ll show you later.”

Kala breathes out on his mouth, fingers needy and tangled in his shirt, but she wants to show as much self-control as he’s showing.

“Only if you finish babyproofing with me,” she says firmly. Then she giggles madly. “Babyproofing,” she goes on, “then babymaking. In that order.”

Wolfgang stares at her. “Kala.”

“No, no, don’t even respond,” she says, laughing loudly and waving him off.

“Are you a little drunk?” he asks, squeezing her ass and pulling her closer.

“Yes, but so are you, and don’t say you aren’t because I always know.”

He nods. “True, you do.”

They look at each other for a moment, then burst into fresh laughter. Kala nudges him to be quiet, so they stand there, silently shaking.

“Oh, oh my God,” sighs Kala. “Okay. We still have...the bathroom and the bedroom and the backyard.”

“What about the backyard?” he asks.

Kala lists off of her fingers. “The hoses, the toxic plants, the pool...”

He glances outside and sees that it’s just now evening. “We should do that, still have some light.”

Kala nods, returning to the kitchen to top up their wine, then slinging one of the bags from the hardware store over her shoulder and going outside on the patio to find Wolfgang. The July air is warm and fragrant and the inky blue night has just begun to descend in the sky. Kala looks up to make out the first faint stars, and then looks over at Wolfgang, who is dutifully coiling up a hose near the fence. She walks out to him, stretching her toes in the wet grass, and presses the wine glass into his hand. She kisses him, and then her expression settles on a soft, excited smile.

“I can’t believe we’re already babyproofing. He can’t start crawling already. I feel like he was just two days old...”

Wolfgang nods. “The time’s fucking with me, too.”

Kala hums in thought, then clicks her glass against his. “To slowing down time, at least tonight.”

Wolfgang chuckles softly, then nods and kisses her forehead. They each take a drink, and then Kala walks up to the next hose and starts to wrap it up. She read somewhere that hoses are a risk to babies (she’s not entirely sure how) but she might as well tidy them up anyway considering there is a whole serpentine network of them around the rose bushes. She’s just rolled up the last one when she feels a sense of foreboding.
“Hey, Kala, look at this,” says Wolfgang in a tone of false innocence.

She turns around, only to be blasted with a stream of cold water.

“Oh my God!” she shouts, throwing her hands up, darting backwards. “Wolfgang!”

She lunges for a hose which is still attached to a spigot near the porch and retaliates, pressing her thumb over the nozzle to increase the pressure of the spray.

“I am your wife!” she shouts, laughing. “You cannot spray your wife with a hose!”

Wolfgang shrugs, dodging the stream she directs at him. “Why not?” He grins wickedly. “I like it when you’re wet.”

“Oh my God,” says Kala, stopping, staring. “That is very inappropriate.”

He shrugs again, clearly pleased with himself, and aims the spray at her from a new angle. She scurries away, ducks behind a lawn chair, and finally hits him full-blast with the cold water.

“Fuck, fuck,” he laughs, holding a hand up and running backwards.

This continues for a few minutes, Kala screaming and laughing, Wolfgang giving the neighbors a reason to move due to his language, until Kala finally corners Wolfgang against the house and sprays him relentlessly.

“Oh, I surrender -- Kala! You win! Fuck, okay, let up--”

Kala drops the hose and thrusts her hands in the air with a victorious laugh, her hair dripping and clinging to her skin. Then, so suddenly that Wolfgang becomes momentarily disoriented, she shoves him against the wall and kisses him hard.

“You’re mean,” he murmurs against her mouth

“You started it,” she says, tilting her head to kiss him more deeply. “Besides,” she goes on, finding his hands, pressing them impatiently to her breasts, “I’ll warm you up...”

He groans into her mouth, kissing her for another moment, finding the shape of her body under her wet clothes. Then he slides his hands down her hips, grips her thighs, and lifts her up so her legs are around his waist. She tilts her head back, laughing, and throws her arms around his neck. They share a messy kiss while he carries her inside, down the hall, and into their room.

He sets her down on the bed and she latches a finger under his shirt, pulling him down with her.

“Finally,” she mumbles.

He laughs, responds with a forceful kiss, then agrees, “Finally.”

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August: The Flu

“Who gets sick in August?” asks Kala, staring listlessly at Wolfgang from the other side of the bed.

“I think I’m going to die,” he says in response, covering his eyes with his arm and groaning.

Kala coughs weakly and looks at Jalesh, in between her and Wolfgang, in a permanent state of fussy
crying.

“What time is it?” she asks.

“About eleven...”

Kala nods, forcing herself up on one elbow so she can reach two bottles of medicine and a thermometer. She sits up and so does Wolfgang, who holds Jalesh and coaxes him to be quiet long enough for Kala to slip the thermometer into his ear.

“How did...” Kala trails off, wrinkling her nose against a wave of nausea. “How did we get sick?”

“Probably riding the metro...”

Kala groans in agreement, pulling the thermometer out. She blinks a few times before the numbers resolve, then sighs in relief. “Only 98. That’s two degrees lower than this morning.”

Wolfgang nods seriously, giving Jalesh a squeeze. “A little better, Mäuschen...”

Kala pours a small amount of infant cough syrup, which she hands to Wolfgang to give to Jalesh. Then she pours some stronger medicine for herself and Wolfgang, and after they take it, they lie down again in a heap, cradling Jalesh in between them and watching him.

“I can’t sleep,” murmurs Kala. “Not when he’s sick.”

Wolfgang nods. “Should we call a doctor?”

Kala shakes her head. “I will if the fever rises again. For now, he just needs sleep.”

Jalesh starts to cry again and Kala sighs.

“I tried feeding him,” she mumbles. “But he didn’t want that. I hope I didn’t get him sick, I’m around so many people at work...”

“Not your fault, babe,” murmurs Wolfgang, reaching out to tuck her hair behind her ear and rearrange the blanket more securely around her.

She sighs again. “I know. But look at him. He won’t stop crying...”

Wolfgang nods tiredly, eyelids slipping. Kala gently touches his face and he tries to smile.

“Sleep, it’s okay,” she says. “There’s no reason for all of us to be tired...”

He nods again, murmuring, “Wake me up if you need anything...”

“I will,” she whispers, resting her head on his shoulder, sniffling as she watches Jalesh cry.

Wolfgang drifts off to sleep despite the noise, but Kala can’t, and she spends the next half hour soothing her son with tiny touches and occasionally rubbing rosemary ointment into his chest, hoping it will calm him down. When none of this works, she sighs and gets to her feet, holding Jalesh in her arms, bouncing him. She can barely stay upright, but she stands in front of the window for a while, holding him close, watching as late-night workers arrive in their driveways, as the bats flutter, as a blue darkness comes over the city, signaling late night.

Jalesh is still crying, but Kala can’t bear to stand, so she pulls a chair to the window and sits, rocking him. In the hazy state of exhaustion and worry, she doesn’t notice that she’s started to softly sing. It’s
a song her mother used to sing to her and Daya during rainstorms when they were little, before Kala learned to love the rain.

“Nanhi kalle sone chalee...Hawa dheere aana...neend bhare, pankh liye, jhoolaa jhula jaana...nanhi kali sone chali...”

She rubs her thumb over Jalesh’s forehead, studying the delicate wrinkles around his eyes, his plump nose and wide nostrils, his plum-colored lips which remind her distinctly of her mother’s. Jalesh starts to quiet down, so Kala keeps singing and rocking him.

“Aaj agar chaandaneey aana meree galee...ham use ek geet dheere se...neend bhare pankh liye, jhoola jhula jaana...”

She looks up when she feels Wolfgang next to her, and carefully shifts in the large armchair so he can sit next to her.

“Never heard you sing to him before,” he murmurs.

Kala sniffles and smiles. “It’s never felt like this before.” She sighs. “I feel like he’s...my heart outside of my body... and I can’t always protect him and...”

Her voice rises and Wolfgang gives her a hug from the side.

“It’s okay,” he whispers. “Look, you got him to sleep.”

Kala nods. “True.”

Wolfgang kisses the side of her head. “Keep singing, it’s beautiful.”

Kala smiles, and after another sniffle, nods and continues. Then, in the middle of the second verse, her eyes instinctively seek the clock. It’s midnight, August 8th, 2021.

“Oh,” she says softly. “Wolfgang.”

He glances at her. “Hm?”

“Happy birthday,” she says with a quiet laugh.

He laughs too. “Oh. Happy birthday, suße.”

She turns her face and kisses him lightly, and then they both look at Jalesh. Every other birthday they’ve had together has been dedicated to the Cluster, to dancing and liquor and lights, but tonight, there is no place they would rather be than in a cramped armchair, fighting the flu, watching their son sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Translation of the lullaby is as follows:

"The little flower-bud is going to sleep"
Breeze, please blow gently
In your sleep-laden wings, rock him as in a cradle
The little flower-bud is going to sleep
Dear moonlight! If today you come my way
Hum a song to him gently.
In your sleep-laden wings, rock him as in a cradle"
This is apparently a very popular lullaby in India :-)
Also, "Mäuschen" means "little mouse" in German.
September through March

Chapter Summary

Jalesh tries new foods, Wolfgang gets a promotion, the Dandekars discover exactly how many people it takes to brush a baby's teeth, Riley and Will make an announcement, the Cluster stays for Christmas, and the family gets a furry new addition.

September: Bananas

Kala tilts the spoon upwards in hopes that the pear mush will make it into Jalesh’s mouth this time. It’s six in the morning and Kala, as usual, is wrapped in a silk robe, messy morning hair falling around her face, trying to get her son to try a new food. But Jalesh, as he’s been doing all morning, turns his head away at the last second, and most of the pear ends up on his chin. Kala raises her eyebrows at her son, who beams up at her, reaches for the spoon and yells, “Ba!”

Kala sits down next to Jalesh’s highchair. “Aren’t you bored of milk, sweetie?”

Jalesh gestures for the spoon again, so Kala hands it to him, and he promptly drops it on the floor and giggles. Kala smiles to herself, retrieves the spoon, and then pushes a plate of banana pieces towards Jalesh.

“What about these, hm?” she asks.

She sits back, awaiting his reaction while she sips her coffee and listens to the shower in the next room. Jalesh blinks with his dark lashes, then reaches out curious plump fingers and grabs a piece of banana. Kala holds her breath, watching, enchanted and bursting with pride that he’s trying something new. Lately, he’s been extremely adventurous, and he’s growing every day. She came across a picture of him as a newborn and can scarcely believe how chubby he is now at six months, or how sweet his features are -- an expressive nose which she loves to squeeze, bright eyes which she senses are turning brown as he gets older, a raspberry-colored smile shaped like a fiddle. She can barely look away from him once she starts looking, and he apparently feels the same, because Wolfgang often catches them in an affectionate staring contest (Kala always loses, breaking her gaze with a giggle and nuzzling Jalesh’s tummy with her nose.)

“Kela,” Kala sounds out, the Hindi word for banana, adding in German, “banane.”

“Ba la!” replies Jalesh.

“Close enough,” says Kala, laughing.

Jalesh puts the banana chunk in his mouth and Kala watches intently as he chews it, then cheers softly when he swallows and he gives her a banana-filled smile. She laughs, then glances behind her, surprised at a noise, and sees Wolfgang adjusting a cufflink in the entrance to the kitchen. Kala’s breath catches at the sight of him in a suit -- he has an interview today, but she wasn’t anticipating something quite so sophisticated -- and he glances up at her.

“Okay?” he asks, almost shy.

“Perfect,” she murmurs, twitching her fingers at him to come closer.
She pulls him in by his tie when he reaches her, and he laughs quickly before she presses a soft kiss to his mouth.

“You look extremely handsome,” she tells him, adding excitedly, “and your son just ate a piece of banana.”

Wolfgang glances at Jalesh, who’s reaching for another piece. Jalesh pauses with the banana halfway to his mouth, looking at Wolfgang like he doesn’t quite recognize him. Wolfgang chuckles and picks him up (“Honey, no, what if he pukes on you?” asks Kala) and snuggles him close.

“Just me,” he says and Jalesh settles, adding to Kala, “no luck with the pears?”

Kala gestures at the mess of pears on Jalesh’s high chair. Wolfgang grins and glances at Jalesh, who blinks up at him, then reaches for Kala.

“Mama!”

Kala and Wolfgang stare at each other, shocked and breathless with surprise.

Then Jalesh says, “Mama!” more loudly and Kala jumps up and puts her arms around both Wolfgang and her son.

“He said it,” she murmurs tearfully, petting Jalesh’s head. “He said it, oh my God, Wolfgang!”

Jalesh continues to reach for Kala, so she pulls him into her arms and cradles him.

“Hi honey,” she whispers. “Hi, oh, you’re getting so smart, yes...”

Jalesh reaches up, touching his fingers to Kala’s chin. Kala laughs softly and squeezes him, and Wolfgang smiles to himself and puts an arm lightly around her waist. They watch Jalesh, who moves his fingers from Kala’s chin to Wolfgang’s (they shake with silent laughter, trying not to disturb him) and then he hiccups and Kala quickly holds him upright and reaches for a cloth.

“I told you,” she murmurs to Wolfgang, patting Jalesh’s back. “He would have spit up all over your suit...”

“Maybe that would have been good luck,” Wolfgang says, going into the kitchen for coffee.

“Yes,” laughs Kala, “a baby’s blessing.”

“More?” asks Wolfgang, holding up the coffee press.

Kala nods and he walks over to pour her some more, then sits down with his own cup. She sits near him, still patting Jalesh, and sets her feet on Wolfgang’s lap. Wolfgang squeezes one of her knees, then leans back, takes a drink of coffee, and studies Jalesh.

“Does he know what he means?” he asks, interested. “Or is it just easy syllables?”

“Easy syllables,” says Kala, pressing a series of kisses to Jalesh’s ear. “But he’ll connect the two eventually. This is on the early side, you know, usually little ones are eight months before they say full words like that...”

“He’s smart,” says Wolfgang with a soft smile.

“He is,” agrees Kala, and then Jalesh burps loudly and she laughs. “Smart and messy, yes, very messy...”
Wolfgang snorts and leans forward to kiss the back of Jalesh’s head, then pauses to look at Kala, and doesn’t catch himself in time to stop a huge smile.

“I love watching you with him,” he says quietly.

Kala replies with a joyful grin, then snuggles her face against the side of Jalesh’s head.

“He’s getting big...” adds Wolfgang.

Kala nods seriously and whispers, “Seventeen pounds.”

“Whoa,” murmurs Wolfgang, patting Jalesh’s side.

Kala laughs, then shifts Jalesh to one arm and reaches out to take Wolfgang’s hand. She smiles gently.

“Do you want breakfast? How are you feeling?”

He shrugs and shakes his head. “Can’t eat.”

Kala’s moved by how much he wants a director position so he has the flexibility to be at home with Jalesh. Her job is less flexible, and she feels slightly guilty, but Wolfgang has reassured her over and over that she should do what she loves and reminds her she didn’t mean to get pregnant. Though they’re sure Jali doesn’t understand these conversations, every time they have them, they notice that he has a rather smug expression on his face, as if proud for challenging their established schedules.

“Are you sure?” checks Kala. “What about a bagel?”

He shakes his head. “No, suße, I’m alright.” He shrugs again and smiles distantly. “I’m sure I’m the only applicant without a degree.”

“But you have experience,” she replies, like she always does. “And you come off so well in person...”

He laughs and squeezes her hand.

“You do,” she assures him, adding with a smirk, “it doesn’t hurt that you’re so gorgeous--”

“Kala--”

“Stunning, frankly, you could just smile and they would give you the job.”

Wolfgang hangs his head and laughs. Kala grins victoriously, then lifts his chin and kisses him. Then his watch beeps and he takes a deep breath.

“Okay, time’s up,” he murmurs, finishing his coffee in one long drink.

Kala nods, settling Jalesh in his high chair, and follows Wolfgang to the door. She gives him his coat and his shoulder bag, then stands on her tiptoes to share a deep, lingering kiss. He groans softly against her lips and gives her ass a brief squeeze, and she smirks, satisfied.

“Whatever happens, you’ll come home to find me naked in bed--”

He cuts her off by squeezing her sides and laughing. “Kala. I’m trying to focus on the questions I memorized.”
She tips her head back, laughing indulgently, then pushes him away. “Too bad. Now go, go.”

He kisses her goodbye and disappears out the door, and she’s left in the foyer, rocking back and forth on her feet, nervous. Then she hears something clatter -- the dish of pears, no doubt -- and she hurries back to the dining room. Jalesh proves to be an effective distraction all day.

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October: Toothbrushing

Kala resists the urge to take her high heels off in the backseat of the taxi. It’s late, chilly, and her feet ache after standing all night at an endless party, where she and Wolfgang chatted with important diplomats and donors, who apparently see them as an important couple considering Wolfgang’s promotion and Kala’s recent success with shelf-stable antibiotics. Though they both dislike parties, this one served chocolate fondue and featured an open bar, so they had a better time than they usually do and Kala wore a close-fitting dress styled with violet silk, so Wolfgang never found himself without a good view. Will occasionally appeared to elbow Wolfgang so he stopped looking at his wife and actually engaged in one of the boring conversations happening around him.

“Oh my God,” Kala murmurs as the taxi rolls into their neighborhood. “I think I ate a hundred of those strawberries…”

“How does anyone talk about the stock market for that long?” Wolfgang says in response, head back against his seat, brow wrinkled in utter confusion.

Kala giggles, hiccups, and then reaches down to rub her ankles. “When I married you, I thought my future would not include la-di-da parties for people who have an intimate understanding of finances and wine tasting and horse breeds, but I was wrong.”

Wolfgang snorts. “What the fuck does full-bodied mean when you’re talking about a wine?”

“Perhaps it’s a wine with voluptuous breasts,” suggests Kala with a defeated sigh. She leans against him and sighs again. “We’re drunk.”

“Yes,” he agrees.

“And we have to go home to my family,” she goes on. “Who are taking care of our infant son, and are expecting us to be responsible and well-adjusted.”

“Sounds right,” he replies and they both laugh.

The Dandekars been in Paris for a week and have spent much of the time babysitting, which Kala and Wolfgang are grateful for, though they both shouted at Daya for feeding Jalesh a Cheerio without asking if he was eating solids yet.

“Maybe they’re all asleep,” says Kala, checking the time on her phone.

“We could sneak in through the back,” suggests Wolfgang.

“No, no, what if they catch us?” murmurs Kala. “Let’s just take a deep breath and act like adults.”

The taxi pulls up to their house and they get out onto the icy street. Kala grips Wolfgang for support, murmuring damn these shoes repeatedly as they walk up their sidewalk. They stop in their doorway and scrutinize each other.
“Do I have chocolate on my mouth?” she asks.

“No, do I have lipstick on mine?” he replies and she frowns, reaches out, and removes the trace of crimson from his lips with the pads of her fingertips.

They share a final laugh, then quietly open the door. Kala sets her heels aside and they tiptoe through the house, which is fragrant with curry and coconut and garlic, a sign that Sanyam cooked everyone a huge supper. They pass through the kitchen and find two plates of dal and chapati bread on the island counter (Kala gasps in delight and immediately stuffs a piece of chapati into her mouth) and then they continue down the hall towards their room. It appears that everyone is asleep, but just as they reach their room, the bathroom door bursts open next to them and light floods over them. Wolfgang is wearing the exact expression he did as a teenager whenever he was caught sneaking home and Kala is wide-eyed like a deer, half a piece of chapati sticking out of her mouth.

They turn to see Sanyam, Priya, Daya and Auntie Ina, all in their pajamas, all surrounding Jalesh on the bathroom counter. Priya is holding a toothbrush, and Kala pieces together that Jalesh was resisting having his teeth brushed, so Priya recruited the entire family to help. Jalesh bounces enthusiastically at the sight of his parents and reaches his hands out for them.

“Are...are all four of you trying to brush his teeth?” asks Kala.

“We’ve been alternating!” Daya says, adding cheerfully, “He hates it!”

Wolfgang and Kala stare at the Dandekars, who are wearing blazing, synchronized smiles, clearly unaware that their daughter and son-in-law are intoxicated and on the brink of bursting into wild laughter at the image of Jalesh, four relatives, and a single toothbrush.

“How was the party?” asks Ina.

Kala forces herself to finish chewing her piece of chapati and says, “Oh, lovely, so lovely.” Then she reaches her arms out, asking for Jalesh, and Daya hands him over.

“He’s such a good baby,” remarks Priya. “Besides the tooth brushing. But just a wonderful baby and he loves your father’s cooking!”

Sanyam smiles widely. “Yes, he ate three whole spoonfuls of dal.”

Kala pulls Jalesh close and gives him a squeeze. “Hello, my sweet hippo.”

It takes a painful effort for Wolfgang not to burst out laughing. He looks at his wife with narrowed eyes. “My sweet hippo?”

“Yes, Wolfgang, he’s fat and wrinkly like a hippo and I love him, yes I do...” Her voice trails upwards and she peppers kisses on Jalesh’s face. “My tiny hippo, yes, hello...”

This should have been an indication that Kala had several drinks at the party, but still, her family notices nothing and they all collectively *aww*. Wolfgang clenches his jaw against the urge to laugh because he knows he’s drunk enough that if he starts to laugh he won’t stop. Kala passes Jalesh to him and he bounces him gently, which brings out a happy giggle.

“Okay, let’s brush your teeth, yes?” says Kala, stepping into the bathroom.

“Oh, good, now five people are trying to brush one baby’s teeth,” murmurs Wolfgang, adding as he steps into the bathroom with her, “six!”
“I think his teeth are sensitive, you know,” says Kala, settling Jalesh on the counter. “They’re so new and tiny...”

“How do you get him to open his mouth?” queries Ina.

“You can hold a baby’s nose so they have to open their mouth to breathe,” says Daya with a tone of total authority.

Wolfgang makes a face at her. “We’re not doing that, Daya.”

“Oh, okay, let me remind you that I have had three babies--”

“Oh, don’t argue, you two are like true siblings,” sighs Sanyam.

Kala listens to the conversations happening around her while she scrutinizes her son. She takes the tiny toothbrush out of her mother’s hand, but as she brings it up to Jalesh’s mouth, he looks at it in fear and starts to fuss. Kala huffs, searching for another approach. She reaches blindly behind her for Wolfgang, pulls him closer, and hands Jalesh to him. Her family all turns to watch them interact with Jalesh, who looks philosophically troubled by the experience of toothbrushing. Kala bites her lip, then gasps in inspiration, and reaches for her own toothbrush. She quickly wets it and applies some toothpaste, then begins to brush her teeth. Wolfgang slowly smiles and points at her.

“Look, Mausebär, look, she likes it...”

Kala beams while brushing her teeth, which is somewhat difficult, and once against Wolfgang struggles not to laugh.

“Oh good idea!” says Priya breathlessly.

“Oh, you two are naturals,” adds Ina.

Jalesh watches Kala for a moment, then reaches for the baby toothbrush she’s holding. She quickly sets aside her own toothbrush, puts a speck of toothpaste on the baby version, and gently presses the bristles to Jalesh’s miniature first teeth. The Dandekars cheer, and Jalesh promptly starts crying, which is the norm for having his teeth brushed.

“You’re okay,” mumbles Wolfgang, giving him a squeeze.

“Yes, you’re okay,” echoes Kala, finishing up.

Jalesh looks up at them with a tragic, betrayed expression, sobbing, and Kala presses her face into Wolfgang’s shoulder to hide her laughter.

“He looks like an angry old man in a Renaissance painting,” says Wolfgang.

Kala trembles with laughter and shakes her head. Wolfgang bounces Jalesh for a moment, but this does nothing to soothe him.

“You should feed him,” suggests Priya, patting her grandson’s back.

Kala steps away from Wolfgang and nods in agreement. Then the six of them all look at each other and start to laugh.

“Well, that was an ordeal for two teeth which are approximately the size of grains of rice,” observes Sanyam.
“What a loud crier, oh my goodness,” adds Daya, petting her nephew’s head.

Kala and Wolfgang walk out of the bathroom towards their room, bidding everyone goodnight, and once inside with the door shut firmly behind them, Kala bursts into a fit of giggles and Wolfgang laughs loudly.

“Oh my God,” gasps Kala. “I just wanted to come home and go to bed!”

Jalesh is still crying, so Kala takes him out of Wolfgang’s arms and sits down on the bed with him. She’s about to pull her dress down and feed him, but she stops.

“Oh, I can’t, I’ll get him drunk too,” she murmurs.

“Really?” asks Wolfgang.

“Really,” she says with a sigh, but just then, Jalesh’s crying abates and he reaches out to pull on Kala’s earring. “Ow, ow, oh no…”

Jalesh laughs, happy again, and pulls the earring harder. Kala gasps in pain and quickly removes both earrings and dangles them for him to play with. Wolfgang sits next to her and they watch this for a moment, and then Jalesh yawns hugely. Kala simply flops back on the bed, so Jalesh is on her chest, and Wolfgang chuckles, reaches to shut off the light, and follows suit. He toes off his shoes, then turns on his side to watch Kala hug Jalesh close to her and kiss the top of his head.

“Are you going to sleep in that dress?” Wolfgang asks sleepily, eyes slipping shut.

“Oh, absolutely,” breathes Kala.

Wolfgang shakes his head, then forces himself to get back up, picks up Jalesh, and takes him to his crib. When he returns, Kala is asleep with her feet sticking off the end of the bed. Wolfgang smiles to himself, then lays next to her, kisses the side of her head, and immediately drifts off.

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November: The Announcement

Saturday morning dawns cold and bright, and Kala spends the first hour she’s awake in the kitchen, lazily cooking paratha and drinking chai with Riley. Jalesh crawls around the kitchen -- it’s more of a scoot than a crawl, but he’s faster than she expected him to be -- and occasionally clings to her or Riley’s legs so he can stand up. Jalesh, though he’s been sweet to all of their Cluster-mates, particularly loves Riley and always greets her with a toothy grin and laughs so hard he burps. At first, Kala felt a continuous presence of pain through Riley, but as the week went on, she noticed it less and less.

She puts Jalesh in his baby swing so she can pay attention to cooking the paratha, and just then, Wolfgang and Will come in through the kitchen door, back from a morning run, frost clinging to their hats and stubble.

“You look like Yetis,” says Riley as she slices a banana.

“Is there more than one Yeti?” asks Kala. “I thought there was just the Yeti.”

“Yes, many,” says Riley with a laugh, swiping one of her fingers through some whipped cream and popping it into her mouth. “A whole population of Yetis. Or would it be Yeti plural? And for that matter is it Bigfoot or Bigfeet?”
Kala grins. Will chuckles to himself and comes over to place a kiss on the side of Riley’s head.

“Oh, you’re freezing,” she mumbles, pulling him closer. She picks up a paratha and offers it to him. “Try. I think Kala should have been a chef like her dad.”

Will grins and takes a bite, then looks at Kala, impressed. “Thabs delibous.”

“Chew your food, Will,” says Kala, but she has to laugh.

She glances over at Wolfgang, who is taking off his coat, then goes back to stirring batter. “Is it cold?”

“Gonna snow,” he says in response, adding. “Jali’s first snow.”

“Oh my God!” says Kala, turning again and beaming. “I didn’t think of that!”

“Do you think he’ll be as excited as you were?” asks Wolfgang.

Kala looks down to hide a blush and tucks her hair behind her ear. “I don’t think that’s possible…”

Wolfgang chuckles. “No, maybe not.” He kicks his boots aside, then goes into the kitchen, wraps his arms around Kala, and kisses her behind her ear. “What are you making?”

“Paratha,” she says, turning to give him a proper kiss, adding, “you’re frozen.”

“Warm me up,” he replies, sliding his hands up her waist.

“Armpits,” advises Will, stealing another pancake. “Those are the warmest place on the human body.”

“Oh don’t you dare,” says Kala.

“I don’t think it’s the warmest place,” says Wolfgang, also taking a pancake.

“Oh, keep it PG for once, Wolfgang,” murmurs Riley, stirring some blueberries into a dish of yogurt.

Wolfgang snorts, then kisses Kala’s cheek and releases her. Kala and Riley finish making paratha while Will and Wolfgang take showers, and then everyone plates up their breakfasts and moves into the living room. Will carries Jalesh in his baby swing into the room, Kala lights a fire, and Riley and Wolfgang argue like siblings about what music to play. Eventually, everyone settles by the window that looks into the front yard, quietly drinking strong coffee and eating paratha after paratha, always covered in butter and sugar. Kala feeds Jalesh blueberries and small bites of yogurt, and then he settles against her chest, asleep. Will and Riley, curled up together on the couch, exchange a glance and then smile at Kala and Wolfgang. Everyone is filled with so much warmth towards each other that no one notices the first few crystals of snow descend from the sky.

Riley extends her feet (which are clad in reindeer-themed socks) towards the fire, finishes her coffee, and sighs happily as she snuggles against Will. They glance at each other once more, and then Will smirks and clears his throat.

“So,” he says.

“Yes, so,” Riley goes on. “We have an announcement.”

“We wanted you two to be the first to know since you have Jali…”
Kala sits up slightly, eyes wide, and looks at Wolfgang in anticipation. They hold their breath.

“We are...” Riley pauses for suspense, grinning lightly and twirling her strand of blue hair.
“...adopting a little girl!”

“Oh my God!” says Kala, jumping to her feet and waking Jalesh. “Oh my God, congratulations!”
She bounces Jalesh to keep him from crying, then reaches out her free hand to take Riley’s. “How wonderful, you’re going to be beautiful parents, oh my God...”

“When will you see her?” asks Wolfgang, grinning. “Have you met her yet?”

Will shakes his head. “No, not yet, but all the paperwork’s done and we get to pick her up in January.”

“Oh,” sighs Kala, cheeks bright with excitement. “Oh, good for you, how old is she?”

“She’s five,” says Riley, and she looks up to meet Kala’s eyes, smile fading slightly. “See, her parents, they...”

“They were like us,” says Will, glancing briefly at Wolfgang. “And they died four years ago in Italy, when BPO was targeting as many of us as possible.”

“She only lived because her parents knew how close BPO was and they gave her away at the very last moment,” says Riley softly. “And when we heard her story we...”

Will shrugs. “We had to.” He looks at Riley and smiles. “The timing’s right anyway, right Riles?”

She beams. “It’s perfect.”

“Congratulations,” says Kala softly, and Riley gets up to hug her.

Will pulls Wolfgang to his feet. They all exchange several hugs and are left holding onto each other, together in the conflict of grief and joy, a glowing wire connecting each of them to the other. Kala notices, more intensely than she ever has, the presence of Riley’s strength. Today it is something almost physical, something that can hold her up, and she leans her forehead against the other woman’s and breathes in, smiling. Riley smiles too, latching her fingers with Kala’s, and Kala reflects for a moment that Riley, who lost her daughter, is more suited than anyone to have a daughter who lost her parents.

After another moment, everyone releases each other and meets eyes, smiling.

“What’s her name?” asks Kala.

“Celisa,” answers Will, “which we think is appropriate.”

“It means song of joy,” explains Riley. “I think my father will like the name, don’t you?”

Everyone laughs in agreement, and then Riley reaches for Jalesh and cuddles him against her chest. “She’ll be a good big sister to you, huh?”

But Jalesh’s attention has shifted. He’s looking outside, mesmerized by huge snowflakes falling from the sky. Everyone holds still, watching as a slow smile spreads on Jalesh’s face. Then he giggles and points outside, enthralled by the unfamiliar weather, and shouts, “Pa!”

“Close,” says Wolfgang with a laugh.
Kala beams, glancing at him and sharing a quick kiss, and Jalesh continues to giggle happily. Riley joins in with her musical laugh, and then she marches towards the door.

“We have to go outside!” she calls to the others as she steps into her boots. “He needs to catch one on his tongue!”

Kala, Wolfgang, and Will all look at each other and grin, and then they hurry to follow her outside into the whirling snow.

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December & January: Holidays

“Shit, man, that is the tits!” shouts Felix from the kitchen.

Dani and Kala look up from the book they’re reading to Jalesh and exchange an affectionate, long-suffering glance. Their husbands are in the kitchen making “mug brownies,” because this was the only thing Lito could think of that would be acceptable for all levels of culinary expertise. He, Hernando and Wolfgang had been the only ones in the kitchen initially, but the smell of cooking attracted Will and Felix, so some dumbing down was a must.

“You can make brownies in a fucking mug?” Felix goes on. “Shit, how come I never knew about this?”

“I cannot abide this,” says Hernando with a soft sigh. “You are not supposed to make brownies in a mug.”

“Why not?” asks Will. “This batter is delicious, it’s bound to turn out well.”

“Don’t eat the batter, that has egg in it. How dumb are you?” asks Wolfgang.

There’s the sound of dishes clinking, followed by Wolfgang laughing, Will whooping in victory, and Lito and Hernando sighing and scolding the other two men for their total disrespect.

Kala and Riley meet eyes and Riley murmurs, “I think my boyfriend just sprayed your husband with whipped cream, what do you think?”

“Hm,” says Kala. “I think he did...”

“Not the whipped cream!” groans Hernando, and Kala and Riley silently high-five.

“Ay,” laughs Dani, snuggling Jalesh closer to her. “Let’s keep reading...”

She goes back to her soft, engaging delivery of the book Niño Wrestles the World. Jalesh settles against her chest and plays with the buttons of her cardigan, and Kala watches, smiling.

Jalesh has spent the whole day with his mother, Dani, Riley, Capheus, Zakia, Sun, and Mun, taking turns with each of them as they read to him around the fireplace. With the whole Cluster in Paris for Christmas, Jalesh has been spoiled ridiculously every day, and has repaid everyone by biting them. He unfortunately discovered that his teeth are a tool, and though he doesn’t seem to be motivated by malice, he doesn’t seem particularly apologetic when his victim yells in pain. He’s also discovered that tugging a woman’s earring is a sure way to get attention, which Dani learned the hard way this morning.

“Junta tus manos para un fantástico, único en su clase, el chico maravilloso!” Dani reads, showing
Jalesh the illustrations. “Junta tus manos...Kala, does he know how to clap?”

“I’m not sure,” murmurs Kala.

“Try mimicking,” suggests Zakia, shifting closer from her place on the couch. She claps her hands. “Do you see?”

Capheus chuckles. “It is an odd custom, is it not?”

“Yes,” agrees Sun. “There is no natural urge to clap...”

Dani claps her hands too, and then Kala, and soon everyone is clapping at Jalesh, who watches them, puzzled. Wolfgang sticks his head around the door.

“Are you just...applauding the baby now?” he asks.

Kala nods, holding her hands up higher as she claps. “He deserves recognition! He is the best baby!”

Wolfgang chuckles “You won’t say that when he bites you while you’re nursing later...”

Dani laughs loudly. “Oh, you poor woman.” She takes Jalesh’s hands in hers and makes him clap. “There we go. Oh, this baby. I want this baby.”

“Wolfgang, I think Dani and Felix are going to steal our child!” Kala calls.

“We are!” retorts Felix from the kitchen.

Everyone in the living room laughs, and then Dani passes Jalesh to Zakia, who grins at him so widely that her nose wrinkles. She opens up the book she and Capheus brought to read to him.

“Are you ready? This one is very good...”

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Will is pouring five more eggnogs to kill the time while they wait for Nomi and Amanita to return from the store with ingredients.

“None of us need more eggnog,” Will says as he pours. “Especially you two,” he adds, eying Wolfgang and Felix.

Wolfgang flips him off and reaches for his glass. “We’re German.”

“No one can outdrink us,” agrees Felix.

“Except your wife,” says Wolfgang.

Felix nods. “Fuck yeah, no one can outdrink my wife.” He grins and downs his eggnog. “Never get tired of saying that. Wife! Shit, who would have thought.”

He gestures at Will with his glass, and Will looks meaningfully at Wolfgang as he tops Felix up. “He is your friend, and therefore your responsibility.”

“Okay Officer,” says Wolfgang, also taking his eggnog in one swig and asking for more.

Will sighs. Lito puts an arm around Will and gives him a bracing squeeze. “Kala and Wolfgang may have been the first ones to have a child, but in a way, you are the first father of the group, because you are the father of us all.”
Will laughs and raises his glass. “I’ll drink to that.”

Everyone takes a drink, and then Amanita and Nomi stumble through the door, bundled up and breathing hard.

“Oh, gimme some of that nog!” says Neets excitedly, stomping her boots free of snow. “It’s freezing here, this girl misses San Francisco…”

Everyone in the living room calls greetings at them, and then they walk into the kitchen, weighed down with bags and distribute the ingredients over the counter.

“We’ve got broccoli!” says Nomi.

“AKA little trees!” echoes Neets.

“Tangerines!” Nomi goes on.

“AKA miniature representations of the disgraced 45th President!” says Neets, setting them aside.

“Dried fruit for fruitcake!” says Nomi.

“AKA plastic shapes disguised as fruit and drowning in horrible syrup,” replies Amanita, tossing the canister to Wolfgang. “You Germans, thinking that this is actually edible! That is adorable of you!”

Wolfgang snorts and sets the canister on the counter. The women continue to unpack and Will pours them each a glass of eggnog. Amanita, who as expected is wearing thermal pajamas with dinosaurs in santa hats on them, take a huge drink of eggnog, then thrusts her glass over her head, squeals “Christmas bitches!” and dances into the living room, saying, “Where’s that baby? I’m here to see that baby! It’s my turn to read to him!”

Nomi smiles at everyone in the kitchen. “She loves Christmas. And babies. And reading. She brought her entire Nancy Drew collection.”

Wolfgang grins. Nomi finishes unpacking the groceries and everyone goes back to cooking, except for Wolfgang, who walks into the living room to watch his family read to Jalesh. He leans on the doorframe, sipping his eggnog and taking in the scene -- Kala is sitting in Dani’s lap, and Dani is braiding her hair, both of them laughing; Jalesh is sitting in Amanita’s lap while she reads Nancy Drew with wide, dramatic eyes, and he’s clearly enamored with her colorful dreadlocks; Sun and Mun lean on each other on the couch, watching Jalesh and sharing a cookie, whispering with plans on their mind; and Zakia and Capheus are sitting by the fire, flipping through the children’s books which have already been read and chuckling at the illustrations.

Capheus catches sight of Wolfgang and holds up his hand to reveal a small cut. “Your son is a very vigorous biter.”

Wolfgang laughs and shows his hand, revealing a similar mark. “Yes, he is.”

“Shh, everyone, this is my favorite part!” says Amanita, squeezing Jalesh closer as she reads.

“Watch out, he has your earring--” Wolfgang begins, but it’s too late.

“Ow, ow, ow, oh my God!” squeaks Amanita, tilting her head down as he pulls. “Oh, baby, no!”

Nomi sticks her head into the living room. “Are you okay, babe?”

“Ow,” replies Neets, head at an odd angle so Jalesh has less leverage.
Nomi puts a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing, and Amanita can’t help but grin and shake her head.

“I think he’s just curious,” murmurs Kala thoughtfully. “Input, output. He likes to see what outputs he can produce with different inputs.”

“Or he’s a budding serial killer,” suggests Nomi.

Amanita gently wrestles her earring from Jalesh, and Jalesh looks up at her, pouting. Then he notices a clunky ring on her third finger and reaches for that. She squeals softly at the attention and briefly meets Nomi’s eyes before continuing to watch Jalesh play with her ring. Nomi puts a hand on her heart and exchanges a glance with Wolfgang.

“That woman is too much for me,” Nomi says seriously, drinking her eggnog.

“Yeah, I know the feeling,” laughs Wolfgang, adding, “sorry about your wife’s ear.”

“She’ll live,” says Nomi with a smile.

They watch Jalesh interact with Amanita for another moment, and then Amanita claps her hands together and gasps, inspired.

“Presents! We have to do a few presents! We said one per day until New Years, right?”

Everyone nods in agreement, and they call the boys into the living room -- Lito, Hernando, Felix, and Will traipse out of the kitchen with eggnogs in hand. They all gather closer to the fire.

“I think Jalesh should have the first go,” murmurs Zakia, smiling at the baby. “Now, Miss Kala, I know you said no gifts for the baby since he’s a baby and he doesn’t understand them, but...”

She pulls a small package out from behind her and hands it to Kala. Kala smiles, pats the seat next to her for Wolfgang to sit, and starts to unwrap.

“Nice braid,” Wolfgang tells Dani, gesturing at Kala’s hair.

Dani beams. “Thanks, Wolfgang.”

Then Kala gasps in delight, stops breathing, and starts to cry. “Oh, Zakia, Capheus, oh my God it’s beautiful ...”

It’s a small, hand-knitted elephant with careful embroidery of Jalesh’s name on the side.

“My mother made it,” Capheus says proudly. “She heard about your delivery and she couldn’t resist.”

Wolfgang grins. “This is perfect, thank you.”

Kala hands the elephant cautiously to Jalesh, who studies it for a moment; then he pulls the toy to his chest and squeezes it, and no one thinks to keep unwrapping gifts, all too absorbed by the image of Jalesh hugging his elephant.

Then the fire alarm goes off, Wolfgang and Felix having left some garlic bread in the oven. Will fixes both of them with a murderous stare before he and Wolfgang sprint into the kitchen to find a fire extinguisher.
February: Plans

Paris is snowier than usual in late winter, and Kala and Wolfgang have passed most nights with homemade soup, good beer, and a movie. Tonight, having gotten Jalesh into his crib early, they snuggle on the sofa, spooning, and watch some stand-up on Netflix.

“Oh, we needed this,” mumbles Kala, nestling more securely against Wolfgang while he runs a hand up and down her arm.

He nods and kisses her behind her ear. She smiles to herself -- he’s affectionate tonight, she likes the feeling of his hand on her hip -- and she’s just turned to kiss him when there is a loud thunk and they freeze.

“What was that?” asks Wolfgang, hand jumping automatically to his side where he grew accustomed to keeping a gun for so many years.

“The wind?” suggests Kala -- there is a loose shutter in the back room.

Wolfgang shakes his head slightly and they listen closely. Then Kala gasps.

“Oh my God, Jalesh, he fell out of his crib--”

But before she can get up to check on him, Jalesh appears in the living room, having crawled from his room, and he looks at them with inquisitive, dusky blue eyes.

“Oh, honey, hello,” murmurs Kala, reaching out and pulling him onto her stomach.

Wolfgang looks at her, worried. “Do you think he’s okay?”

She shrugs and nods. “I escaped from my crib sometimes.”

He hums in concern, stroking Jalesh’s head, but is reassured when he smiles and reaches for him with gentle exuberance. “Mama!”

Kala giggles. “No my love, that’s me...”

“Mama!” he says again, adding, “Paba!”

Wolfgang chuckles and puts an arm around both Kala and Jalesh.

“Closer,” murmurs Wolfgang.

Kala nods, and then Jalesh clambers down from the couch, crawling across the rug.

“He’s excited since he learned to crawl,” says Kala,

Wolfgang nods and they watch their son explore in the glow of the TV, holding onto furniture so he can walk, slow and unsteady. They hold their breath each time he tries to make a break between furniture that is far apart, and each time he stumbles and crawls instead.

“He can nearly walk,” says Kala, turning halfway so she can nuzzle Wolfgang. “He’s almost one...”

Wolfgang smiles sleepily. “How did that happen?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “It’s going by so quickly, but we can always have another...”
Wolfgang perks an eyebrow, then kisses the side of her mouth, her jaw, her ear, and suddenly she’s laughing and breathless from the attention. He chuckles, pressing a final kiss to her forehead, and then he tucks her hair behind her ear and thumbs over her temple.

“I like that idea,” he says quietly.

“Maybe two,” she murmurs. “But I want them to be a couple of years apart.”

He nods. “Maybe when Jali is two.” He pauses to grin and shake his head. “Never thought I’d get this with you.”

Kala laughs. “Thank God for accidents.” Then she pauses too, watching as Wolfgang gently plays with her fingers, and her expression softens. “All the best things in my life are things that I thought I didn’t want, or shouldn’t want, or couldn’t have...isn’t that strange?”

He shakes his head, smiling distantly. “I think we all do that, we don’t listen to ourselves.”

Kala hums. “We listen to whichever voice is the loudest one and it’s almost never our own.” Then she smiles brightly. “That’s part of why I fell in love with you...you were the voice in my head saying all the things I couldn’t say to myself. And I think I was that voice for you, too.”

He nods and kisses her softly. Then he chuckles. “And we were both saying the same thing.”

“Which was?” asks Kala, starting to smirk.

“What the fuck are you doing with your life?” he replies, and she presses her face into his chest and giggles silently.

He laughs too, pulling her into a tighter hug, and she’s just lifted up her head to reply when they’re interrupted by a loud cry -- Jalesh bumped into a side table and knocked it over, then fell down and hurt his knee.

“Oh, honey,” says Kala, jumping to her feet and retrieving him.

She hugs him close and bounces him gently, but he continues to cry like the world is ending. She and Wolfgang meet eyes, both frowning sympathetically. Eventually, Kala gives up bouncing and sits next to Wolfgang, so Jalesh can look at him over her shoulder. Wolfgang bites his bottom lip, then on impulse, covers his face with his hands. Jalesh stops crying, pain replaced by curiosity, and Wolfgang quickly removes his hands and makes a face for his son. Jalesh gurgles happily.

“Are you playing peekaboo?” murmurs Kala, glancing over her shoulder.

“Yes,” says Wolfgang, this time tugging up the blanket to hide under, and reappearing to whisper, “Peekaboo!”

Kala grins softly to herself, listening to Jalesh laugh and Wolfgang say peekaboo, which is one of the many silly words Kala never expected to hear from Wolfgang. Her chest aches when she notices how gently and carefully he says it, so he doesn’t startle Jalesh, and suddenly she finds herself sniffling. She kisses the side of Jalesh’s head and then settles down next to Wolfgang again so the baby is in between them. Wolfgang glances at her and thumbs under each of her eyes.

“Kala, hey, what’s going on?”

She shakes her head, beaming. “You’re so good with him. He trusts you.”
Wolfgang looks down at Jalesh with a smile, then kisses Kala gently and murmurs, “Thank you.”

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March: The Adoption

Wolfgang zips up his jacket as he steps out of the gym, shouldering his bag higher and patting himself down to find his keys. He’s nearly made it to his car across the rainy parking lot when he stops, surprised by a plaintive whine. He frowns, then bends over and glances under the nearest car, where he sees a tiny, furry lump -- a puppy.

“Oh no,” he mumbles, knowing that despite his better judgment, that puppy will be in his living room in twenty minutes and his wife will be covering her face in the background. He reaches his hand out towards the small creature, but it shies away, so he clicks his tongue. “It’s okay. Did someone leave you here?”

The puppy doesn’t move. Wolfgang sighs and reaches into his gym bag for a cheese stick that he didn’t eat, then breaks off a piece, kneels down, and extends the cheese. Two minutes later, the ragged and skinny dog is sitting in the passenger’s seat of his car, looking up at him. He checked the puppy’s neck in hopes of finding a collar but had no luck. He thinks the puppy is about ten weeks old, but that’s all he can tell, because its fur is hidden under thick, caked mud.

“Shit, why?” he asks himself, pulling out his phone to send Felix a photo with the caption *how upset do you think she’ll be?*

Felix writes back *hope your couch is comfortable!*

Ordinarily, Kala would be understanding, but Wolfgang isn’t sure how pleased she will be with a puppy considering they have an eleven-month-old. He rubs his face briefly, unsurprised by his bad judgment, and starts the car.

“Good for you,” says Sun, appearing in the backseat and looking at the puppy.

Wolfgang frowns. “Sun?”

She shrugs. “I think I’m here because we both like to protect vulnerable things...” She stretches her hand out towards the dog and pets it. “Hello. How are you today?” Then she sighs. “I think he’s very hungry and cold... what kind do you think it is?”

“The fuck do I know,” replies Wolfgang, nudging the rest of the cheese towards the puppy’s tiny muzzle, adding to Sun, “who leaves a puppy in a parking lot?”

“People who don’t deserve to live,” says Sun in a flat voice, and Wolfgang nods in agreement.

He watches the puppy on and off on the drive home -- it shivers often, so he blasts the heat -- and then he wraps it in his coat to keep it warm while he walks from the street to the door.

Kala knows Wolfgang is hiding something as soon as he comes in the door, because his jacket is fully zipped up and he’s holding his arms around himself. She had just finished giving Jalesh a bath and sat down for the first time all day with a cup of tea when she heard him come in, and whether it was due to simple intuition or their connection, she knew he had done something misguided.

An explanation is clearly on the tip of his tongue, but if she lets him start talking, she knows she’ll give in. So she stares at him as he walks through the foyer, crossing her arms over her chest like a supercilious and all-powerful sphynx. Wolfgang, having known Kala for five years now, recognizes
the look in her eyes and a chill goes down his spine. He’s sure that he’ll never have to say anything to their children because she’ll give them that look and they’ll instantly behave themselves.

“Wolfgang. What is that.”

“I know this is bad timing,” he says, still holding his arms around himself. “But it was an emergency...”

She notices his jacket move and she raises her eyebrows. Wolfgang hesitates, then unzips his jacket and pulls out the muddy puppy.

“Oh you didn’t,” breathes Kala.

“It was raining, someone just left it in the parking lot, look how skinny it is.”

Kala puts a hand over her mouth. “Oh my God, we -- we can’t adopt a puppy right now, Wolfgang, we barely sleep as it is...”

Wolfgang glances at the puppy. “But look at it.”

Kala covers her face and sighs in exasperation, then walks over to Wolfgang and scrutinizes the puppy. He glances at her, notices her brow soften in sympathy, and cheers internally, knowing he’ll win her over now.

“We have a baby,” says Kala as she gently pets the puppy’s nose.

“Who will love this puppy,” replies Wolfgang.

“That was not my point,” Kala says, working some of the dirt off of the puppy’s ears. She sighs. “I suppose we can at least give it a bath...”

Wolfgang smiles at her and she raises a single, menacing eyebrow at him.

“This doesn’t mean we’re keeping it,” she says.

“Uh huh,” he says, starting to grin.

Kala rolls her eyes fondly, then pulls him into the living room. Jalesh is in his baby gym, teething on a bumpy turquoise dolphin toy. He turns his head at the arrival of his parents.

“We need to...disinfect the puppy before he touches it,” says Wolfgang, glancing down at the grimy creature.

Kala laughs at the word choice, and they go into the guest bathroom and run a warm bath. The puppy is lethargic from cold and hunger, so it isn’t difficult to coax him into the water. Kala and Wolfgang both kneel by the side of the tub, sleeves rolled up, and massage the tiny dog with soapy fingers. The puppy jumps a bit at the unfamiliar sensation and yaps several times at them, growing more energized.

Kala begins to giggle when the puppy itches behind its ear and sprays Wolfgang with muddy suds, and then she leans and presses a kiss to Wolfgang’s cheek.

“You’re very lucky I love you,” she murmurs.

“So we’re keeping it?” he asks.
She shakes her head fondly. “What are you, five?”

“Please?” he goes on, which doesn’t help convince her he really is a thirty-three-year-old man.

“Yes, we’ll keep it,” she says, rolling her eyes and going back to scrubbing the puppy’s fur.

“I love you,” says Wolfgang with a grin.

Then they both stop at a noise behind them. Jalesh, having walk-crawled to the bathroom, watches them from the doorway in interest. He stares, his little grip tightening on the toy elephant he dragged with him; his hair is wispy and clean and he’s wearing his brand-new onesie which features shooting stars and crescent moons on the cozy white fabric. Kala senses disaster, but before she can stop it, the puppy jumps energetically out of the tub, shakes mud onto her and Wolfgang, and then prances over to Jalesh, knocks him down with his snout, and immediately licks his face. Jalesh giggles in delight, apparently unbothered that he was just knocked over by a furry thing with teeth and claws, and Kala and Wolfgang stare at each other, stunned by this parenting mishap.

“We were too slow,” observes Wolfgang.

“Yes, honey, thank you for stating the obvious,” says Kala.

They watch the puppy lick and paw at Jalesh for another second, still too shocked to move, and then Kala gets to her feet and pulls Jalesh into her arms.

“Oh dear,” she says -- her son is covered in suds, mud, and fur, and his new onesie which she carefully chose at a nice shop downtown is ruined. “Well...I suppose this is good for your immune system.”

Sun reappears, smirking, and Kala and Wolfgang both glance at her.

“Kumiho,” she says, nodding at the dog. “You should name it Kumiho. In Seoul, I grew up with stories about the trickster spirit Kumiho which took the form of a fox and existed simply to cause chaos.” She tilts her head and frowns. “And sometimes to eat people.”

Kala and Wolfgang look at the puppy, which is wagging its tail cheerfully, clearly pleased with itself.

“Kumiho,” agrees Kala, adding to Wolfgang, “not only did you bring home a puppy without asking me, you brought home a devil puppy.”

“Sounds like Wolfgang,” says Sun with a chuckle.

Kala shakes her head, unable to keep from laughing, and then she nuzzles Jalesh. “Guess who gets two baths tonight?”

Wolfgang gets to his feet with a groan, then kisses the side of Jalesh’s head and squeezes Kala’s waist.

“I’ll finish the puppy while you give Jali a bath, okay?”

Kala nods, adding after she looks down at herself, “Then you owe me a bath.”

He smiles playfully. “Why would I say no to that?”

“That’s my cue,” says Sun, vanishing with a roll of her eyes.

“And a massage,” adds Kala.
Wolfgang nods, then pats his leg so the puppy runs to him. Kala leaves with Jalesh, who is still burbling happily about his encounter with the puppy.

An hour later, Kala and Wolfgang snuggle on the couch under a blanket. Kala has her hair up in a towel, and Wolfgang’s hair is sticking up at all angles because he let Kala wash it for him while they were in the tub, and she purposefully styled it to make him look silly. They share a mug of hot chocolate and watch Jalesh, dressed in a fresh onesie, play with the puppy, who is even more energetic since having a dish of milk and some sausage. Kumiho, who they have already started to call Kumi, is a girl. Even without the mud, her breed is unclear, so they decide she’s a mix of many things -- mottled brown and black fur, a white medallion on her chest, floppy ears, a licorice-colored nose and an upturned, fluffy tail.

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Kala leans her head on Wolfgang’s shoulder as Kumi gently tries to tug a stuffed giraffe away from Jalesh.

“She is cute,” murmurs Kala.

Wolfgang chuckles. “I knew you would come around.”

“It’s a good birthday present for Jali,” she goes on with a yawn.

Kumi wins the tug-of-war and trots away with the stuffed giraffe. Kala braces herself, expecting Jalesh to cry for help. But Jalesh simply gets up and walks after Kumi. Kala gasps.

“He -- he’s walking! Wolfgang! Oh my God!”

They both lean forward, holding their breath. Jalesh calmly takes his toy back from the puppy, then walks up to his parents and presents the toy to them. Wolfgang takes it from him, then reaches to pull him up into his lap. He and Kala both snuggle him and praise him softly and he gives them a toothy grin, and then Kumi jumps up onto the couch, turns in a circle, and curls up next to them.

Kala bites her bottom lip, amused and jubilant, and murmurs, “I love our family.”

“I love our family too, babe,” says Wolfgang.

They laugh softly and share a kiss before turning to Jalesh again, playing with his hair and his tiny fingers, hearts jumping each time he smiles or giggles.
Kala, Wolfgang, and Jalesh go to a bakery. Kala and Wolfgang get a surprise.

1. I envision Jalesh speaking Hindi and German, but because I don't know Hindi and my German is terrible, I have him mispronounce things in English...just imagine that he's actually mispronouncing things in one of those two languages.

2. Those of you who have read Diary of a New Life Together know that I headcanon Wolfgang as having some artistic talent...so I brought that into this fic too ;)

Kala sits up with a start, pushing her hair hastily out of her eyes and blinking feebly in the morning light. She looks down at her son, who is sitting on her legs and smiling as if he’s keeping a secret. She wrinkles her brows and Jalesh silently crawls over the bed and settles in between her and Wolfgang, looking at her with bright, brown eyes. The blue began to fade around his first birthday. He’s also grown bigger - 28 pounds, at the last count - and his hair is curly like Kala’s, permanently sticking up in the back. He has exactly seven teeth, and Kala is sure he has the longest eyelashes of any child to ever live.

“What are you up to?” she murmurs, tickling his tummy gently.

He snuggles against her. She rolls her eyes fondly, squeezes him in greeting, and kisses the top of his head. Wolfgang turns over, groggy, then squints at Kala and Jalesh. He groans tiredly and rubs his eyes.

“He has to stop waking us up like this,” he murmurs.

“Maybe…” says Kala, pausing for dramatic effect. “if we squeeze him in between us like a sandwich, he’ll learn.”

Wolfgang nods seriously. “Yes, he will.”

Kala chuckles, then presses against Wolfgang so Jalesh is smashed in between them. Jalesh just giggles and throws a playful kick against Wolfgang’s stomach.

Wolfgang snorts, then gets abruptly to his feet and dashes out of the room -- lately, the favorite game. Jalesh’s eyes widen in excitement and he chases after Wolfgang as quickly as he can, only to be intercepted by the dog, who noses him enthusiastically and knocks him down.

“Thank you, you stopped him,” says Wolfgang, patting Kumi’s head.

Kumi looks up at him with a characteristic dog-grin, panting. Kala walks out of the bedroom, tying
her silk robe around her and running her hands through her hair to loosen it. Then she bends down to pick Jalesh up and bounces him.

“Did the dog knock you over?”

“Yeah…” he says defeatedly.

“Do you want juice?”

He grins, showing a few tiny white teeth. “Yeah!”

Kala nods and pats his arm. “That’s what I thought.”

She sets Jalesh in his highchair and Wolfgang hands her a cup filled with fresh orange juice. She passes it to Jalesh, who sips it and kicks his feet. Then she sighs and leans against the counter, perching her hands on her round tummy and looking down at it. She frowns slightly. She’s bigger at four months than she was with Jalesh. She looks up and meets eyes with Wolfgang, who pours her some coffee.

“We should meet with Doctor Marsielle…” he says cautiously -- somehow, Kala hasn’t made time to see her obstetrician.

“Women have babies all the time without ever seeing a doctor,” Kala says, unconcerned, adding, “your mother had you without ever seeing a doctor.

“Yes. In Communist East Berlin.”

Kala smiles, meeting his eyes, and takes the cup of coffee out of his hands. “Fair point.”

Wolfgang smiles back. “Sure it’s only four months?”

Kala rubs her tummy. “It feels like four months, based on symptoms, but...it could be longer?”

“Yeah,” he chuckles, stepping closer to put his hands on her stomach. “You’re big.”

Kala hums, unconvinced. Wolfgang kisses her forehead, then sits at the table next Jalesh.

Jali looks at him while drinking his orange juice. Wolfgang makes an ugly face and Jalesh giggles suddenly, then coughs on his juice, and Wolfgang hastily takes his cup away and pats his back. Kala smirks over her coffee.

“You know you can’t make faces at him while he’s drinking, Wolfgang...”

Wolfgang looks apologetically at his son. “I’m sorry, Hosenscheißer *--”

“No!” sighs Kala. “You can’t call our son that. He can’t help that. He isn’t potty-trained yet.”

“I still get to make fun of him for shitting his pants. Besides, cute nickname.”

Kala drinks her coffee. Then she takes a seat next to Wolfgang and looks at him playfully.

“If our two-year-old says any variation of scheiße ,” she says in a low voice, “I will never forgive you.”

Wolfgang nods, leaning forward to kiss her softly. “I’ll make sure he never says it around you.”
Kala raises an eyebrow, plump lips pursed together, as disapproving as she can manage while she’s still so amused. Wolfgang tilts his head, pleased and unapologetic like a little kid, and then she laughs, kisses him once more, and pushes him away. She turns to her son, who finishes his juice with a loud burp.

“What do you want to do today, Jali?” she asks.

On Saturdays, they take him where he asks to go, no matter what he says. Last Saturday was an aquarium (though he called it “the fish place”) and the Saturday before that, he requested to see “balloons,” so they went to the store, brought home balloons, and let him play with them; he immediately popped one and cried so hard at the noise that they put on a movie, gave him a cup of warm milk, and hastily deflated all the balloons.

Jalesh looks at his mother, thinking. “Park.”

“The park?” asks Kala, nodding.

Then Jalesh says, “Bwetfath.”

“Breakfast?” guesses Kala. “How about waffles?”

Jalesh nods, then holds his palm up and mimicks spreading something on it.

“With peanut butter,” says Wolfgang. “Wonder why that is.”

Kala laughs, patting her stomach and walking into the kitchen. “I loved peanut butter when I was pregnant with him, didn’t I?”

“Which means this one will only want pesto,” says Wolfgang.

Kala’s newfound obsession with pesto was the giveaway this time -- after making pesto tortellini three nights in a row, Wolfgang came home on the fourth night with a pregnancy test in his hand. Half an hour later, Kala found herself curled up with him on the couch, staring at the ceiling. He chuckled at her for being surprised, considering they spent much of the previous month using Jalesh’s naptime to sneak into an upstairs bedroom together, fulling intending to have another baby.

“Pesto,” Kala groans dreamily. “Can I put pesto in my coffee?”

“You could, but should you?” murmurs Wolfgang, scrolling through the news on his phone and drinking his coffee.

“Honey do you want waffles?” she asks.

He sets his phone aside with a clunk - he has a habit of clicking the lock button and throwing the phone down on whatever surface is nearby, this time the glass dining table.

“And you wonder why you have to get a new phone so often,” says Kala, opening up a jar of peanut butter and sniffing it.

He gets to his feet and pulls Kala close to him from behind. “Not waffles, let’s stop at that bakery on the way to the park.”

She turns around. “Oh, the one with the pastries shaped like owls? Jali loves those…”

He nods, running his hands down her waist, provoking a gentle smile. Then they both jump at a noise -- Jalesh has reached across the table, taken Wolfgang’s phone, and thrown it as hard as he can
muster against the wall. Wolfgang raises his eyebrows, surprised, and Kala’s eyes widen in horror.

Jalesh looks at them, smiling.

“What are we going to do?” whispers Kala.

“Do?” asks Wolfgang.

“Yes! Do! He just broke your phone!”

“It’s probably not broken, he’s two--”

“Wolfgang.”

Wolfgang hesitates, so Kala sighs and walks over to the table. She takes a seat next to Jalesh and looks at him.

“Honey, you can’t throw other people’s personal belongings.”

“Yeah, he knows what those words mean.”

Kala presses her lips together in thought, and then she pulls Jalesh out of his seat, walks into his room, and sets him in his crib. He immediately starts to cry, but she forces herself to leave the room and shut the door. Wolfgang raises an eyebrow at her when she comes back.

“I don’t think he knows what he did,” he says carefully.

Kala sighs, running a hand through her hair. “Oh, I don’t know either.”

The crying grows louder. Wolfgang hesitates, but Kala sees the urge in his eyes. She tries to stop him as he leaves the room.

“Wolfgang, we -- we have to let him -- don’t go in there!”

“Can’t help it,” he says apologetically, going into Jali’s room and pulling him out of his crib.

Kala sighs sharply and follows him. She finds him snuggling Jalesh, who’s still whimpering quietly. She sighs again, but this time out of annoyance with herself, and goes up to the two of them. She kisses the side of Jalesh’s head.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs.

“We’re bad at this,” says Wolfgang, bouncing Jalesh.

“He’s going to get away with everything,” she says.

“He was just copying me,” Wolfgang goes on, shifting Jalesh into her arms so she can hug him.

“Mm, you’re right,” agrees Kala, squeezing her son tightly. “Maybe I should put you in timeout instead.”

“Probably,” says Wolfgang with a laugh. He looks at Jalesh. “You still want to go to the park?”

He sniffs and nods, looking hurt.

“Yeah, okay, you’ve made us feel bad enough,” says Wolfgang, squeezing his foot.
“Yes, we feel terrible, are you satisfied?” adds Kala.

Another huge, dramatic pout.

“Wow, he’s good,” says Wolfgang.

He crosses the room and opens the shades, then looks into Jalesh’s closet and consults with Kala. “Dinosaurs or spaceships?”

“Hmm,” she says, walking over and looking through the tiny clothes. She pulls out a blue sweater and a green canvas jacket. “It’s chilly. Oh! We can put those little boots on that Dani sent us…” She chuckles. “If she’s sent Jali this many clothes, imagine how many she’ll buy for her own little one…”

“It’s Felix’s fault too,” says Wolfgang. “Have you seen how many shoes he owns?”

“That’s why they’re together,” murmurs Kala. “They bonded over shoes.”

“And terrible movies,” says Wolfgang.

They laugh quietly together and then look at Jalesh, who’s still pouting. Kala sets him on a tiny green chair nearby, then tells Wolfgang to pick out a pair of pants and socks. Jalesh still doesn’t cooperate with socks and is particularly fussy today out of revenge.

Twenty minutes later, they’re out the door, walking down the foggy street with Jalesh in a stroller, a blanket tucked securely around him, and Kumi on a leash, far ahead of them. Kala glances at Jalesh, who’s smiling again, and she puts her arm around Wolfgang’s waist.

They continue down the street, pressing together for warmth. Kumi chases pigeons and barks at passing ankles. Jalesh dozes for a few minutes, apparently tuckered out from breaking an expensive piece of technology.

The bakery is swarming with morning guests on Saturday, and Kala squeezes into a seat near the window. She coaxes Kumi under the table, because dogs are not technically allowed in this bakery, and keeps her busy with a chewy treat. Meanwhile, she gives Jalesh some crayons and pieces of paper, and he goes about pressing his chin to the table and scrawling a huge, blue, snake-like thing on one of the papers.

Wolfgang comes back balancing several pastries and two more coffees -- this time, cafe noisette, which Kala loves because of the espresso and milk combination.

She kisses him in thanks, then frowns at Jalesh, who’s lost interest in coloring and begun to examine Wolfgang’s watch. Kala and Wolfgang look at each other, holding back laughter.

Jalesh grabs the watch face with both hands, watching the hands of the clock move. He tilts his head in curiosity.

“What’s that?”

They translate in their heads: What’s that?

“The numbers?” asks Wolfgang. “Can you say numbers?”

Jalesh bites his bottom lip and turns the dial on the side of the watch. Wolfgang laughs.

“It’s...four a.m. now, thanks, Jali,” he says.
Kala bites the tip of her tongue, amused. Wolfgang unfastens the watch and hands it to Jalesh, who holds it up in front of his face, studying it.

“I think he likes to analyze things,” murmurs Kala.

“Makes sense,” says Wolfgang.

She nods. “We both like to break things down to their basic components, whether it’s chemicals or complicated locks…”

Wolfgang laughs. “Not sure I remember how anymore.”

Kala raises a soft brow. “Oh, you do.”

He smirks, pressing a quick kiss to the side of her mouth. “My criminal past still gets you going, doesn’t it?”

She shakes with laughter, curls dancing around her face. “No.”

“Uh huh,” he says, unconvinced.

She grins, shaking her head, and they go back to watching their son. He turns the watch over in his tiny hands, enthralled, eyes huge; then he chews on one of the straps - Wolfgang frowns - and then he taps the watch on the table like he’s trying to crack a nut.

“Not the watch,” says Wolfgang hastily, taking it back. “Your grandfather gave that to me.”

Jalesh reaches for the watch, chin trembling, so Kala quickly takes a cookie and cuts him a piece.

“Here, love, eat this,” says Kala warmly.

Jalesh looks suspiciously at the pastry, so Kala takes a bite. Jali copies her warily and then brightens at the taste. She beams and pulls him onto her lap, hugging him as close as her stomach will allow.

“Good, hm?” she asks, kissing the top of his head.

Wolfgang chuckles, refastening his watch. Then he glances at Kala and Jalesh, who are in a world together, sharing breakfast -- Kala is playing with Jalesh’s wispy hair while she nibbles on a croissant, Jalesh is looking up at her with complete trust, crunching the edge of a cookie. Wolfgang smiles to himself, then notices the paper and crayons on the table.

He smirks, pulling the paper towards him, and takes a pen out of his jacket pocket. He cradles his coffee in one hand, sketching with the other, occasionally glancing up at Kala and Jalesh for reference.

He listens to their conversation, which consists mostly of Jalesh asking questions in his emerging German-Hindi mix, and Kala attempting to explain things, often sounding ridiculous -- that’s a bicycle, people ride them to get places, because cars are too big for some streets, because streets were built before cars, before that people rode horses, no honey horses do not have wheels, because they don’t, because they’re born with legs instead, yes horses would be able to go faster with wheels.

Wolfgang remembers reading that toddlers ask, on average, four hundred questions per day; at the time, when Jalesh was too young to talk, he didn’t believe it, but his mind has changed.

He glances up a last time, putting a final touch on the sketch, and then sits back, drinking his coffee,
listening to Kala describe what wind is and why he can’t see it.

“It’s just the air,” she says, wiggling her fingers in front of Jalesh. “And the air is made up of nitrogen and oxygen molecules, and you can’t see them because they don’t absorb any light from the sun.” She pauses. “The air is still real, all around us, but it’s hiding. It’s invisible. And the wind is just moving air, so that’s why you can’t see the wind.”

“Can you see the wind?”

“No, sweetheart, no one can see the wind.”

“Oh,” says Jalesh, sounding disappointed.

Kala and Wolfgang meet eyes, both laughing. Jalesh picks up the remainder of his cookie and chews on it, thinking. Then he looks down at Kala’s tummy.

“Uh oh,” murmurs Wolfgang, waiting.

“Mama,” begins Jalesh, surprisingly polite; usually when he’s interrogating his parents about the fundamentals of life, he’s pushy. “Why….” He trails off, searching for the right word, and settles for, “...are you big?”

Kala bites her bottom lip, thinking. “I...am having a baby. And right now, the baby is inside of me, because the baby has to get bigger and grow up before she’s ready to be with us.”

They’ve chosen to use she, even though they aren’t sure whether the baby is a boy or a girl.

Jalesh’s face twists, a sign of intense contemplation. Then he points at himself with both hands.

“Like me?”

“Yes honey, but you’re almost three, so the baby will be much smaller. And she won’t be able to talk or play or walk. She’ll sleep at first, just like you did when you were little.”

“She’s here?” asks Jalesh, looking at Kala’s tummy.

Kala nods, pulling Jalesh closer and taking his hand. She presses his hand to her belly. “She’s in there. Sometimes I can feel her kick.”

“Like fishes,” says Jalesh, and Kala frowns.

“Fishes?”

“In water!” he explains, drawing a big breath, in and out.

“Oh,” laughs Kala. “Yes, she can breathe, in a way.”

“Does she have a tail?” he asks.

Kala grins, glancing at Wolfgang, who smiles warmly and shakes his head.

“She does not have a tail now, but when babies are very, very small, they do have a tail. They look like fish because we are related to fish. Here…” She takes a piece of scrap paper from the table and picks up a purple crayon. Then she draws out a phylogenetic tree. “We all started as bacteria, those are little teeny tiny animals far too small to see, and then became plants, and fungi, like mushrooms. You know what mushrooms are, don’t you? You like them on pizza...and then we became
protostomes like snails and then echinoderms like starfish and then fish, and only after fish did we become mammals, with some more steps in between.”

Jalesh stares at his mother, boggled. Wolfgang finishes his coffee, unsurprised that his wife has the evolution of life memorized. Then Jalesh frowns, deeply troubled.

“But we...we eat fishes,” he says.

Wolfgang raises his eyebrows at Kala. She makes a “help me!” face and he grins and goes back to sketching.

“You're on your own,” he murmurs.

“Okay, honey,” Kala says quickly to Jalesh. “We were never actually fish! We just...evolved from fish. It took millions of years.”

Jalesh blinks, uncomprehending, but a new problem is troubling him now. “Can I be a fish again?”

“No,” Kala says cautiously, looking for a change of subject so she doesn’t have to explain the intricacies of evolution to a two-year-old. “But...we could take you swimming next weekend!”

Jalesh grins and nods happily.

“Okay,” says Kala, sighing in relief. “We’ll all go swimming.” Then she gasps softly from a powerful cramp and looks down at herself in alarm. “Oh, ow, ow.”

“Kala?” asks Wolfgang, watching her closely.

“Cramp,” murmurs Kala, hands low on her belly.

“Did that happen with Jalesh?” asks Wolfgang, leaning closer.

She shakes her head. “Not this early -- oh my God, ow.” She looks up at Wolfgang, eyes wide and fearful. “I’m past the first trimester, so this can’t mean…?”

He shakes his head, not letting himself consider the idea. Then he stacks up the papers, puts them into Kala’s bag, and she begins to gather the crayons. Jalesh looks at his parents, confused, and then looks at the dog to see if she has answers.

“Do you think Dr. Marsielle will fit us in?” Kala asks.

Wolfgang nods, helping her to her feet, putting Jalesh into his stroller. Twenty minutes later, they’re driving to the doctor’s office, Kala speaking in rapidly with Dr. Marsielle.

“--cannot believe I was so stupid, I was so busy but that’s no excuse. I thought I would be fine because I’ve been pregnant before--”

Wolfgang tries to focus on his driving rather than on her frantic conversation and keeps repeating to Jalesh that everything is fine and that they’ll go to the park tomorrow. When they reach the doctor’s office, they hurry inside, and a nurse promptly escorts them into an examining room.

Wolfgang stiffens at the small, brightly-lit space, unnerved by the medical equipment and the faint smell of cleaners. Kala, despite her panic that something might be wrong, takes a moment to squeeze Wolfgang’s hands reassuringly.

Jalesh, noticing this exchange, looks up at Wolfgang with a slight frown. Then he smiles and says,
Kala and Wolfgang look at each other in surprise. Then Wolfgang breathes out, laughing, and reaches to pick Jalesh up.

“Hey, c’mere,” he says, kissing the side of his son’s head. “You’re sweet.”

Kala smiles, momentarily taken away from her worry, and she cuddles against Wolfgang and Jalesh.

“Isn’t it incredible how perceptive children are?” she murmurs.

He nods and they both watch Jalesh for a moment as he plays with Kala’s hair, and then they turn when Dr. Marsielle comes into the room with a file.

She smiles calmly at Kala and shakes her hand, then Wolfgang’s, and then she beams at Jalesh and waves.

“Oh, he is as handsome as I expected, look at him,” she gushes. “How old is he now?”

“Two and a half,” Kala says, hastily adding, “Dr. Marsielle, please, I’m very nervous about--”

“I know, I know,” says the doctor, patting Kala’s arm. “Just sit down here. It’s likely nothing. Some cramping is perfectly normal. No bleeding, right?”

Kala shakes her head.

“Okay, we’ll do an ultrasound -- you’re past due for one,” says Dr. Marsielle with a slight smirk.

Kala blushes. “Yes, I -- I really am sorry that I didn’t come in. I thought I was an expert after one baby.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are,” says Dr. Marsielle kindly. “But it’s still a good idea to monitor things.” She pats the exam table and Kala sits down on it. “You’re very big, how far along do you think you are?”

“I can’t be more than four months,” says Kala.

“Four months?” Dr. Marsielle frowns. “Okay, I have a hunch, but let’s look inside before I tell you anything...”

Wolfgang goes around the side of the table to stand next to Kala, and Jalesh watches the doctor’s movements closely, curious and attentive. The doctor smiles at him.

“Looks like you’ve got an inquisitive little one,” she remarks to Kala, who nods and reaches to squeeze Jalesh’s foot.

Dr. Marsielle turns on the ultrasound screen and squeezes some gel onto the transducer, and Kala holds her breath at the first pass over her tummy, then shivers. She glances up at the screen, studying it. She squints, noticing what appears to be a shadow behind the baby.

“As I expected,” says the doctor, laughing. She looks at Wolfgang, then back at Kala. “You are about four months along, but you’re having two babies. Not one.”

“Oh no,” breathes Kala, eyes wide. She looks at Wolfgang, who mirrors her stupefied expression. “Oh my God. Oh no. Are you sure?”
The doctor nods. “Twins.” She moves the transducer around for a moment while Kala’s mind echoes in shock. “Nothing appears to be wrong. Cramping is quite typical with twins, especially if you’ve been on your feet often.”

Wolfgang turns slowly in a circle, a hand over his mouth, gaze distant.

“Do you want to know the sex?” asks Dr. Marsielle.

Wolfgang and Kala look at each other again, still dumbfounded. Then Kala forces herself to nod.

“Yes, yes we would like that,” she manages.

The doctor chuckles. “I know, twins are always quite the surprise. Alright, one boy, one girl.”

“Oh my goodness,” says Kala, looking down at herself and smiling. “A boy and a girl.” She glances at Wolfgang, who still looks as though he’s just surfaced after a dive into arctic waters. “Oh my God, Wolfgang.”

He shakes his head, staggered, then laughs quietly and reaches for her hand. He brings it up to his mouth and kisses it and she smiles gently at him. Then he glances at Jalesh and bounces him.

“You’re going to have two little siblings,” he says. “A little brother and a little sister.”

“Can we get them out yet?” asks Jalesh.

Wolfgang laughs. “No. A few more months.” He sits next to Kala on the table, putting an arm around her as Dr. Marsielle finishes up. They watch the two humanoid blobs on the display, and then Wolfgang breathes out. “Holy shit.”

Kala shakes her head in amazement. “I’m afraid we are too good at this.”

“I have...strong swimmers, apparently,” he jokes.

Kala snorts. “Oh my God. Wolfgang.”

“Actually, this is on you, my dear,” says Dr. Marsielle. “You probably have an inherited tendency to release more than one egg.”

“Oh, my grandmother had twins,” sighs Kala. “I’ve heard that it runs on the mother’s side of the family.”

“Indeed,” agrees the doctor, handing Kala a cloth to wipe the goo off her belly with. She opens up her file and clicks the cap of her pen. “Alright. I’m going to put you on bedrest for a little while...see if we can get these cramps to go away, alright? We’ll start with two weeks, and then you can come back and we’ll go from there.”

“Two weeks?” asks Kala. “Oh, I can’t possibly--”

“Twins are more difficult on your body,” says Dr. Marsielle firmly. “I would suggest talking to your employer about taking this pregnancy off, or working significantly less.”

“Oh, I -- I don’t have to ask anyone’s permission, I could take it off if I needed to, but…”

“You need to,” says Dr. Marsielle.

“It’s okay, babe, we’ll talk about it,” says Wolfgang softly.
Kala nods, sighing. “Alright.”

Wolfgang kisses the side of her head and squeezes her shoulder. She pulls her shirt over her tummy again, then sits up and runs her hands through her hair.

“We’ll do some blood work today as well,” says the doctor. “I’ll ask my phlebotomist to come in and assist you with that. Do you have any concerns you want to talk to me about?”

Kala laughs breathily. “Oh, yes, I imagine I have many concerns…but, none of them come to mind right now. I’m sure I’ll be calling you.”

Dr. Marsielle smiles and pats her hand. “Feel free. Alright, sit tight…”

She leaves the three of them alone in the room. Wolfgang sets Jalesh on a chair nearby and he plays with his color cube, a toy where he matches the colors on each side, the toddler-version of a Rubix. Kala leans against Wolfgang’s shoulder, staring at the linoleum floor, dazed. He runs a hand over her belly, smiling gently.

“Twins,” Kala murmurs feebly.

“Are you okay?” he asks her.

She looks up, smiling, and nods. “I am. Just very surprised.”

He nods, then chuckles. "Dani's going to be furious at you. You stole her spotlight."

She grins. "I know. We were bonding so nicely over being pregnant at the same time."

He shakes his head, envisioning Dani and Felix's reaction, and then helps her to her feet.

They go home after half an hour of blood tests, stopping on the way to pick up Thai food. By the time Kala has taken a bath to calm down and had several cups of chamomile tea, it’s nearly dark outside and a light snow has begun to fall. She finds Wolfgang and Jalesh in bed -- Wolfgang is reading *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* and Jalesh is curled up against him, happily shouting the answers to the repeated question in the text. Kala smiles to herself and gets into bed next to them, groaning quietly.

Wolfgang glances at her and kisses her quickly. “Tired?”

Kala sighs. “And sore. I think Dr. Marsielle is right…”

He nods, pulling her closer under the covers. She looks at the book.

“Ooh, you’re at the purple cat page,” she says.

Wolfgang laughs. “The more I read this to him, the more I think it’s about mass surveillance.”

“What?” says Kala.

“All the animals do is talk about who’s spying on them,” he replies.

Kala rolls her eyes and pats his arm. “I think it’s just meant to teach animals and colors.”

“It’s clearly an allegory about mass surveillance,” he says.

“Mm, moments like these remind me you’re half-Russian,” she jokes, leaning her head on his
He laughs and sets the book aside. “I’ll go heat up the food, yeah?”

Jalesh whines at the abrupt end to story time. “Papaaa!”

Kala nods at Wolfgang and hastily picks the book up again. “Alright, come here, beta*. I’ll read to you.”

Wolfgang comes back several minutes later with steaming plates of Thai food, a beer, and a dish of bananas and cream for Jalesh. He and Kala almost never eat in bed, but it’s a cold night and after a day like today, they’re both happy to huddle under the covers and eat ungodly amounts of *tom kha kai* and *pad see ew*. They put on *Die Sendung mit der Maus* for Jalesh, who sits cross-legged on the foot of the bed and eats his bananas happily while he watches.

Wolfgang and Kala snuggle closer while they eat, occasionally glancing at Jalesh, both bone-tired from the news they received.

“How about three kids…” mutters Wolfgang.

“Very different than one,” says Kala, coaxing a noodle into her mouth by sucking on the end of it. “And Jali is so easy, he’s such a good napper and he hardly gets sick…we’ve been spoiled with him.”

“Three,” repeats Wolfgang.

“It’s strange,” says Kala. “I know we said wanted three but I never thought it would happen so quickly.” She looks down at herself, brows wrinkled in thought. “This is the last time I’ll be pregnant if we stop after three. Strange.”

Wolfgang kisses the side of her head and holds her closer. Then he chuckles. “At least it’s not twin boys.”

Kala grins. “Oh, can you imagine? Three boys!” Then her expression softens and she rubs her hands over her belly. “I like what we have. Two boys, one little girl. She’ll keep them in line.”

He nods, then glances at Jalesh. “And he’ll be a good big brother.”

Kala smiles in agreement, setting her plate aside, fluffing the pillows behind her and resting her head on Wolfgang’s chest. He puts his arms around her and pats the side of her tummy, and she smiles and presses a kiss against his chest.

Then they both glance up, surprised by Riley and Will, who smile.

“We thought we would say hello,” says Riley quietly, sitting on the edge of the bed. “It smells delicious, did you have Thai food?”

“We felt some…” Will trails off, searching for the right word. “What I like to call the “what the fuck is happening?” emotion.”

Riley chuckles. “Are you two okay?”

“I noticed that too…” says a new voice -- Sun, appearing in the doorway.

“Hello, me as well,” says Capheus, perching on the windowsill.
“Same,” murmurs Nomi, appearing next to him and folding her arms.

“And me,” agrees Lito, showing up alongside Will and Riley and tossing some popcorn into his mouth. “I thought it was indigestion, but it felt too…” He gestures at his chest. “Panicky. It was far too panicky for indigestion.”

“Are you alright, Kala?” asks Capheus. “The baby?”

Kala and Wolfgang look at each other, both smiling gently, and Wolfgang nudges her.

“Well,” murmurs Kala, looking around at her family. “We were going to tell you all tomorrow, but... I went to the doctor’s today...and it is **babies**, not **baby**. Two babies.”

The reaction is predictable -- Riley covers her face and laughs in delight, Will groans and laughs, as if to say *of course*; Nomi grins and shakes her head, eyes bright; Capheus claps, laughing joyfully, shouting congratulations; Sun rolls her eyes and pats her own tummy, chuckling; and Lito sniffls and puts a hand on his heart.

“If any of us were going to have twins, it would be you two,” jokes Will.

“Are they identical?” asks Riley.

“No, a boy and a girl,” says Wolfgang, smiling.

Nomi shakes her head, bursting with pride. “You two are so freaking domestic, none of us saw this coming at first. Three kids. What the fuck.”

Everyone laughs, amused and excited.

Then Capheus pat’s Kala’s arm and says, “We should let you relax. Congratulations again.”

Kala smiles and nods, and her six Cluster-mates vanish one by one, calling goodbyes and well wishes. Then she turns to Wolfgang, touching her nose to his.

“I have a feeling I’m going to yell at you when I’m in labor this time,” she murmurs.

“You heard the doctor, it’s your fault,” he jokes.

She shakes her head and kisses him softly. “Irrelevant. You got me pregnant. I deserve to yell at you while I’m pushing two entire human beings out of my body.

He laughs and shakes his head, pulling her closer. “Okay.”

“Okay,” she says, kissing him again.

Then Jalesh interrupts, tugging on the sleeve of Kala’s robe.

“Mamaaa! Where’s Pippa?”

Pippa is a stuffed hippo, which was originally called Hippo, which became Pippo, which became Pippa. Kala sighs, glancing at her baby bag across the room, then gets to her feet and retrieves the toy. In the process, she pulls out the crayons and papers, and finds the small sketch Wolfgang did of her and Jalesh at the table in the bakery. She pauses, looking down at it with a sudden twinge in her chest. She sniffls.

“Oh, honey,” she murmurs, glancing at Wolfgang. “It’s been so long since I’ve found one of these,
it’s beautiful…”

He smiles at her, then looks away to hide a faint blush.

“I’m putting it on the fridge,” she says resolutely. “Along with this,” she adds, holding up one of Jalesh’s colorful scribbles.

“His is better,” says Wolfgang, smirking.

Kala glances at the scribbles. “Yes, clearly. He shows artistic talent well beyond his years.” Then she smiles. “You should teach him.”

“Teach him what?” asks Wolfgang.

“To draw,” says Kala, sitting down again with a soft, pained moan and handing Jalesh his hippo.

Wolfgang snorts. “Babe, I can barely draw.”

Kala rolls her eyes -- even Hernando has complimented the drawings that Kala showed to him in secret. “Okay, Wolfgang.”

“I can’t,” he says, sipping his beer and putting his arms around her.

“Oh, if you loved yourself half as much as I do…” she murmurs.

He laughs and kisses her. “Lucky you do.”

“You are lucky,” she says, and they kiss for a moment, hands finding each other’s figures under the covers, seeking closeness.

They break apart when Jalesh climbs onto the bed and sits on Wolfgang’s lap.

“Is the romance gone?” sighs Kala as Wolfgang takes his hands off of her and he laughs loudly.

“Yeah, babe, it is,” he tells her after quieting down.

She grins, shaking her head, pulling Jalesh close and nuzzling him. “Hi, my tiny hippo… what do you need?”

“Kheer!” he shouts, showing his mismatched, bright white teeth.

Kala keeps a constant supply of the flavorful rice pudding called kheer in the fridge -- Jalesh (and Wolfgang) eat it almost daily. She nods, going to get up.

“Kala, let me--”

She shakes her head. “I need to move while I still have the chance. Two weeks of bed rest…”

He nods. She gets to her feet and waddles out of their room and into the kitchen. She stands in the light of the open fridge for a moment, yawning, forgetting why she came into the kitchen in the first place. Then she breathes in sharply, reminded, and pulls out two small dishes of kheer and sets them in the microwave to warm slightly.

By the time she returns to the bedroom, Jalesh is asleep on Wolfgang, snoring faintly. Kala rolls her lips over her teeth, eyes crinkling in amusement. She looks at Wolfgang, who shakes his head and pets Jalesh’s hair with his hand.
Kala settles into bed, careful not to wake Jalesh, and hands one of the servings of kheer to Wolfgang. He kisses her in thanks, squeezing her slender wrist, then entwining their fingers. She smiles at him, then takes the other serving for herself, scooping a huge bite of the creamy pudding onto her spoon.

She and Wolfgang glance down at Jalesh while they eat. His eyelids flicker, indicating that he’s dreaming.

“What do you think he dreams about?” asks Wolfgang softly.


Wolfgang smiles too, then kisses the side of Kala’s head and takes a steadying breath.

“I love you,” he murmurs.

She sniffs, soothing Jalesh’s temple with a gentle stroke of her thumb. “I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

*Hosenscheißer = literally, "pants-shitter" in German. Because of course Wolfgang calls his child this.
*Beta = dear/son in Hindi.
Kala tiptoes with two cups of coffee into her and Wolfgang’s bedroom and finds him sitting up in bed, running a hand through his hair and yawning.

“They still asleep?” he mumbles, accepting one of the cups and pulling her back into bed by her waist.

She smiles and nods, tucking her unruly hair over one shoulder and cradling her coffee close to her chest. It’s always colder in Berlin than Paris and despite living here with Wolfgang for a year before they got married, the chill still surprises her. They recently bought a small apartment in Berlin so they could bring their children there occasionally. This is their first visit with them and they’re anxious to show them around a city they both love.

“Did you see the snow?” Kala murmurs, bringing the coffee to her mouth and letting the steam warm her face.

He grins softly. “Yeah, it’s beautiful. We should take them somewhere.”

She smiles and nods, tucking her unruly hair over one shoulder and cradling her coffee close to her chest. It’s always colder in Berlin than Paris and despite living here with Wolfgang for a year before they got married, the chill still surprises her. They recently bought a small apartment in Berlin so they could bring their children there occasionally. This is their first visit with them and they’re anxious to show them around a city they both love.

“Did you see the snow?” Kala murmurs, bringing the coffee to her mouth and letting the steam warm her face.

He grins softly. “Yeah, it’s beautiful. We should take them somewhere.”

She nods. “We should.” Then she chuckles. “I can’t believe Jali didn’t wake us up at four by jumping on our stomachs and screaming about the snow.”

“We’re too old for that,” says Wolfgang with a laugh.

“We are,” murmurs Kala, pressing closer, thumbing over his stubble and smirking. “I think I see a bit of gray.”

“You’re full of shit,” he says with a confident smile.

She laughs. “Yes, I am.” Then taps her forehead between her brows. “You may be as handsome as ever, but do you see these wrinkles? I’ve been worried constantly since the moment Jalesh was born and the wrinkles just keep getting deeper.”

“Yeah, you’re hideous,” he says, nodding and pressing a kiss to her mouth. “I can barely stand looking at you, actually.” He kisses her again, more deeply, and pulls her closer under the covers. “No sex appeal at all.” He tugs the strap of her nightgown down and kisses the side of her neck and she dissolves into quiet laughter, shaking her head.
“Okay, you’ve made your point,” she says, blushing.

“Have I?” he mumbles, sliding a hand up her leg under the covers.

“Mm, no, actually, keep going,” she replies.

He chuckles and they continue kissing. Then they hear a crash in the other room, and seconds later, the patter of feet down the hall. Wolfgang swears softly. Kala groans and puts the strap of her nightgown back into place on her shoulder.

“Why are we even paying for birth control?” says Wolfgang.

Kala shakes her head. “He always interrupts.”

“Bad strategy for someone who’s been begging for another sibling,” says Wolfgang.

Jalesh runs into their room and takes a flying leap up onto their bed, then starts to jump up and down, pointing outside.

“It snowed! It’s still snowing! Can we go outside?”

“Sure mausi, c’mere,” says Wolfgang.

Jalesh jumps onto him and he winces in pain and shakes some spilled coffee off his hand. Jalesh, noticing neither of these things, sits down on Wolfgang’s lap and grins. Kala smooths her son’s hair and kisses the side of his head, and then looks up as her three-year-old daughter, Aria, peeks her head around the door and looks at them. She’s willowy and sweet, an exact replica of little Kala, with eyes that twinkle and reflect wisdom well beyond her age. She’s also twenty-five pounds of pure mischief.

“Trouble’s awake,” Kala murmurs.

Aria grins and runs up to the bed, reaching her arms up, asking to be lifted. Kala pulls her up into her lap and Aria snuggles close to her, then shrieks in her ear, “It snowing!” Then she looks at Wolfgang as if she just noticed him and yells, even louder, “Papa!”

“Aria, shh,” says Kala, rubbing her ear as it rings.

Wolfgang laughs and reaches out to poke Aria’s stomach and she giggles. Then her twin brother, Sani, always the last to wake up, appears in the doorway hugging a dinosaur-themed blanket to his chest, and looks at the rest of his family.

He’s taller and slimmer than his sister, but they have identical brown eyes and the same, quick smirk. Sani smirks rarely, unlike Aria, who is a disobedient hurricane from sunrise to sunset.

Kala notices her younger son looking unsurely at them all, so she shifts Aria into Wolfgang’s lap and gets to her feet. She scoops Sani up and peppers his face with kisses.

“There’s my Sani, there’s my sweet one...the only sweet one,” she adds in a whisper. She hugs him and spins in a slow circle for a moment, bouncing him and chatting at him until he smiles, and then she smiles too and returns to the bed with him.

Wolfgang glances at Sani, then at Kala, and murmurs, “I’m worried about Aria and snowballs. She’ll kick their asses.”

Kala’s eyes darken. Her sons, both bigger than Aria, are always reluctant to defend themselves
against her, even when they should.

“We’ll make Jalesh protect Sani.”

Wolfgang looks at Aria, who is sniffing his coffee interestedly. Kala holds her breath, watching, and Aria dips her whole hand into the mug.

Wolfgang nods in an unsurprised, long-suffering way. Kala wrinkles her nose.

“I’ll get you new coffee,” she murmurs. “Because who knows where her hand has been.”

Aria pulls her hand back out and puts a few fingers in her mouth. Her expression seems to swirl inward like a drain and she coughs and starts to cry.

“Seems about right,” says Wolfgang, setting the coffee aside and pulling her close to hug her. “Shh, libelle*.”

She keeps crying, so Wolfgang gets up, shaking his head in amusement at Kala, and goes into the kitchen. He sets Aria on the counter and opens the fridge, searching for a can of whipped cream. He finds one, then steps up to his daughter, who stops crying instantly and looks with huge, attentive eyes at the can. He looks around, checking that Kala isn’t watching, and Aria grins and opens her mouth wide.

He snorts and presses the dispenser on the top of the can and Aria smacks her lips around the pile of whipped cream in her mouth and giggles.

“That better?” he asks Aria.

She nods hard, then reaches her hand out for the bottle. Wolfgang hands it to her and she plays with the dispenser until she figures out how to activate it, and then she sprays whipped cream into the air. Some of it sticks in her hair and she laughs loudly, delighted, then aims the can at Wolfgang.

“You wouldn’t dare--”

He’s interrupted when a stream of whipped cream hits him in the face. Aria grins, exposing several new teeth, and she kicks her legs against the cabinets. Then Kala appears in the door to the kitchen with Sani and Jalesh.

She looks at the whipped cream on Wolfgang’s face, then at Aria who’s holding the can in her tiny hands. She doesn’t say anything as she passes them to refill her coffee.

Wolfgang and Aria exchange a worried expression.

Then Kala walks up to them, takes the can out of Aria’s hands, and sprays a mountain of whipped cream into her coffee. She pats the side of Wolfgang’s cheek and kisses him.

“Ew!” sighs Jalesh from the corner.

Kala stands still, staring at her son, then she laughs and gestures with the can. “Want some?”

Jalesh grins and he and Sani run up to her. She fills their mouths with whipped cream, then smiles over her shoulder at Wolfgang.

“I can have fun too,” she murmurs.

He laughs and shakes his head. She smiles to herself, then pushes her sons out of the kitchen, calling
after them, “Jalesh, make sure Sani is wearing socks, it’s cold outside!”

The benefit of letting Jalesh dress his little brother is that it saves time. The disadvantage is that he has a sense of style similar to drunk Felix.

Wolfgang hands Aria to Kala.

“I’ll make breakfast, yeah?” he says.

She smiles. “Sure. I’ll go wash this one’s hair…”

Twenty minutes later, they’re all sitting in the living room, setting plates and cups on the last few unpacked boxes. Sani plays with his apple slices, trying to build something with them, and Aria continuously takes slices away from him to ruin his designs. Jalesh, who feels worldly and sophisticated by comparison, sits in between his parents on the couch and eats politely.

When Aria steals Sani’s last apple slice, he looks at Kala.

“Mama,” he says defeatedly.

Kala gets to her feet and picks Aria up, then hands her to Wolfgang.

“You should stop stealing from your brother,” he says, looking into her eyes.

Aria, as usual, is unfazed by direct confrontation and she takes a piece of apple off of Wolfgang’s plate. He frowns, almost impressed, and wonders if he showed a similar desire to take what wasn’t his when he was little. If he did, he doubts his mother let him get away with any of it.

Kala sits cross-legged by Sani and peels a clementine for him.

“Here love, use these,” she says, pushing the slices towards him on the plate.

He brightens.

“What are you building?” Kala asks.

“Auto,” he murmurs. “Slug...zeug...auto.”

Kala squints at Wolfgang. “Does he mean Flugzeug?”

“Jali always had trouble with F,” replies Wolfgang with a shrug. "He might too."

“An airplane car?” she asks Sani.

He moves his hand through the air and nods. She laughs and watches him stack the slices of clementine for a moment, then starts to feed them to him as the other kids get to their feet, ansty to go out in the snow.

“Have you had enough?” she checks, looking at Sani’s plate, which still has most of the food on it.

He nods, grinning. She sighs, knowing that two hours from now he’ll be crying about being hungry, and picks everyone’s plates up. She looks out of the kitchen window as she washes up, frowning slightly at the prospect of taking three little children into a city. Their neighborhood in Paris is quiet, but the same can’t be said for this one. The image of Aria chasing a pigeon into a busy intersection stops her heart for a moment, and then she shakes her head and takes a deep breath.
“We could put them on leashes,” says Wolfgang as he comes into the kitchen, sensing what’s on her mind.

She laughs weakly. “It’s Ari I worry about.”

“We could take her to the park first and let her tire herself out,” suggests Wolfgang, just as Aria sprints across the kitchen and trips over the transition from tile to carpet in the hall. She gets up as quickly as she fell, disappearing into her and Sani’s room.

Wolfgang jogs after her to make sure she isn’t doing something diabolical and comes back a few minutes later with both her and Sani fully dressed in coats and hats. Kala hurries to get dressed and makes a canteen of hot chocolate for them all. They grab toddler carriers and set off to the elevator. Aria presses several wrong buttons before Wolfgang picks her up. Kala eyes her daughter and Aria looks back cautiously, seeming to calculate how much more she can get away with today before her mother puts her in a timeout.

Wolfgang glances at his phone as they step into the lobby. “Can Felix come over for dinner? He’s lonely without Dani and Meems.”

“Oh, yes please, then it’s a fair fight,” says Kala. “Three against three.”

Wolfgang laughs and texts Felix back. With Dani and his three-year-old daughter Mimi in Los Angeles, Felix has been unusually clingy and has texted eleven times this morning.

Wolfgang and Kala put Sani and Aria into the carriers -- Sani with Kala, Aria with Wolfgang -- and Jalesh looks at his little siblings, slightly jealous.

Aria gives Wolfgang a steady, impish smile and he frowns.

“If I was anything like Ari, I must have scared my mother,” he mumbles to Kala. “Look at her eyes.”

“She’s a little wolf,” agrees Kala.

“We should have spelled it with a y-a at the end, that spelling means lioness.”

“Why on earth do you know that?” laughs Kala.

“Because Felix went through a *Game of Thrones* phase,” he says.

“Arya is that little fierce one, right?” asks Kala. She smiles and glances at Aria. “Mm, at least we’ll never worry about her standing up for herself.”

“And her brothers,” agrees Wolfgang.

Kala grins. “They’re lucky to have her.”

They go through the lobby. Aria asks to be let down, so Wolfgang pulls her out of the carrier. They step outside into the snow and Aria runs forward joyfully, hands outstretched, and cuts off a man who’s walking past the door.

“Sorry,” Kala and Wolfgang say automatically.

Aria dances down the sidewalk in front of them, hands over her head, giggling. Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other with a fervent smile, then laugh and lean against each other as they watch her.

Jalesh runs to catch up with her, darting along the side of the street, swinging around lamp posts and
gathering snow in his hands, tossing it up so it falls on him. Kala glances at Sani, who is looking up
at the sky, eyes full of wonder, and she grins and kisses his forehead.

“He’s so sweet,” she murmurs to Wolfgang.

Wolfgang smiles. “He is. Surprised Ari didn’t absorb him in the womb.”

“Wolfgang, God,” moans Kala, making a face.

Wolfgang laughs at himself, realizing how that sounded. Kala shakes her head, then gasps when she
notices Aria approaching a dog on the other side of the sidewalk and dashes forward to scoop her up.

“She’s!?” complains Aria.


“No…Mama!”

“You’re safer like this, beta,” says Kala, slowing her pace so Wolfgang and the boys catch up.

She puts Aria back in the carrier that Wolfgang’s wearing and they look into each other’s eyes for a
moment.

“She looks just like me, but she is all you on the inside,” Kala murmurs with a slight smile.

Aria grins at this, though she doesn’t understand, and Wolfgang laughs, then softens and shakes his
head.

“Yeah, I love you,” he mumbles at his daughter.

Kala smiles and takes Wolfgang’s hand again. They walk behind Jalesh who, unlike
Aria, doesn’t walk into passersby or unnecessarily hold up traffic. Kala bites her bottom lip as she
watches him -- he’s seven and nearly four feet tall.

“Oh,” she sighs after a while. “I can’t believe it.”

Wolfgang looks at her for a moment before speaking. “He was a baby yesterday.”

She grins and laughs. “I swear he was!”

“He grew up fast after the twins,” says Wolfgang with a shrug. “He likes taking care of them.”

Kala smiles. “He does, it’s sweet. I’m glad he’s our first, he’s responsible.”

Wolfgang laughs. “Imagine Ari, she’d start an uprising.”

“They would lock us in our bathroom and eat all the chocolate I hide under the bed.”

Wolfgang glances at her. “You hide chocolate under the bed?”

Kala nods. “Yes, because if it’s in the kitchen, you eat it.”

He smirks. “And now you’ve told me about it.”

She shrugs superiorly. “So I’ll find a new hiding spot.”

They laugh together and continue down the sidewalk, squeezing each other’s hands. They walk
more slowly as they enter a familiar part of the city, and Kala stops at an intersection, looking to her left. Then she tugs Wolfgang with her.

“We have to show them our old apartment,” she murmurs.

He hesitates, looking at Jalesh, anticipating questions. Then he nods. They turn down the street and Kala leans her head on his shoulder while they walk.

Aria, giving up her pursuit to cause trouble on the ground, snuggles her head against Wolfgang’s chest and pouts. Sani, still looking up, giggles every time a snowflake hits his face.

They pass the familiar graffitied buildings, tapas bars, and clubs and finally turn around a bicycle-crowded corner and look at the simple apartments they spent almost a year living in together.

Kala breathes out heavily, then smiles. “I never thought…” She pauses, looking around at her children. “I never thought my life would look like this.”

Wolfgang shakes his head in agreement. “No.”

They continue up to the apartment, looking inside the entrance; his old apartment is the one of the left, and she distinctly remembers the first night she spent there in person. It was one of the first times she remembers feeling truly safe.

“It seems so long ago,” she says quietly.

“It was,” he says.

She laughs gently. “That’s true.”

They look at Jalesh, who’s stepped nearer to the apartment, looking around, curious why they stopped walking.

“Wonder who lives there now,” says Wolfgang.

Kala smiles. “We could knock and ask to look around.”

He laughs. “Fuck, no. I want to remember how it looked when we lived there.”

She glances up at him and murmurs, “I loved it.”

“After you moved in with me, I forgot how it felt to live there alone. Still don’t remember. I just remember you.”

Kala leans as close as the two toddlers between them will allow and kisses him gently. Then Jalesh pipes up.

“Why aren’t we moving?” he groans.

“This is where we used to live,” Wolfgang answers, gesturing at the apartment.

“No it isn’t.”

“Just your mama and me.”

Jalesh frowns and looks at the apartment, clearly having never considered his parents’ life before he was born.
“Where you grew up?” asks Jalesh after a moment.

Wolfgang shakes his head. “No. I started living there when I was eighteen and your mama lived there with me when we were...twenty-eight?”

Kala nods.

Jalesh makes a thoughtful sound and says, “Oh.” Then he shrugs, leans down, makes a snowball, and tosses it at a nearby parking meter.

Kala shakes her head fondly and she and Wolfgang stare at the apartment for another moment. Then Jalesh looks at them.

“Where did you grow up?”

“In India,” answers Kala. “You’ve been there, you’ve visited nana and nani.”

“Here, in a different part of the city,” says Wolfgang.

Jalesh hesitates, then says, “Can I see?”

Kala smiles sadly. “No, baby--”

But Wolfgang shrugs. “Okay. We’ll take a train.”

“A train?” Jalesh gasps.

Wolfgang grins. “Yeah, underground.”

Kala looks at him in surprise. “Are you sure?”

He nods, then nudges her and they move on, towards a quirkier part of the neighborhood where Felix’s shop is located and the nearest U-Bahn can be found.

“Want to stop by?” Wolfgang asks, gesturing down the street towards Felix’s shop.

Kala grins. “Yes, let’s surprise him. And warm up.”

“Want to see uncle Felix?” Wolfgang asks Jalesh.

Jalesh’s eyes widen in excitement and he nods. Kala is certain that Felix is a bad influence when it comes to swear words and movie recommendations, but his energy is infectious and Jalesh always leaves a visit with his uncle in high spirits.

They continue down the street and come up to the small locksmith shop, which is missing its characteristic paint on the window, as it has been since Wolfgang moved away.

They step up to the door, children and Kala beaming, Wolfgang smirking, and Jalesh knocks. Felix looks up from the front desk with a start, then grins and jogs to the door. He opens it, laughing.

“Fuck! Give me some warning next time!” He pulls Jalesh into a hug and ruffles his hair hard. “Shit, man, you’re so tall!”

Jalesh grins proudly. Felix pats his back and releases him, then pulls Wolfgang and Kala into a hug.

“Look at these little fucking peapods, hi guys,” he whispers, squeezing each one of the twin’s heads.
"Fuck, man, Dani left me all alone, I miss having a little fucker around..."

Aria twists her head around, grinning, and yells, “Fewick!”

“Hey, how are you Ari Safari?”

She giggles at the nickname and Wolfgang pulls her out of her carrier to hand to Felix. She grins and snuggles close to him.

“She still a pain in the ass?” Felix asks.

Wolfgang laughs and nods.


“Oh, don’t apologize,” she says, reflecting on Sani shouting "shit!” last week when he was pleased with the lego structure he built. “I don’t think they realize what the words mean. They just like to say them.”

“Jali knows,” Wolfgang murmurs darkly, reflecting on something unrepeatable his son yelled last week after a boy suggested he would lose the next neighborhood soccer match.

“Sorry Dani’s gone,” Felix adds after a moment, bouncing Aria and glancing at her. “Her directors figured out what scenes to shoot without showing she’s pregnant, so she flew to L.A. yesterday.”

Kala smiles warmly. “It’s so exciting, she’ll be wonderful.”


“Yes please,” says Kala, adding, “We’re going to Marzahn later if you want to come.”

“The fuck? Why?”

“Want to show the kids where I grew up,” explains Wolfgang, stepping inside the shop.

Felix shakes his head. “Whatever fucking tickles your fancy. I’ll go. Haven’t seen that dump in years.” They make their way inside and he goes on, “I have coffee, want coffee?”

Ten minutes later, the adults are drinking coffee, and the children are sharing a plate of polvorones* that Dani made and sipping milk. Felix facetimes Dani and turns the phone so she can see her dark-eyed, curly-haired niece and nephews.

“My loves, hello!” she yells, appearing on the display, all bright eyes and fuschia lipstick. “Aw babe, they’re so sweet, look at them!”

She waves and the three Dandekar-Bogdanow children wave back, beaming. She turns the phone to the movie set around her.

“Look, mis pequeños*, look at the California sunshine, suckers!” She laughs and adds to her cast, “Ay, todos, mira! Mira a mis bebés! Mi sobrina y sobrinos!*”

“She loves them,” Felix murmurs. “She can’t fucking wait for Leo to get here, she says one isn’t enough.”

“You know it,” says Dani over the phone, adding to the side, "Mimi, come say hi!"
Three-year-old Mimi, with freckles and sparkling black eyes, appears on the phone and waves cheerfully. The others wave back, and then she blushes, shy, and ducks out of sight. Dani smiles and shakes her head, and then looks at Kala and Wolfgang.

“You surviving?” she asks.

Kala laughs. “Sometimes.”

Wolfgang laughs too but just shakes his head.

“Your babies are beautiful!” says Dani. “Is Ari still a pain in the ass?”

“Jinks babe,” says Felix.

“She is,” says Kala, grinning and adding, “good luck with your movie, it sounds amazing!”

“Oh, bless you, thanks!” shouts Dani, then glances over her shoulder and laughs. “I should go! I love you all! Love you, babe! Don’t let them eat all the cookies, they’ll be on a sugar high.

“Mm,” says Felix worriedly, glancing at the children who have finished all the cookies and are licking the powdered sugar off the plate. “Will do.”

Ten minutes later, Aria is running in a continuous loop around the shop, occasionally knocking merchandise off the walls. Sani is playing an enthusiastic game of peekaboo with Felix and scream-giggling. Jalesh and Wolfgang are tossing the soccer ball Felix always has on hand back and forth, and Kala is watching the scene with a slight frown as she sips her coffee.

Aria, on her tenth loop around the shop, stops this time in front of Kala, grinning up at her. Then she tugs on her hands.

“Chase me!” she commands, trying to pull Kala up.

Kala laughs and gets to her feet, pretending to have trouble running as fast as her daughter, and Aria laughs happily and careens around displays of key fobs and lanyards. Kala eventually intercepts her, picks her up, and tickles her. She’s just about to set her down again when she hears a crash and looks over at Wolfgang and Jalesh. She sees that the soccer ball has hit a display of key chains and knocked it to the floor.

Jalesh steps back and points at Wolfgang, who wrinkles his brow indignantly.

“Snitch.”

“It was you, Papa!”

“Damn it, Wolfie!” sighs Felix.

Wolfgang crosses the room to Jalesh. He nudges his son’s shoulder and they kneel down to pick up the keychains.


Wolfgang snorts. Jalesh tries to put the stand back in place but it’s too heavy, so Wolfgang helps him. Jalesh frowns and looks enviously at his papa.

“You’ll be big one day,” says Kala.
“When?” asks Jalesh.

“Maybe...ten more years.”

“Ten years?” he asks incredulously.

“You have to work for it,” jokes Felix. “Look at me, I’m ancient and I still weigh about as much as fucking pixie stick.”

Jalesh looks at the stand. “Let me try again.”

Wolfgang laughs and shakes his head. “C’mon mausi, we’ll go to the park.”

Jalesh groans. “Okay…”

“Park, good idea, they can wear themselves out somewhere other than my shop.”

“And the boys,” says Kala, pausing for effect and handing Aria to Felix, “can carry the twins so mama’s back stops hurting.”

Felix chuckles. “I don’t mind.”

They put the kids’ jackets and hats back on, then head for the door. Just as they reach it, however, the store phone rings. Felix rolls his eyes apologetically at Kala and hands Aria back to her.

“You go, I’ll be there for dinner anyway!” he calls as he hurries towards the counter.

They nod. Kala pulls Aria’s hat lower so her ears are covered and Aria flutters her lips to make a horse sound. Kala giggles and copies her as they walk out into the snow.

“What was that?” she murmurs.

Aria repeats herself and Kala laughs more loudly, then glances at Wolfgang and grins. They continue down the street to a park nearby, and Jalesh sprints across the street at the first sight of a jungle gym. Kala groans feebly and quickly covers her face.

“Tell me he didn’t just cross a street without looking,” she says.

Wolfgang raises his eyebrows. “Looks like he did.”

“No,” she sighs.

They follow him across the street and through a patch of icy trees to the playground. Wolfgang tugs Jalesh backward by the hood of his jacket and kneels in front of him.

“Don’t cross streets without looking, you’ll get hit by a car and you’ll die.”

Jalesh blinks, wide-eyed in fear

“Wolfgang,” says Kala sharply.

Wolfgang glances up at her. “It’s true.”

“I don’t care if it’s true!” she snaps.

“I can’t just tell him no, kids have to understand why they shouldn’t do something.”
Kala shakes her head, walking away from them, and sets Aria down near the swings. She immediately scrambles up the steps to the slide, and Sani runs past after a moment, then Jalesh. Wolfgang steps up to stand next to Kala and glances at her.

“You could have left it at you could get hurt,” she says after a moment.

“That’s too abstract,” he replies. “He gets hurt all the time, he doesn’t care about getting hurt.”

“That may be true but he’s too young to think about death,” says Kala.

“Okay, give me an age.”

Kala puts a hand lightly on Wolfgang’s shoulder. “He’s seven.”

“He--”

“He’s seven.”

Wolfgang bites his bottom lip, then goes on in a whisper, “I don’t care if he’s seven, I don’t want to lie to him--”

“Fine, but we don’t have to mention--”

“Will you stop interrupting?”

“Now you’re interrupting.”

Wolfgang breathes out hard, then mumbles, “Do you think I scared him?”

“Yes, you clearly terrified him,” whispers Kala.

He looks at Jalesh, who’s struggling to lift Aria over his head so she can reach the monkey bars.

“He’s okay,” says Wolfgang.

“Yes, now he is,” replies Kala.

“It was one comment, Kala,” he says tersely.

She crosses her arms, tilting her face down in thought. Then she murmurs, “My parents never explained anything like that to me until I was almost grown, and I was...very disoriented and frightened when I learned on my own.” She takes a breath and glances at him. “You’re right. But next time, be a bit...softer?”

Wolfgang looks at her for a moment, then smiles in concession and nods.

She smiles too. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to fight with you.”

He nods. “Sorry, me too.” Then he smirks. “We can make up later.”

Heat rises in her cheeks and she pushes him, laughing. He grins and pulls her into his arms and she looks up at him, stubbornly resisting a kiss.

“Maybe we can bully Felix into watching the kids,” she murmurs.

He nods, and then she grins and stretches on her toes to press a quick kiss to his mouth. He pulls her closer, but she steps back and squeezes his hands.
“I’m saving up my kisses for later,” she says.

He nods, playing along, and squeezes her waist. “What else are you saving up?”

She flashes her eyes at him and breaks away, heading towards the playground. He looks down and chuckles, then sits on a bench nearby and watches. Aria, tired of the monkey bars, drops down and runs to the swings. Kala walks over to her to lift her into a swing, then pushes her. Sani, jealous, runs over as well, so Kala puts him in a swing too, alternating who she pushes, and Jalesh gets on the third swing and kicks his feet wildly through the air, rising higher and higher.

A woman and her grandson arrive at the park, and the woman sits on the other side of the bench and digs through her purse for a cigarette. She lights up, scowls, and tightens her scarf. Wolfgang glances at her and sees she’s watching Kala.

She looks at him, puffing smoke out of her mouth, and says, “She probably has another one on the way.” She gestures with her cigarette. “Why doesn’t she stay in her own country? Why come here?”

Wolfgang stares, taken aback. He could reveal that they’re his children, or remind her that it isn’t 1940, or suggest she go fuck herself, but he’s momentarily lost for words. He looks away, formulating a response, but doesn’t have time before Sani jumps off his swing and lopes over to him. Sani grins at him, climbs onto the bench, and snuggles against him.

“Hi papa!”

Wolfgang glances at the old woman and pulls his son close. Her nostrils flare and her eyes widen in disbelief.

“There’s another park on Dieffenbachstraße,” he says coldly.

The woman puts her cigarette out and gets up to pull her grandson away from the playground. They walk away at a quick pace and Wolfgang shakes his head, still stunned.

“What the fuck was that?” he asks his son.

Sani just smiles brightly up at him and snuggles against his chest. He breathes out and hugs Sani closer, suddenly protective. Kala walks over after a moment, panting and brushing snow off her jacket.

“Your turn,” she says to Wolfgang, sitting next to him and fanning her face to cool off. “Aria wants to keep swinging, I’m exhausted.”

“Good thing I was sitting here and not you,” he says.

She frowns. “Why is that?”

“Because that old woman who was sitting here would have told you to go back to your own country and stop having so many babies.”

Kala gasps. “She did not say that!”

Wolfgang nods. Kala can sense his lighthearted tone is tenuous, and she glances at Jalesh and Aria, wanting to take them home and keep them safely inside. She swallows and looks back at Wolfgang.

“Do you ever worry…?” she starts, voice shaking, “that they’ll be treated like…like we were…before BPO…” She trails off, shifting closer, and presses a long, gentle kiss to Sani’s head. Then she sighs.
“Oh God, Wolfgang, I don’t want them to go through that. I don’t want them to feel unwanted by the world.” She sniffs. “I know most people look at them without a second thought and treat them just as they would anyone else but...but what do we tell them?”

“We tell them...most people suck,” he murmurs, putting an arm around her.

She sniffs again and laughs. Then she goes on, “How could anyone look at them and think they aren’t perfect? I know I’m their mother, but I just...I can’t understand that.”

He nods. “I can’t either, babe. But what happened to us won’t happen to them.”

“We can’t keep them safe all the time,” she whispers. “What if Jalesh is...is walking home from school and some other boys don’t like how he looks and they…”

Wolfgang glances at Jalesh on the swing set and replies, “I can show him how to defend himself.”

Kala hesitates, then meets his eyes fiercely. “Show him everything.”

He nods. “Okay.”

“I’m serious,” says Kala. “I want him to be able to fight if he needs to.”

Wolfgang nods again. “I know. He’ll be able to.” Then he smirks. “You could show him some things, too.”

She smiles, eyes warm and playful again. “I think knowing how to take a punch may be more useful than knowing how to make a molotov cocktail.”

“Save that for when he’s a rebellious teenager,” Wolfgang replies.

Kala laughs. “Yes, excellent combination.”

They look at each other for a moment, and finally Kala smiles and presses a quick kiss to Wolfgang’s mouth.

“I hope that old woman slips on the ice,” she murmurs.

He perks an eyebrow and jokingly covers Sani’s ears. “Kala.”

“I do, she insulted my children.”

Wolfgang starts to laugh. He shakes his head and kisses her again. “I love you when you’re like this.”

“I know,” says Kala with a satisfied smirk, and then she gasps, noticing that Aria has gotten off the swing and is climbing a tree.

She runs over to her and pulls her off the branches, and then a huge snowball hits her backside. She spins and stares at Jalesh, who giggles, then takes off across the neighboring field.

Kala looks at Wolfgang and opens her arms wide.

“You saw him sneaking up on me and you didn’t stop him!” she shouts.

He shrugs, unapologetic, and she laughs. She sets Aria down, then scoops up some snow and tosses a snowball after Jalesh. It misses him, but he turns around, invigorated by the idea of having a
snowball fight with his mama. Aria trots after them, and finally Wolfgang nudges Sani and gets to his feet with him.

Jalesh, keen to take on both of his parents alone, throws a huge snowball at Wolfgang.

“He’s good at this,” Wolfgang mutters, brushing the snow off his coat.

“Too good,” whispers Kala, crouching down for more snow.

Aria looks at Sani, who freezes, staring at his twin sister like a frightened deer. Aria watches him cautiously as she bends down to form a snowball, and then she steps closer and throws it hard in his face. Sani wipes the snow off of his face, looking hurt.

“Aria Kalinda Dandekar,” says Wolfgang.

Aria looks at him, unruffled. He shakes his head and passes a snowball to Sani, then points at Aria.

“Don’t cheat!” she yells.

“You broke the rules,” says Wolfgang with a shrug.

“Didn’t,” she says, pouting.

Sani throws the snowball at Aria and grins when it hits her, and she quickly forms a new snowball, outraged that he’s returning fire.

Kala watches them cautiously, and while she’s distracted, Jalesh flings a snowball at her chest.

“Ow!” says Kala. She shakes her head, then turns to Wolfgang, cupping her hands under her breasts and murmurs, “I think these have been through enough after three babies, don’t you?”

He laughs. “Kids don’t give a shit.”

“They should,” she says, wincing and adding another, “ow.”

“I’ll get him back, babe,” says Wolfgang. He points at an imaginary something behind Jalesh and calls, “Hey maus, look!”

Jalesh spins around, and while his back is turned, Wolfgang throws a big snowball at him. He spins back, disgruntled, and Kala laughs loudly.

“Not fair!” Jalesh shouts.

Wolfgang grins, then ducks as Jalesh lobs another snowball at him. Then Aria and Sani stumble closer, still tossing snow at each other. Sani is laughing, but Aria seems committed to a mission, and after another harmless moment, she launches a hard-packed snowball at her brother and it hits him in the face.

Wolfgang turns around at the sound of snow-on-skin contact. Sani plops down in the snow and starts to sob, his nose steadily dripping blood. Kala rushes forward to sit by Sani and takes a kleenex out of her pocket. Wolfgang looks at Aria in disbelief and she starts to run away, but he grabs her arm and kneels down.

“Aria, I know you like to win, but you aren’t allowed to hurt your brother.”

She hesitates. “I didn’t...mean...”
“You threw a snowball at his face.”

She nods.

“It hurts when you do that.”

She shrugs. Kala glances at Wolfgang as she dabs the blood off Sani’s lip and mouths *oh my God*. He shakes his head, astounded by his daughter’s behavior. He turns back to her.

“Do you understand?” he asks her.

She nods reluctantly.

“Go apologize,” he says, turning her towards Sani.

“No,” she says.

“Aría, we’ll go home and you can sit in your room if you don’t apologize.”

She pouts and stomps her feet, but finally looks at Sani. “Sorry.”

Wolfgang is sure when she’s older, she’ll add snarky adjuncts such as *sorry you’re a crybaby, sorry I’m better than you, sorry you have a dumb face*. He’s glad three-year-olds have limited linguistic ability.

“Okay!” Kala says in a slightly higher voice than usual. “I think it’s time to leave!”

Wolfgang nods, reaching for Aría to put her in her carrier, but she dashes away.

“Mm, she’s mad at me,” he says.

Kala sighs. “Let her walk for a little while, maybe she’ll calm down.”

She picks up Sani, who’s still crying, and settles him into his carrier and snuggles him. Then she waves Jalesh forward, and he picks up his pace and walks alongside Aría. Kala takes Wolfgang’s hand and looks at him.

“Do you think she meant to hurt him?” she whispers.

“Definitely,” says Wolfgang.

Kala sighs, but adds with a smile, “You handled that well.”

“I hate doing that,” he mumbles, looking at Aría, who’s walking with a bowed head.

“I know,” says Kala, squeezing his hand. “But she’ll forget about it in a moment.” She looks at Sani, who’s sniffing tearfully. “Unlike this one.”

Wolfgang chuckles and pats Sani’s side.

“It’s my fault,” she says with a sad smile. “He’s my baby, I’ve made him very sensitive.”

Wolfgang shakes his head. “He’s not sensitive. Aría is mean.”

She laughs. “That may be true.”

They turn down a narrow street, heading for the entrance to the underground. Kala speeds up to pull
Aria back from the stairs before she hurts herself, and Wolfgang picks her up and puts her in her carrier.

“Yeah, you have to put up with me,” he says when she frowns at him, adding to Jalesh, “hold onto the handrail.”

Jalesh rolls his eyes and jogs down the steps, hands-free. Wolfgang looks at Kala as if to say why do we bother? and she laughs quietly and shakes her head. They hurry after him onto the U-Bahn platform and Wolfgang pulls him back from the edge of the tracks.

“Jali, what the fuck is wrong with you today?”

Jalesh looks up indignantly. “Nothing the fuck is wrong with me.”

“Oh Ganesha,” murmurs Kala, rubbing her face.

“Don’t say that word around mama,” says Wolfgang, and Kala looks at him, scandalized. “Don’t say that word at all,” he amends.

“You are as much trouble as they are,” she says to him as the train comes.

They find three free seats. Kala leans against Wolfgang, closing her eyes for a moment. Jalesh stands up on his seat after a few minutes, looking out of the window as the train speeds out of the underground and parallels a street. Wolfgang tugs him down.

“I can’t see now,” he complains.

“Okay, you can stand, but if you fall down it’s your own fault,” says Wolfgang.

Jalesh nods and goes back to standing. Wolfgang glances at Aria, who has fallen asleep and extended an arm, gripping his jacket with her chubby hand. He nudges Kala so she looks at them and she grins brightly.

“Aw, see, she forgave you,” she murmurs.

“That, or the sugar high wore off,” he replies.

The train comes to a stop and Jalesh falls onto both of his parent’s laps. Wolfgang nods, unsurprised, and Kala pats Jalesh’s tummy and smiles. He settles his head more comfortably on her lap and stays where he landed.

“We should start a betting pool,” she murmurs to Wolfgang. “How much longer will it be before he seriously injures himself?”

“And another one, what will the injury be?”

“Mm, I think...broken arm...next year,” she says.

“Broken nose, this year,” he guesses.

“No, not his little nose, he’s so handsome,” she sighs.

“I broke my nose a few times, you just have to set it right,” Wolfgang replies.

“Mm,” says Kala, sliding her fingertips along his nose and kissing the side of it. “I like your nose”
He chuckles and kisses her, and Jalesh groans. Wolfgang glances at him and raises an eyebrow.

“Jali, you want another baby?” asks Wolfgang.

Jalesh sits up excitedly and nods.

“Then you have to stop complaining when I kiss your mama,” says Wolfgang, starting to smirk.


“It’s one of the steps in the...recipe,” he replies.

Kala shakes her head, laughing. “Wolfgang, why are you bringing this on yourself?”

“You have to *kiss* to make a *baby*?” Jalesh asks incredulously, and several passengers on the train glance over and chuckle.

He nods and Jalesh breathes out, astonished.

“Wow,” murmurs Jalesh. “Is that why you can’t kiss *other* people? What if you kiss a *boy*? Did you have to kiss two times for Aria and Sani?”

“Oh my God,” says Kala, starting to blush.

She and Wolfgang look at each other and laugh briefly.

“We can’t kiss other people because we love each other,” Kala explains. “And if two boys kiss, or two girls, it doesn’t make a baby, but it makes a...rainbow. God puts a rainbow in the sky.”

Wolfgang glances at her and says, “How did you come up with that so fast?”

She raises her eyebrows. “It’s the truth, Wolfgang.”

He shakes his head and laughs.

“And yes,” she goes on, “we did kiss twice for Ari and Sani.”

Jalesh’s eyes widen. “But...but you just kissed two times now!”

“It’s just one step in the recipe,” says Wolfgang.

Jalesh frowns. “What are the other steps?”

“Those are a secret,” says Kala quickly.

Jalesh huffs, but doesn’t have a chance to ask any more questions because the train comes to a stop and his parents nudge him to get up. They walk onto the platform, Wolfgang holding Jalesh’s shoulder so he doesn’t tumble onto the tracks.

“Jali, don’t look at anyone here, okay?” Wolfgang says quietly.

“Don’t look at anyone?” queries Kala.

“Not a great neighborhood,” he explains.

“What?” she hisses.
“It’s Berlin, babe, it’s not like Paris.”

“What do you mean?”

He puts an arm around her waist. “Just run down, some theft, vandalism, nothing violent usually. Was worse when I was a kid.”

She nods unsurely.

“Babe, I wouldn’t bring the kids here if it was that dangerous.”

She nods more confidently, smoothing her hand over Sani’s head. They walk out of the U-Bahn station and onto a wide snowy sidewalk across from a field with many young trees in it.

“Are you sure you want to show them where you grew up?” she murmurs as they walk.

“Jali’s curious, I don’t mind,” he admits.

“But he may...he may ask what happened to them,” she says, even more quietly.

“I know,” says Wolfgang. “It’s okay, he’s my son, he’ll know everything eventually.”

Kala doesn’t speak for a minute, and then she says softly, “Maybe they won’t be so naughty if you tell them you’ve killed a man.”

Wolfgang looks at her for a moment, considering, then grins. “I think that would work.”

She grins back and bumps against him. They walk in silence for a few minutes until the trees converge on both sides of the road. Jalesh pulls back, frightened, and takes Kala’s hand.

“Up here,” says Wolfgang as the road turns, revealing a row of two- and three-story brick apartments, all behind metal fences, all with fire escapes. Trash piles up near the doorways, covered in snow and several dogs bark from inside.

Kala is surprised she’s never seen the apartment in person, although considering what happened inside, she assumes that Wolfgang didn’t feel compelled to revisit it with her. He showed her other parts of his childhood while in Berlin -- his mother’s grave, the zoo, his school, his favorite bar -- but never the home he was born in. She’s seen the inside of the apartment through his memories, but never the outside or the neighborhood, which is as derelict as she imagined.

She glances at Wolfgang, concerned, but doesn’t sense any distress beyond a distant twinge.

“That one, on the right,” Wolfgang murmurs to Jalesh, pointing at the first floor of the nearest apartment.

Jalesh looks for a moment, then glances at his papa and says, “It’s small.”

Wolfgang laughs. “Yeah.”

“No grass,” adds Jalesh, looking at the concrete, fenced-in patio.

“No,” says Wolfgang.

Then the door on the left of the apartment opens, and a hunched woman steps out of it with a broom to brush the snow off her steps. She stops, looking up, and stares at Wolfgang, Kala, and the children. Wolfgang’s eyes widen slightly -- he recognizes her from nearly thirty years ago, though
she was much healthier and her hair was dark.

“Shit,” he murmurs. “Kala, that woman...she was our neighbor.”

Kala breathes in, surprised. “Are you sure?”

Before he can answer, the woman blinks, sets aside her broom, and carefully goes down the steps. She walks up to the fence near them and looks hard at Wolfgang.

“You’re not...you can’t be Elyse’s boy?”

“Mrs. Weber?” he murmurs.

“I can’t believe it!” she whispers. “I thought he must have killed you! You were here one day, gone the next!”

Kala puts her hands protectively on Jalesh and looks around, disoriented and taken aback.

Wolfgang shakes his head. “I went to go live with my uncle.”

The old woman nods, shoulders trembling slightly with palsy. Then she looks at Kala and the children.

“And you...you got married!” Mrs. Weber says in shock. “Oh my God! We all...we all assumed…” She trails off and shakes her head. “It’s like seeing a ghost!”

“I feel the same,” he replies quietly. “You’re still here.”

She laughs. “I’m still here, in this shithole, with the rest of the tenants! You’re the only one who left, everyone else died or stayed, almost the same as dying.” She pauses and looks at Jalesh and smiles faintly. “He looks just like you.” Then she looks at Kala and adds, “Your wife is very pretty, can she speak German?”

Kala smiles cautiously and nods, then shakes the old woman’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, dear,” she says.

Kala nods again. “You as well.”

“We tried, you know,” Mrs. Weber mumbles after a moment. “Called the police, more than once, they never came.”

“I know,” says Wolfgang.

“Useless,” she says, shaking her head. “A miracle you’re alive, many times over.” Then she lifts her head and a sharpness enters her milky blue eyes. “Tell me something. Is he dead?”

“A long time ago,” Wolfgang says softly.

She nods. “Good.”

She totters away without another word and begins to sweep her steps. Wolfgang stares for a moment, then puts a hand on Kala’s back and guides her and Jalesh back down the street, towards the U-Bahn once more.

“I didn’t expect that,” he murmurs.
“She’s ancient,” whispers Kala. “You knew her as a child?”

Wolfgang nods. “Before my mother died, made us soup sometimes. Once it was just my father, she stopped.”

Kala shakes her head, then puts an arm around Wolfgang. Jalesh pauses to look at his parents, confused by the intensity of their expressions and their hushed voices.

“Papa?” he murmurs, and Wolfgang and Kala both look at him in surprise, as if they were momentarily unaware of his presence. “Papa that woman said she thought...she thought he must have killed you. Who?”

Kala glances at Wolfgang, suddenly sweating, and murmurs, “You don’t have to do this now.” But he shakes his head and looks at Jalesh. “She meant my father. He wasn’t a good person.”


“He hit me and my mother,” he explains.

Jalesh blinks, then says again, “Why?”

“Because he was bigger and he could,” says Wolfgang.

Jalesh nods slowly. “Like a bully.”

Wolfgang nods in response. Kala’s gaze flickers from Wolfgang to her son and back, and she thumbs over Sani’s ear to soothe her nerves.

“He’s dead,” says Jalesh quietly.

Wolfgang nods. “He is.”

“And your mama,” he goes on.

Kala squeezes Sani’s earlobe and holds her breath. Wolfgang nods in confirmation.

Jalesh tilts his head. “Do you miss her?”

Wolfgang smiles softly. “I do miss her.”

Jalesh smiles back. “Sorry, papa.”

“It’s okay, I have all of you now,” says Wolfgang quietly.

Jalesh nods, beaming, then reaches his hands up. Wolfgang chuckles and picks him up, settling him on his hip so he doesn’t disrupt Aria in her carrier.

“You’re too big for this, mausi,” Wolfgang says.

Jalesh nestles closer and rests his head on Wolfgang’s chest. Kala wipes her eyes and presses closer to them as they walk. She squeezes Wolfgang’s shoulder, then pats it comfortably, and they make their way back to the U-Bahn.

***

Two hours later, they’re back at their new Berlin apartment. Kala is stirring a pot of murgh makhani.*
and frying naan, while Wolfgang and Felix are constructing a fort with Sani. Jalesh and Aria are both mysteriously absent, but Kala lets herself focus on dinner, on humming to the album she put on, on sipping a glass of wine and soothing her sore legs with gentle stretches. She listens to Wolfgang and Felix mutter and swear about engineering issues with the fort, interspersed with Sani’s happy giggles. She runs a hand through her hair and yawns, and grins a few minutes later when Wolfgang wraps his arms around her from behind and kisses the side of her neck.

“Smells good,” he murmurs, pulling her closer.

She glances back at him and nuzzles his nose. “Thank you.”

He presses a string of kisses down her neck, letting his hands slide over her ass.

“Wolfgang,” she murmurs.

“What? We’re alone.”

She shakes her head with a gentle smile, then closes her eyes and leans her head back on his chest. He takes both of her hands and tangles their fingers together, and she hums happily, turning to kiss his jaw.

Then Felix comes in with Sani in his arms, clears his throat, and grimly says, “Not to ruin the moment, but you two have to see this.”

Kala and Wolfgang frown at each other. She turns the heat off on the stove and then they follow Felix into the dining room.

Kala observes the eight-by-four masterpiece. It’s elegant, nicely balanced, effortless. She notices a butterfly and the rough shape of a giraffe. She would be immensely proud of the art -- a collaboration by Jalesh and Aria, no doubt -- if it was on paper instead of on the dining room wall. Wolfgang looks at the wall in awe.

“This is the third time,” murmurs Kala.

“How do they paint so much...so quickly?” he asks.

“Little goblins,” she says fondly, shaking her head. “I was out of the room for ten minutes. And now they’ve vanished.”

“It’s Jali, he encourages it,” says Wolfgang.

“No, it’s Ari. She is fearless.”

Just then, Aria peeks around the door. She sees that they’re staring at the unsolicited painting and she sprints down the hall. Then Jalesh looks into the dining room and freezes. He has a striking smear of orange paint on his face which he seems unaware of.

Kala fixes him with a stare. Jalesh looks from his mother to his father, then shouts, “It was Aria!” and runs into the hallway to collect his little sister.

Kala and Wolfgang listen to a struggle, smiling patiently at each other, and then Jalesh returns, carrying Aria.

“It w-wasn’t m-me!” yells Aria, sobbing on cue.

“I think Dani taught her that,” says Kala.
Felix frowns, reflecting on the night when he and his wife babysat their niece and nephews and Dani sat them down to teach them effective tactics to get out of trouble.

“Could be Lito,” says Felix evasively.

“Probably both,” says Wolfgang, walking over to pick up his crying daughter. “Shh, Ari, you’re not in trouble.”

She sniffs and blinks. Then she asks, “Is Jalesh?”

Wolfgang shakes his head in disbelief. “You’re such a schemer.”

Meanwhile, Jalesh has kept up a constant chorus of, “It was Aria!” and Kala has tried to interject that Aria couldn’t reach that high on the wall.

“It was both of you,” says Wolfgang and both children look at him, waiting. “So both of you are going to help me clean it up…”

Aria and Jalesh look at each other, but Aria doesn’t have the grasp on language to explain the graveness of the situation. Jalesh gulps and looks at Kala.

“Mama?” he says cautiously.

Kala looks at Wolfgang, who frowns, sure something dire is about to be said.

“We couldn’t find the finger paints…” Jalesh goes on.

Kala holds her breath, meeting eyes with Wolfgang again.

“So we used…papa’s paints…”

Wolfgang wrinkles his brow and glances at Aria. “Where did you find those?”

“Bed, under it,” explains Aria.

Kala looks at Wolfgang in alarm, then back at the wall -- washable finger paints are one thing, oil paints another. She groans softly, then kneels in front of Jalesh and looks into his eyes.

“Jalesh Dandekar, you know you are not allowed to go searching for things that aren’t yours.”

“I know,” he mumbles. “But papa’s a bad hider. The box was right there.”

Wolfgang snorts and Kala, normally reserved, covers her face and shakes with silent laughter. Then she sighs and kisses Jalesh’s head.

“Jali, what are we going to do with you?”

Jalesh grins at her and Kala rolls her eyes.

“Your kids are terrible,” Felix says with relish, adding as he squeezes Sani, “Except this one. Are you sure this one is yours, Wolfie?”

“Fuck off,” laughs Wolfgang, turning around and gesturing to Aria. “This one clearly is and they’re twins.”

“What are you going to do about that disaster?” asks Felix, gesturing at the wall.
“Jalesh, tell your uncle how you’re going to fix this,” says Kala.

Jalesh looks at Felix and brazenly says, “Papa’s going to fix it.”

Kala rolls her eyes and gives Jalesh’s backside a loving swat. “You’re helping, Jali. Go wash the paint off your face, please.”

“There isn’t any paint on my face, mama.”

Kala touches her finger to the orange paint on her son’s face and shows it to him.

“Oh,” he says, then shrugs, wipes his finger through the paint, and touches Kala in between her eyes, leaving a dot of paint behind. “Now you look like nani.”

Kala beams and pulls Jalesh into a brief hug. “Bindis are red, sweetheart.”

He shrugs again. “So?”

Then he trots past the adults and goes into the bathroom to wash his face.

Wolfgang glances down, hiding a smile, then looks at Aria. “You have to help too.”

She pouts, her short curling hair bouncing as she shakes her head. Wolfgang puts a hand over his eyes.

“Not today, that look won’t work libelle…”

Aria pulls his hand away from his eyes and grins at him -- her smile is extra endearing since she lost one of her front teeth recently. Wolfgang shakes his head and kisses her cheek, then glances at Kala.

“She’s like you, she knows how to manipulate me,” he says.

Kala smiles and walks over to them, running her fingers through her daughter’s hair. Aria reaches for her and she chuckles and pulls her close.

“Hi love,” she says, adding in a whisper, “did Jali talk you into it?”

“No!” she says brightly.

“Ari, no, keep it a secret,” says Wolfgang.

“Wolfgang please don’t teach our daughter to hide things,” sighs Kala.

Ari asks to be let down and she scampers into the hall, intent on pestering her brother in the bathroom.

Then Sani pipes up, “I help?”

Wolfgang and Kala glance at each other, laughing. Felix sets Sani down and he trots over to look at the painting.

“You would be dead if you did this,” mumbles Felix to Wolfgang.

“You know this isn’t coming off, right?” Wolfgang asks.

Kala sighs. “I know.” Then she pauses. “Wolfgang?”
He glances at her. She smiles softly.

“What if we...let them paint here?” she asks. “Just here. This can be their wall. And maybe that way, they’ll leave the rest of the apartment alone…”

“That’s fucking optimistic,” he mutters, but then he nods. “Okay.”

Aria appears in the door to the dining room, curiously watching her parents. Then Jalesh shows up, still with most of the orange paint on his face. Kala twitches her fingers at them, asking them to come closer, and they both walk up to her. She kneels down and looks at them.

“Listen,” she says warmly. “How would you like it if this is your wall? You get to create anything you like on this wall but only this one. If we see any paint anywhere else in the apartment, you both get extra chores. Anywhere else.”

They both nod seriously.

“And no more oil paints. Just your paints.”

They nod again. She smiles and pushes them both gently towards the door.

“Go play,” she murmurs.

“Thank you, Mama!” says Jalesh, but Aria smirks as if she’s already found a loophole in the rules.

Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other, tired, but then they both smile. Felix shakes his head, laughing, and Kala glances at him.

“Felix?” she says. “Would you like to bring the kids to your place for movie night? Wolfgang and I haven’t had a night to ourselves in months.”

Felix wrinkles his nose. “Shit, no, I’m not enabling you! You already have three children!”

“We just want some time together,” lies Kala.

Felix holds his hands up. “Ugh, fine. Tell you what, movie night, double feature and you can pop out another kid who draws on the walls.”

Kala sighs and leans her head back. “No! No more babies!”

“That’s what you say now,” Felix says darkly.

She grins and shakes her head. She goes back to finishing dinner, and Wolfgang and Felix go with Sani, Jalesh, and Aria to finish the fort.

An hour later, everyone filled with curry and naan, the plans for a movie night deteriorate, because all three children fall asleep on the couch. Kala and Wolfgang say goodbye to Felix after sharing a drink with him in the kitchen, and then they go into the living room and observe their children -- Aria is asleep with her head on Jalesh’s chest, Jalesh is snoring gently, and Sani is passed out on his tummy, fingertips twitching while he dreams.

Kala leans her head on Wolfgang’s shoulder and he puts an arm around her. She stretches to kiss his cheek, then steps up to the couch and picks up Aria, who grumbles but stays asleep. Wolfgang picks up Sani and follows her into the kids’ shared room, but she stops, turns, and goes into their room instead.
She smiles over her shoulder at Wolfgang and sets Aria on the bed, and Wolfgang chuckles and puts Sani next to her.

“I miss having them sleep next to me,” she murmurs in explanation.

He smiles and nods in agreement, then goes back to carry Jalesh in. The children remain asleep on the bed while he and Kala share a quick shower, and when they come back into the bedroom, Kala wringing her hair out in a towel, Wolfgang brushing his teeth, they see that Aria has snuggled against Sani and hugged him.

“She isn’t as bad as she seems,” says Wolfgang.

Kala grins and whispers, “No. She has a huge heart.”

He nods and returns to the bathroom to rinse his mouth. Kala curls up around Aria, and Jalesh yawns and turns over, then puts an arm around Kala and nuzzles her cheek. Wolfgang comes back after a moment, but rather than get in bed right away, he stands for a moment and looks at the four of them.

Kala opens her eyes and looks at him, and then she smiles widely and holds her hand out for him. She pulls him onto the bed and he puts his arm around the four of them.

“Love you,” Wolfgang mumbles.

Kala smiles against the back of Aria’s head, knowing he meant all of them, and murmurs back, “We love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Libelle = dragonfly
Nana and nani = grandma and grandpa
Polvorones = Mexican wedding cookies
Mis pequeños = my little ones
Todos, mira! Mira a mis bebés! Mi sobrina y sobrinos = Everyone, look! Look at my babies! My niece and nephews!
Murgh makhani = butter chicken
Babysitting

Chapter Summary

Wolfgang and Felix take care of the Cluster's kids while Kala enjoys a night out. Two easily-distracted men, eight unruly children. What could go wrong?

Chapter Notes

1. Nomanita and Zapheus also have kids, but they aren't included here. They will be soon! I didn't mean for this fic to turn into a detailed post-BPO fic about the whole Cluster, but here we are. *shrugs*

2. Elsa is not named for Frozen LOL. She's named for Wolfgang's mother, Elyse, because Elsa is a variation on that name and has the same meaning.

3. Verner, Sun, and Riley are all visiting Kalagang in Paris in person for a vacation.

4. Felix and Dani's son Leo is in Mexico City with his uncles (*cough cough* because I forgot to include him in this chapter and was too lazy to go back)

4. Jalesh is the embodiment of the "but did you die?" meme.

Okay, proceed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kala pauses in the doorway, adjusting her purse on her shoulder, hesitating to leave. She sighs and runs her hands down Wolfgang’s arms, then glances at Felix.

She’s confident that she’s going to regret leaving Wolfgang and Felix in charge of eight small children, just so she can get drinks and a pedicure with Sun, Dani, and Riley. She realized years ago that there is no way to predict the damage that Aria or Jalesh will do when left with other children, and it frightens her that they have Mimi and Ji-hoon with them tonight, because they’re both notorious enablers. It doesn’t help that Wolfgang can rarely bring himself to say no, and Kala knows based on Dani’s stories that Felix is even softer.

“Are you sure you two can handle this?” she asks.

“They’re fine!” groans Dani, stomping her feet. “Let’s go, Kala, I’m hungry, I want to leave!”

“I’m starving,” agrees Sun, rubbing her pregnant tummy. “They’re fine, Kala...Wolfgang just has to give them that...homicidal look he used to be so good at.”

“We’ve got it,” Felix assures her.

Wolfgang nods. “Jali and Celisa can take care of themselves anyway.”
“Yeah, they can help us,” agrees Felix.

Kala looks behind them at Aria, Sani, and Jalesh, then glances worriedly into the nursery where her newborn daughter, Elsa, is hopefully napping. The other four children -- Mimi (Dani and Felix’s five-year-old daughter), Celisa and Oliver (Will and Riley’s thirteen-year-old daughter and six-year-old son), and Ji-hoon (Sun and Kwon-ho’s six-year-old son) -- are spread throughout the house, playing.

“You need a night out,” says Wolfgang quietly. “And Felix is right. It’s only...eight against two.” He frowns slightly, realizing how this sounds, and continues more softly, “We’ll do our best.”

Kala nods and pats his cheek. “That’s more realistic. Okay, remember, Elsa need to be fed at five--”

“And seven. I’ll remember,” he assures her.

“Don’t let Felix distract you,” she goes on.

“Hey,” mumbles Felix.

Kala fixes Felix with a stare. “Felix Berner the last time you two babysat, you drank an entire bottle of Jagermeister and Wolfgang broke his finger.”

Felix hesitates, then nods. “At least it was Wolfgang and not one of the kids.”

Dani laughs from behind Kala, shivering in the doorway. “Very true, babe. Good point. Now c’mon, Kala, you deserve a foot massage and some mojitos. You just pushed the world’s chubbiest baby out of your hoo-ha--”

“Okay!” Kala says quickly. “Thank you for that, Dani.”

Dani gestures at the other women for support. Sun shrugs and nods.

“Elsa did weigh eleven pounds,” she agrees.

Kala sighs deeply and leans to kiss Wolfgang goodbye. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I take care of our kids constantly babe, this is just four more.”

Kala looks at him humorlessly. He responds with a winning smile. She relents, laughs, and kisses him again.

“Please be careful,” she murmurs against his lips.

He nods, squeezing her hands. She steps outside with the other women, leaving Felix and Wolfgang alone with the kids.

“We’re fucked,” says Wolfgang, nodding in acceptance of his fate.

“Super fucked,” agrees Felix cheerfully. “Remind me why Mun and Will bailed?”

Wolfgang shakes his head defeatedly. “Police training.”

“Why don’t we have jobs that get us out of shit?” wonders Felix.

Wolfgang chuckles. “Don’t know. Want a beer? We can watch a movie with them.”
“Yeah, until they get bored so...twenty minutes if we’re lucky,” says Felix, adding in a holler, “Eh! Everyone! We’re watching a movie!”

“What movie?” asks Aria, walking up to Felix and stretching her hands in the air.

He picks her up. “What movie do you want? I think Frozen 4 just came out. Or 5. Who the fuck knows. What about that?”

“No, that’s the one with dumb Elsa!”

“Aria,” says Wolfgang sternly.

“I hate her,” pouts Aria.

“I’m going to assume you mean the character and not your baby sister--”

“She means our sister,” says Jalesh, passing by them and carrying Mimi upside-down in his arms. She’s giggling while her head drags along the carpet.

Wolfgang shakes his head slowly and rubs his face. “Okay, Jali, you pick.”

“Homeward Bound!” he shouts.

“No, I’ll cry,” says Felix.

Jalesh turns around to shrug snidely at his uncle. Unfortunately, the motion of shrugging results in him dropping Mimi on her head and she starts to cry loudly. Felix quickly sets Aria down and rushes over to his daughter to pick her up.

“He-he-dwopped me!” she screams in disbelief before burying her face in Felix’s shoulder and sobbing.

Felix makes a face at Wolfgang, who smiles slightly, then kneels to pick up Aria, who’s pouting because she was set down.

“Sorry Mimi but you’re really heavy!” Jalesh says, trying to leave the room.

Wolfgang frowns and grabs his shoulder. “Hey.”

Jalesh rolls his eyes. “Sorry, Mimi! Sorry that you’re so heavy!”

Wolfgang nudges Jalesh out of the room. “Just go.”

“Thanks, Papa,” says Jalesh brightly. “You’re the be--”

“Don’t even try,” says Wolfgang, crossing the room to Felix and Mimi and running a protective hand over his niece’s head. “She okay?” he checks with Felix.

“Yeah, she’s springy, she falls on her head constantly,” admits Felix.

She sniffs and clings closer to Felix, who grins at Wolfgang. “Do you see how perfect my daughter is? Do you see this?”

Wolfgang chuckles, then glances at Aria, who beams up at him, her curly hair sticking up in two large buns on either side of her head. “You’ve got some tough competition.”
Felix shakes his head. “Mimi doesn’t do anything wrong. Automatic win.”

Wolfgang glances at Aria. “You hear that? You’re not as perfect as Mimi.”

Aria looks at him blankly for a moment, then reaches out and yanks Mimi’s hair hard. Wolfgang grimaces and hastily steps away.

“She’s like this because she’s your daughter,” mumbles Felix.

But Wolfgang shakes his head. “This is Kala’s fault. It’s the competitive streak.”

They glance up when Sani pokes his head out from the hallway. “Papa, I’m hungry!”

Three other children echo a similar sentiment from around the house, adding demands for dinner in different languages.

“What did they say?” asks Felix.

Wolfgang just shakes his head, nudging Felix’s shoulder and walking into the kitchen. He settles Aria on his hip and opens the fridge, biting his lip.

“I think she needs more attention than most kids,” he muses while he searches the contents of the fridge for something that will feed eight picky kids. “And she expects all the attention to go towards her.” He glances at her with a faint smile. “She’s actually sweet most of the time and she’s better around Kala.”

“Yeah, she’s better around Kala because Kala is scary,” remarks Felix, coming around the side of the fridge and setting Mimi down.

Mimi wipes her face free from tears and clings to his leg.

“Yeah,” replies Wolfgang. “I think she wants Kala to respect her, you know?”

Felix frowns. “Do five-year-olds know what that is?”

“I think so,” says Wolfgang, pulling a carton of milk out of the fridge to see what’s behind it. “I guess most kids don’t think about it, though. If they have good parents they know their parents respect them but…Kala has that…” He trails off with a laugh. “She looks just like her mother sometimes.”

Felix laughs too. “Better not say that to her.”

“Yeah, I did once, she didn’t talk to me for two hours,” agrees Wolfgang. He glances at Aria again, who’s resting her head comfortably on his arm and playing with the elastic scrunchies around her frizzy buns. “Don’t touch those.”

Aria meets his eyes, then slowly lowers her hands and pouts.

He raises his eyebrows. “I’m watching you…”

“You can’t always watch me,” she replies quietly, going back to resting her head on his arm.
Felix nudges Mimi when Celisa shows up in the door to the kitchen. “Go on.” He looks at Celisa, who’s nearly five feet tall, tan from the summer, and sporting a wicked bruise on her forehead from playing softball too aggressively. “Can you play with her?”

“Sure thing,” agrees Celisa, bellowing over her shoulder, “Jalesh! Where are you?” before disappearing from the doorway with Mimi in tow.

Aria asks to be let down and she hurries after the other kids. Wolfgang and Felix glance at each other, both breathing out.

“Okay, dinner--”

But Wolfgang is interrupted by two new arrivals -- Sani and Ji-hoon, who’s holding a water gun. He swears quietly and Felix laughs.

“Papa, where’s dinner?” asks Sani.

Wolfgang gestures at the open fridge. Then he squints at the water gun. “Are...are you two playing with that inside?”

Sani swallows. “Inside what?”

Wolfgang looks at Felix. “We always know when they’re lying, which sounds like a good parenting skill, but all it’s done is make them better liars.”

“Well, that’s one thing they didn’t get from you, you’re still a shit liar,” remarks Felix.

Then Oliver -- Celisa’s younger brother, also adopted -- comes flying into the kitchen, water gun extended. He freezes at the sight of Wolfgang, who slowly turns and folds his arms, staring at the three boys.

“Can we go outside?” asks Sani, avoiding further questions.

“If Jali goes with you,” says Wolfgang.

Felix frowns. “You sure you should let...an eight-year-old and three little kids outside alone?”

“What’s the worst that can happen?” he replies.

“You know, you should never ask that,” says Felix, shaking his head. “It’s a fucking curse, okay? If you say those words, something bad automatically will happen.”

“When did you get so fucking superstitious?” asks Wolfgang, adding to Sani, “Don’t go outside the yard.”

Sani nods brightly, pulling Ji-hoon and Oliver out of the door with him and yelling for his older brother.

“Is Jalesh responsible enough for this?” mumbles Felix.

“Felix, calm down,” says Wolfgang, reaching into the fridge for two beers.

Felix breathes out and accepts one of the beers. “Sorry. Guess I haven’t reached the who-gives-two-shits stage.”

“You’ll get there after kid number three,” replies Wolfgang, tossing him a bottle opener. “What
should we make them for dinner?”

Felix chews on his bottom lip, then says, “Oh! Dani does this thing with pita bread. Mini pizzas. Kids love that shit.”

Wolfgang shrugs in agreement, then pats Felix’s shoulder. “You do that, I have to see if they got water everywhere…”

Felix makes a disgruntled face. “Do that later, you know I can’t cook—”

Wolfgang puts his hands on either side of Felix’s face. “Put sauce on the bread, put cheese on the sauce. Preheat the oven.” He pats his cheek and steps away. “You can do it, Felix.”

“Fuck you,” says Felix with a laugh.

Wolfgang only has to go three feet out of the kitchen before seeing water on the floor. He shakes his head for a moment. He never fails to feel astonished by the damage children can do in such a short time. He texts Sun quickly to tell her that his son is a bad influence, then goes in search of paper towels.

***

A few blocks away at a cozy bar, a waitress has just delivered the second round of hot buttered rums to Riley, Dani and Kala, and a non-alcoholic hot chocolate to Sun. The four women sit clustered around a fireplace, eating bread and fancy oils, leaning back in oversized chairs and basking in the child-free peace.

“Wolfgang just texted me to say Ji is a bad influence,” murmurs Sun, setting her phone aside. “I think your children are bad influences.”

“They are,” Kala says simply, shutting her eyes and sipping her drink.

“I still can’t believe you had another one,” says Dani, laughing. “Why did you do that?”

“It was an accident!” Kala groans softly. “Birth control isn’t one hundred percent effective, you know...it nearly is, but only if you’re very consistent about it, and everything is so hectic that I forget sometimes. I should know better, I run a pharmaceutical company…”

Riley snorts. “You really should.”

“Just double up,” says Dani, like the solution is obvious. “Take the pill and use condoms, problem solved.”

Kala rolls her eyes gently and glances at Dani, who winks and raises her mug. Everyone laughs, and then Riley shakes her head.

“I remember how stunned you were when you found out,” she says, grinning lightly.

“Poor Wolfgang,” murmurs Kala. “He came home that day and found me crying in the bathtub. Not taking a bath just...sitting fully-clothed in the bathtub, crying.”

“That’s what I would have done too,” says Sun seriously. “Four children...ugh.”

Kala laughs. “He sat in the tub with me until I stopped crying.”

“Were you upset with him?” asks Sun.
“No,” sighs Kala, swiping some whipped cream off her bottom lip. “I love having sex with him, I miss it, we used to have sex constantly and now we only do maybe…twice a week.”

“You’re complaining about twice a week?” asks Riley incredulously. “That’s still more than most people have!”

“You deserve that baby, you deserve to suffer,” agrees Dani.

Kala looks around at all of them, pretending to be hurt. Then a laugh bubbles over and she takes a long drink of her hot buttered rum.

“You’re all just jealous,” she says with a wicked smirk and a wink.

“Oh please,” says Sun, rolling her eyes.

“He’s still very good,” Kala continues.

Dani shakes her head and sips her rum. “We get it. You don’t have to brag.”

“But I could,” murmurs Kala. “I could give you all the details…”

Sun squints. “Do you think they talk about our sex lives?”

“They talk about futbol,” says Kala. “And politics!” She sits up and gestures at Dani with her mug. “Last year when we were in Berlin for Christmas, do you remember? Wolfgang talked to Felix about politics for three hours! Three! And it wasn’t even something interesting, it was about something…historical.”

Dani groans and covers her face. “Oh my God, they were talking about Vlad the Impaler…”

Kala groans too. “They were!” She pauses. “I wonder how many horrible things they tell our children…Wolfgang never softens anything for them, he’s so contradictory. If they get hurt or they’re crying he panics but if they ask a difficult question he just answers them honestly. Sani had nightmares for weeks after Wolfgang told him what kidnapping is.”

“Why would he tell him that?” asks Riley, eyes wide.

Kala wrinkles her nose. “I have no idea. I nearly strangled him.”

“And then he would have had to explain that to them,” jokes Sun.

Kala laughs and finishes her drink, then murmurs, “I have a feeling we shouldn’t have left them alone with so many kids…”

“Oh, we definitely shouldn’t have,” agrees Riley, getting to her feet and taking Kala’s empty mug. “Would you like another? I’m having another…”

“Yes, please, I want to get very drunk so I’m less angry when I get home later and the house has burned to the ground,” says Kala.

“Good strategy,” says Riley warmly, chuckling.

***

Wolfgang and Felix sip their beers and chop a variety of vegetables, listening in the background to the sound of Celisa and Mimi playing together.
“It’s too quiet,” murmurs Wolfgang, glancing over his shoulder.

“Way too quiet,” agrees Felix. “I don’t hear Aria.”

“She probably went outside, she likes playing with boys more than girls,” replies Wolfgang, adding with a frown, “though she also said to me the other day that boys are stupid and the only reason she plays with them is so they don’t do stupid things.”

Felix grins appreciatively. “She’s not wrong.”

Wolfgang laughs. “No, she’s not.” He shakes his head fondly. “She told Kala last week that she’s never going to have a boyfriend because she’s better than every boy she’s ever met.”

Felix snorts. “What did Kala say?”

“She told her she could have a girlfriend instead and Aria just…” He trails off, laughing. “Ari was so excited, it was sweet.”

Felix smiles. “You know Wolfie, I was pretty fucking freaked out when Dani had Mimi…but having kids has actually made me believe people can be good.”

Wolfgang smiles too, shifting some tomatoes off the cutting board and into a bowl. “That’s what meeting Kala was like for me, with the kids it’s more…” He shrugs. “Life feels more valuable.”

Felix nods. “Yeah. Even though I swear I’ve seen the face of the devil in Mimi’s eyes sometimes.”

Wolfgang grins and sips his beer. “Sometimes Aria looks at me like she’s the girl from *The Ring*…”

“Like she’s debating whether to sell your soul,” adds Felix.

Wolfgang snorts. “Exactly.”

“Speaking of Aria,” says Felix, glancing over his shoulder again, “we should probably fucking find her. She’s probably roundhousing some neighbor kid.”

Wolfgang looks up, checking out the window. It’s beginning to grow dark, and there’s no sign of the group that went outside. He nods, reaching for a cloth to dry his hands. He nudges Felix and they go towards the back door, glancing at Celisa and Mimi in the living room who are coloring on scrap paper and chatting. Felix and Wolfgang pull on boots and jackets, and Wolfgang takes a flashlight off the shelf near the door. He clicks his teeth so that Kumi, the dog, jumps off the couch and trots outside after them.

“Eh!” shouts Felix. “Little monsters!”

No reply.

“Not a great sign,” Felix continues.

“No,” agrees Wolfgang, shouting, “Jalesh!”

They cross the yard, past the swingset, and glance into the trees that border the back of the property.

“If they left the yard…” Wolfgang trails off.

“You’ll look sternly at them for a moment, teaching them nothing,” fills in Felix.
Wolfgang pauses. “Fine. I’ll do something this time.” He pauses and calls again, “Jalesh, Aria!” He shakes his head. “They left the yard.”

“Of course they fucking left the yard,” says Felix. “You left them unsupervised!”

Wolfgang nods in the direction of the gate, which leads to a forested greenway between houses. It begins to rain and Felix swears softly. Wolfgang points the flashlight to the right, scanning the trees. Then they hear someone start to cry in the other direction.

“Found them,” Felix says dully.

“That’s Sani,” mumbles Wolfgang.

“You can tell them apart by how they cry?” asks Felix with a frown.

Wolfgang nods, shifting the flashlight to the left, illuminating Jalesh, who’s holding a saw, Aria, who’s soaking wet and covered in mud, Sani, who’s on the ground wailing about a scraped knee, Jihoon, who’s holding a large net with a frog in it, and Oliver, who still has a water gun. Wolfgang’s eyes widen. “Jalesh, drop that, right now. Where did you get that?”

“Garage,” says Jalesh with a shrug.

“What happened to your brother?”

“He fell, I don’t know,” says Jalesh, annoyed.

Wolfgang shakes his head, walking up to them. The four uninjured children step back, watching him cautiously. He picks up Sani and bounces him.

“Hey, shh, I’ll fix your knee. Hold on.”

He fixes Jalesh with a stare and motions at him to put the saw down. Jalesh twitches his lips, holding the saw more tightly.

“Jalesh, put it down!”

“Ugh, fine!” groans Jalesh.

“You know you’re not supposed to leave the yard, you could get hurt and we wouldn’t know how to find you. You’re the oldest, what were you thinking?”

Jalesh shrugs. “It’s not like we’re lost.” He pauses, smirks, and adds, “You can’t tell mama or you’ll get in trouble.”


“I’m not going to tell her, but she doesn’t need to be here for you to get in trouble.”

Jalesh laughs. “Oh, yeah right.”

“Oh fuck,” says Felix, clearly entertained. “This is bad, Wolfie, you need help.”

Wolfgang glances back at him, perturbed, then looks at Jalesh again. “You know you can’t leave the yard and you can’t let Aria and Sani leave the yard. Why did you leave?”

“It was Aria’s idea,” says Jalesh with another shrug. “And we never get in trouble if mama isn’t

Aria opens her mouth to speak, but Jalesh elbows her.

“Oh!” she yells, smacking him in the face.

“Not fair!” shouts Jalesh, pushing her.

“Fuck,” murmurs Wolfgang in disbelief, setting Sani aside and shoving Jalesh and Aria apart. “Aria, what were you going to say?”

Aria hesitates. “I fell into the…”

“Pond!” shouts Ji-hoon. “The pond!”

Wolfgang narrows his eyes at Jalesh. “She fell in a pond?”

“It’s not like I pushed her in! She’s just stupid, she fell, I pulled her out!”

Wolfgang looks at him for another fraction of a second before gripping his shoulders and shouting, “She could have -- what the fuck were you thinking? -- she could have drowned! You --” He pauses to breathe. “Jalesh, listen to me, you can’t expect her to take care of herself, she’s five-years-old. You’re her older brother, you’re responsible for her. How would you have felt if she got hurt? You can’t do whatever you fucking want, whenever you want to. Get the fuck inside.” He pushes him roughly away. “Go.”

Jalesh stares at him, speechless. So does Felix, breathing out slowly, almost whistling. Jalesh nods quickly and goes towards the house, hugging himself.

Wolfgang kneels down in front of Aria and pulls her into a tight hug. He kisses the side of her head. “Are you okay?”

She nods. “Just cold.”

“Okay.” He picks her up and balances her on his hip. Then he glances at Ji-hoon. “Get rid of the frog.”

“But--”

Wolfgang raises his eyebrows and Ji-hoon huffs and turns the net upside-down. Wolfgang looks finally at Oliver, who lowers his water gun.

“Whoa, Wolfie,” murmurs Felix. “That was a little…” He trails off, picking up the saw, and starts to walk back to the house.

“He used to be more responsible,” says Wolfgang tersely. ”He likes to see how much he can get away with.”

Felix shakes his head. “Good luck in a few years, do you remember yourself as a teenager? If he’s anything like you…”

“Don’t want to think about it,” admits Wolfgang. He shakes his head and squeezes Aria, realizing that his heart is pounding. “Are you sure you’re okay, libelle?”
She nods hard. “I saw a duck.”

Wolfgang relaxes slightly and laughs. “Okay.”

“It was a big duck,” she goes on excitedly.

Wolfgang smooths her hair out of her face, then glances at Sani, who’s still sniffling. “How is your knee?”

Sani just huffs, exhausted by his siblings’ antics. The rain intensifies as they pass back through the gate, across the yard, and go inside.

***

Kala stretches her toes into some warm, bubbly water, leaning her head back in a massage chair, grinning sideways at Riley.

“This was a perfect idea,” she murmurs happily.

Riley wrinkles her nose in pleasure. “Right? Pedicures are so luxurious…”

“I think something is wrong,” mumbles Sun. “Can’t you feel that panic?”

“Is that coming from Wolfgang or from Lito?” asks Riley sleepily. “Isn’t Lito on set this week?”

“Yeah, he is,” agrees Dani, sipping a fruity cocktail and browsing nail polish colors. “It’s probably Lito.”

“No, it’s Wolfgang,” says Kala. “But I’m not getting involved. He’ll tell me if something’s wrong…”

“What is the probability that he’s actively hiding something from you right now?” asks Sun, amused.

“Very high,” admits Kala with a laugh. “He never tells me when one of them does something terrible. He’s a conspirator.”

“Oh, Will too,” murmurs Riley. “He protects them unless they’re doing something dangerous.”

“So does Kwon-ho,” grumbles Sun.

“No one is worse than Felix,” says Dani. “He let Mimi eat an entire bag of marshmallows last week. She threw up everywhere. Men are useless.”

“So useless,” agrees Kala fondly.

***

The moment Wolfgang and Felix get inside, they hear Elsa crying. Celisa runs up to them, gasping.

“She’s crying but I don’t know why and I don’t know how to pick up a baby so I just watched her cry she’s okay but she’s crying!” she says in one breath.

“Okay, thank you,” says Wolfgang, glancing at the clock. It’s five thirty. “Shit.” He passes Aria to Felix. “Can you put a blanket around her so she doesn’t get cold?”

Felix nods. Wolfgang hurries down the hall to the nursery and finds Elsa, four months old, screaming
as if trying to expel her tiny lungs from her body.

“Shh, I’m sorry, I know you’re hungry,” he says softly, picking her up.

Out of all their children, she’s the only blonde one, and her eyes are light cyan, framed by fluffy lashes. She’s also the only one with hair that isn’t frizzy and wild. Despite being large when she was born, she’s small for her age now, with delicate features and a tendency to hiccup often.

Wolfgang cradles her in one arm, glancing around for a blanket to wrap her in. He’s just gotten her to stop crying when he turns at a noise in the doorway. It’s Jalesh, dark eyes reflecting the light from the nursery, hanging back with a sheepish expression.

“Papa?” he starts cautiously. “I’m really sorry. Are you still mad at me?”

Wolfgang breathes out, holding Elsa more securely. “Yes, I am, but I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that. I was scared for your sister, okay?”

Jalesh nods. “I wouldn’t have let her drown.”

“You might not have gotten there in time, Jalesh…”

He nods again. “Okay. I won’t go out of the yard again.”

Wolfgang looks at him, still displeased, but nods in response. “Okay.” He glances at Aria, then back at Jalesh. “Come here.”

Jalesh hesitates and Wolfgang frowns slightly. Then he recognizes the expression on his son’s face and he breathes out, heart keening against his ribs. Jalesh isn’t reluctant or withholding. He’s scared.

“Jali, c’mere, you don’t have to be scared. You never have to be scared of me.”

Jalesh walks up to him slowly and he kneels down.

“You know that right?” Wolfgang asks gently. “You know I’ll never hurt you, right?”

Jalesh looks at him cautiously. “Well...you pushed me.”

Wolfgang hesitates, then murmurs, “I shouldn’t have. I’m sorry.”

Jalesh nods. Wolfgang shifts Elsa to his other arm and looks at his son, considering what to say, on the precipice of guilt.

“I don’t always think about how much bigger I am than you, I don’t always think about how you feel,” he says carefully. “But I know what it’s like to feel afraid, and if you ever feel that way, then I’m doing something wrong. You should never feel that way, okay?”

Jalesh nods, then smiles distantly. “Mama is scarier than you are.”

Wolfgang laughs. “Yeah. She is.” He glances at Elsa. “Do you want to feed her? I need to go clean up Aria.”

“Me?” asks Jalesh, looking at his fragile baby sister.

“Yeah, you,” says Wolfgang, handing her over. “Here. Hold her head up.”

“How do I feed her?” he asks.
“I’ll show you, c’mere,” says Wolfgang, getting up. He puts a hand on the side of Jalesh’s head and pulls him into a half-hug as they go towards the door. “I know it’s not as much fun being the oldest.”

“No,” mumbles Jalesh.

They continue into the kitchen, where Wolfgang takes a bottle out of the fridge and heats it in the microwave, then continue into the living room, where Felix is sitting with the other six children, keeping Aria warm with a blanket and squeezing Sani’s foot to make him laugh and distract him from the cut on his knee.

“Oh, there you are,” says Felix. “Can you deal with this shit? She has pond weeds in her hair.”

“Yeah, baby c’mere, you’re muddy,” says Wolfgang, waving Aria off the couch.

Aria trots happily towards him, pulling her blanket with her. Wolfgang picks her up and Jalesh takes her place on the couch, tilting the milk bottle into her baby sister’s mouth. Wolfgang watches him for a moment, smiling slightly, then carries Aria into the bathroom and sets her on the counter.

“I fell in!” she yells cheerfully, beaming up at him.

“You did,” he says, laughing, releasing her curls from the two buns atop her head, which are now sticky with mud. He frowns deeply, holding one of the strands up, examining the sludge on it. “Ew. Okay.”

Then he stops, feeling Kala to his right, warm and close, kissing the side of his mouth.

“Hi,” she says, clinging, giggly. “How is it going?”

“As expected,” he says evasively, adding, “are you drunk?”

“Yes,” she murmurs happily, resting her head on his shoulder and glancing at him in the mirror. “I love you. And you’re handsome. And I love you.” She pauses, looking at Aria, abruptly sobering up. “Wolfgang, what happened?”

“She...fell in a pond, she’s okay,” he says, running hot water over a washcloth.

“She what?” gasps Kala, standing straight.

“Babe, why are you here?” he asks.

Kala raises an eyebrow. “I was in the bathroom, I missed you, I decided to visit. Will you explain why our daughter fell in a pond?”

He hesitates. “She went out of the yard. It’s okay. She’s okay. Jali pulled her out.”

“Jalesh was there and he let her go out of the yard?” hisses Kala.

“Maybe we’re expecting too much of him,” mumbles Wolfgang, moving the hot washcloth over Aria’s cheek, adding, “I yelled at him.”

“You did?” she asks in surprise.

“I did,” he assures her.

She nods slowly, then goes back to leaning against him, nuzzling his jaw with her nose, and smiling sleepily. “I have pretty toes.”
“You what?”


He starts to laugh. “Every time you go out with Dani she gets you so drunk.”

“I know!” she says, astonished. “How is Elsa? Is Elsa okay? She’s so small, Wolfgang, she’s so small, she’s my little one, did you feed her? Tell me you fed her—”

“Sorry!” says Riley with a laugh, appearing and pulling Kala away. “We’re getting her some food! And water!”

Wolfgang nods. “Do that.”

“You’re no fun,” whines Kala, lightly slapping his arm, then stumbling, catching herself on him, and adding in a murmur, “I talked about how much sex we have, they’re all jealous…”

Riley bites the tip of her tongue in her teeth. “Oh man… I love getting her drunk…”

Wolfgang stares at them, then hangs his head and grins. Riley laughs, squeezing his arm, and she and Kala disappear. Wolfgang chuckles quietly, turning back to Aria, more relaxed than he has been in hours. He scrutinizes Aria, who looks like a swamp creature, and frowns.

“Forget this, shower,” he tells her, setting her on the floor.

He runs the shower lukewarm, turns on the fan, and steps outside. She warbles the ABC song while she washes her hair and Wolfgang waits in the dimly lit hall, smiling to himself. Jalesh passes him, still holding Elsa.

“Did she eat?” Wolfgang asks.

Jalesh nods vigorously. “All of it.”

Wolfgang nods, then breathes in, realizing something. He motions for the baby and Jalesh hands her over. Wolfgang pats her back, but Jalesh stops him.

“I already did that! I’ve seen Mama do that! You have to burp babies, right?”

Wolfgang looks at him, stunned. “…yeah. You… you did that?”

Jalesh nods. Wolfgang looks at him for a moment, then smiles.

“Okay.” He hands Elsa back. “Here. Just hold her until she falls asleep, okay?”

Jalesh nods, full of exuberant responsibility, and carefully supports Elsa’s head. He looks up at Wolfgang with a quick smile, then turns around and disappears into the living room. Wolfgang smiles again, then glances over his shoulder at the cracked bathroom door as the water shuts off.

“You done?”

“Yeah!” shouts Aria.

He goes in, and finds her sitting on the rug outside the bathtub, her hair in a single, sudsy spike atop her head. He snorts.

“No, you have to rinse it off.”
Aria groans and gets back into the shower. He turns it on for her.

“Why can’t the soap just stay in?”

“Rinse it out, libelle.”

Ten minutes later, Aria is sitting on the counter again and Wolfgang is squinting, biting his lip, and carefully combing through her unruly wet hair. She kicks her feet, playing with the sleeve of her tiny bathrobe, and sticks her tongue out occasionally at him, blowing noises and giggling.

“You’re in a good mood,” he mumbles, turning on the hairdryer and aiming it in her face.

She laughs in delight and grips the end of the hairdryer, bringing it closer. She bares her teeth and her lips flutter in the air from the dryer.

“I’m like a horse!”

“You’re what?”

She presses her lips together, blubbering like a horse, and grins. He nods.

“Just like a horse.”

She nods cheerfully. He dries her hair, aiming the dryer from below so her curls fly up as if in a vortex, and she laughs and kicks him. He chuckles, touching his nose to her forehead and kissing the crown of her head, and finally braids her hair neatly and pins it to the top of her head.

“I don’t like braids,” she whines. “They itch.”

“I have to braid your hair or it gets tangled.”

“I don’t care.”

“Neither do I but your mama does.”

“Mm,” she mumbles, considering. “I don’t care what mama says.”

“I do,” he says seriously, then laughs and plucks her off the counter.

He pushes her gently towards the living room, following her out. She runs up to the couch, plunking down in between Oliver and Celisa, and Wolfgang sits next to Felix, groaning tiredly. By this time, Felix has made all the kids mini-pizzas and distributed juice. He’s also poured two more beers. He pats Wolfgang’s shoulder bracingly, and Wolfgang accepts the foamy glass of beer with a slight smile. Then he glances at Jalesh, who’s still holding Elsa.

“She’s not asleep yet,” mutters Jalesh.

Wolfgang nods, unsurprised, and takes the baby from him. He squeezes Elsa softly, then nudges Felix, asking him to hand him a pacifier from a baby bag nearby. Elsa closes her eyes as soon as she has the pacifier, and Wolfgang leans back, thumbing over her foot. Felix grabs the remote and puts on Homeward Bound, then sighs deeply and drinks his beer.

“Kids are exhausting, why do you have four?” he mumbles.

“Two mistakes, unexpected twins,” replies Wolfgang.
Felix nods. “Fair.”

They watch the opening credits before Wolfgang sits up with a start. “Shit, Sani, hold on. Your knee, hold on.” He shifts Elsa to Jalesh again, then runs into the bathroom for the first aid kit and returns to the living room.

“This poor kid,” he mumbles to Felix as he pulls out an alcohol swab. “He always gets ignored because of Jali and Aria…”

“It’s okay, papa,” says Sani.

Wolfgang smiles and cleans the scrape on his knee up, then searches for a band-aid.

“You don’t deserve him,” Felix jokes, then frowns abruptly and looks at Jalesh. “Hey, why did you have a saw?”

“Oh, we were going to cut down trees to make a fort,” he explains breezily, adding, “and for self-defence.”

Wolfgang tips his head down to hide a laugh.

“What?” demands Jalesh. “I’m not that small. I can protect everyone.”

“You’re right,” says Felix, lightly punching his nephew’s shoulder. “Your dad was only a couple years older than you when he started doing really bad shit.”

Jalesh brightens. “You did bad stuff, papa?”

Felix starts to grin. “Such bad stuff. One time...he stole some cigarettes from a store, and…” He pauses to laugh. “Well, he got caught by the police, but he picked the handcuffs and ran.”

“My dad did that!” Celisa says brightly.

“Don’t do that,” Wolfgang tells Jalesh, adding with a shrug, “unless the cop is wrong.” He glances up at his son. “Which they usually are. Try not to get involved with cops. Except for Uncle Will, okay?”

“Okay, but in this case, the cop was not wrong,” laughs Felix.

“True,” grumbles Wolfgang, sealing a band-aid on Sani’s knee and getting to his feet.

He groans slightly and puts a hand on his back. “Fuck, I’m old. Felix, move over.” He sits down again and catches Jalesh staring at him. “What?”

“What else did you do?” asks Jalesh, fascinated.

Wolfgang grips his son’s head in his hand and turns it towards the screen. “Watch the movie.”

“He fought off a kid who was much bigger than him to save me from getting beat up,” says Felix.

“You did?” asks Jalesh excitedly. “Will you teach me?”

“You get in enough fights at school,” says Wolfgang.

“Not bad ones,” argues Jalesh.
“Does he?” asks Felix with a faint laugh.

Wolfgang nods, glancing sideways at his son. “You don’t need any help defending yourself, you always win.”

Jalesh nods. “See papa, you have to hit them first so they know they can’t mess with you.”

Wolfgang makes a pained noise and covers his ears. “Stop talking, Jali, I lie to your mother enough about what you do.”

Jalesh nods, understanding, and watches the movie for a moment. Aria, bored already, slips off the couch and disappears down the hall. The other kids watch serenely, except Ji-hoon, who sits on the floor and does his best to carve his name into the wooden foot of the couch with a swiss army knife that he’s not supposed to have. Wolfgang notices this but is too tired to say anything. He leans his head on Felix’s shoulder. Felix snorts and puts an arm around him.

“At least no one died,” says Felix.

“It’s sad we consider babysitting successful when no one died. Low bar.”

Felix squints. “Wait, so both Mun and Will both had police training?”

Wolfgang considers this, frowning. “That’s what Sun said…”

He sits up and pulls his phone out of his back pocket to text her. A moment later Sun texts back *oh I lied* with a shrug emoji. Then she sends a picture which shows Riley, Kala, and Dani in a tattoo parlor. Riley has her arm bared and is making a peace sign. Kala is looking at her with trepidation, trying to talk her out of drunkenly getting a new tattoo. Dani is grinning fiercely, clearly trying not to laugh. *This was Dani's idea*, Sun adds in a second text.

“Felix, your wife is such a bad influence,” Wolfgang says, turning the phone so Felix can see.

Felix nods, unsurprised. “Yeah. Last year I almost got a tattoo on my ass because of her.”

Wolfgang raises his eyebrows. “A tattoo of what?”

“Of whatever she wanted,” he says, shaking his head, adding in explanation, “I lost a drinking game to her. Like I always do. But I was stupid enough to promise her I’d get a tattoo on my ass if I lost.”

“What’s wrong with you?” wonders Wolfgang. “You’re a father.”

“Fuck off, Wolfie!” laughs Felix, shoving him.

They struggle for a moment, but then Wolfgang sees Aria re-enter the living room and he freezes. His eyes widen and he breathes out.

“Felix,” he says in a voice of forced calm. “Felix, Kala is going to kill us.”

Aria is standing in the doorway, her hair now cropped to chin-length. She grins proudly.

“Aria, what did you do?” mumbles Wolfgang.

She raises a pair of scissors high over her head. “No more itching!”

“Oh, Aria,” he says in disbelief, getting to his feet. “Come here.”
Aria hesitates, gauging the situation. Then she crosses the room to him, looking up at him with defiant eyes.

“Braids are stupid,” she explains.

“Okay, we...we can fix this…”

“No we can’t,” says Felix, horrified. “Our asses are gonna be served on a fucking plate, Wolfie.”

“Uh...Lito?” says Wolfgang, glancing around.

Lito appears, crunching a bowl of granola and taking off his sunglasses, storing them on the top of his head. “Yes?”

Wolfgang gestures at Aria. Lito looks at her without reacting for a moment. Then he grins blindingly and puts a fist up to his mouth, barking a laugh. He shakes his head, delighted, then gasps and looks at Wolfgang.

“Oh, oh, this is bad,” he murmurs. “Kala is going to end your life!”

“Yes, I know, help me,” says Wolfgang.

“Okay, get a pair of scissors,” instructs Lito.

Wolfgang takes the scissors out of Aria’s hand and guides her to the couch. He makes her sit in front of him and he flicks on the light. The other kids stare at her, some chuckling, some open-mouthed in excitement, anticipating the expression on Kala’s face.

“You look like a boy!” says Jalesh.

She whips her head around, narrowly avoiding a collision with the scissors Wolfgang’s holding. He pulls the scissors away and resists the urge to swat the back of her head.

“I look like a boy but you look like a stupid turtle!” she shouts at Jalesh.

Jalesh wrinkles his nose. “You’re ugly now!”

“You were always ugly,” says Aria spitefully.

Wolfgang shakes his head, turning Aria’s head so she’s looking straight ahead. “Don’t move, scissors are dangerous.” He glances at Lito. “Okay, now what?”

“You have to even everything out,” says Lito. He pauses. “May I?”

Wolfgang nods and when he looks at his hands, he sees they’ve been replaced by Lito’s. Lito guides him through the process of evening Aria’s convoluted curls out, clipping here and there, tilting her head to ensure no spots were missed.

“I’ve always wanted to cut her hair,” admits Wolfgang. “It’s just like Kala’s, it’s this...dangerous jungle of hair.” He squints, finishing up, then asks Aria to turn around. “That’s better.”

“Okay,” says Aria pleasantly, instantly adding, “can I paint my nails now?”

Wolfgang frowns at her. “Aren’t you tired?”

She rolls her eyes. “No.” Then she stomps her feet impatiently. “Please?”
He breathes out and laughs. “Fine. Go.”

She runs into the bathroom and brings back a box of nail polish and makeup. Felix eyes it nervously.

“This isn’t going to end well,” he remarks.

Wolfgang nods in agreement and finishes his beer, patting Felix’s arm bracingly. “Want another beer?”

Felix nods. When Wolfgang comes back, he sees Mimi on Felix’s lap, examining a tube of glittery lipstick with wide, fascinated eyes.

“She steals Dani’s makeup constantly,” murmurs Felix, accepting the beer Wolfang hands him. “One time she drew all over the floor with her expensive shit.”

Wolfgang chuckles, glancing at Aria, who is contentedly (though sloppily) painting her nails hot pink.

The kids watch the rest of the movie in peace. Jalesh gets tired of holding Elsa, so Wolfgang does instead, walking around with her periodically and feeding her at seven like Kala asked. Felix puts in another movie—The Sound of Music—and distributes dishes of sherbet and popcorn to the kids. Wolfgang finds himself falling asleep, too warm under the weight of Sani and Jalesh, who snuggled progressively closer as the movie went on. He breathes in, more alert, as Aria climbs onto his lap.

She wordlessly grabs his hand, unscrews the cap of her nail polish, and begins to paint his nails. His mouth twitches in amusement.

“Felix. Look. The fuck?”

Felix glances over, at once breaking into an endeared grin. “Wow, that’s your color, Wolfie.”

Wolfgang laughs and looks at Aria.

“What are you doing?”

She shrugs. “Nails.”

Jalesh wrinkles his nose. “Boys don’t wear nail polish, Aria.”

“Your sister isn’t here for your gender norms, buddy,” says Felix, chuckling.

Jalesh shakes his head. “You’re weird, Aria.”

Mimi watches this interaction, then grabs the lipstick off the side table, tosses the cap, and energetically writes MIMI on Felix’s cheek.

“Oh, great, look what you started,” he says to Aria.

Aria grins and shouts, “You’re pretty, Uncle Fewick.”

He laughs, then squeezes Mimi. “You did the impossible, you made me pretty.”

Aria has just finished applying pink polish to three of Wolfgang’s nails when the front door opens and the sound of women laughing fills the room.

“Hello!” calls Kala.
Felix and Wolfgang exchange a worried glance.

“I got a tattoo!” crows Riley. “Oli, Celisa, come look!”

Her children bounce off the couch and bound over to her, excited. Ji-hoon follows and Sun swings him into her arms, grinning and peppering kisses on his cheek. Dani and Kala both walk over to the couch.

At first, Kala doesn’t notice Aria’s hair. The light is low, and she’s distracted by Wolfgang’s bright pink nails. She pauses before speaking, her face slowly giving way to a loving grin.

“You’re very patient with her,” she murmurs to Wolfgang, leaning to kiss him.

He smiles, tilting his head, and she kisses him more deeply, groaning quietly.

“I’m right here!” says Felix, gesturing at himself as they continue to kiss.

Dani rolls her eyes in solidarity with him, pulling Mimi off his lap and hugging her.

“Hi, baby,” she says, kissing her cheek and settling her on her hip.

She leans and kisses Felix quickly. “I talked Riley into a tattoo, aren’t you so proud?”

“So proud,” he agrees.

“It’s a nice tattoo!” retorts Riley from the door.

Kala, finally pulling away from Wolfgang, pushes Jalesh to the side of the couch so she can sit. She takes Elsa from Wolfgang’s arms and presses a long, relieved kiss on her forehead and tucks the blanket more securely around her. Then she glances at Jalesh.

“You’re very lucky I’m too tired to yell at you, young man,” she murmurs. She looks at Aria and blinks. She stares, dazed. Then she screams softly. “Oh my God! Oh my God, Wolfgang, her hair! What happened to her hair?”

Wolfgang grimaces slightly. “She, uh…” He swallows. “We weren’t watching closely enough and she cut it all off.”

“Oh,” breathes Kala, putting her fingers through Aria’s short, wispy curls. “Oh...her beautiful hair.”

Riley comes around the side of the couch, holding Oliver. She grins instantly.

“I love it. It fits her.”

Kala looks warily at Riley. “But...but she…” She can’t find a valid response. “Okay. You’re right.”

“She likes it, that’s what matters,” says Wolfgang, glancing at her.

Kala softens. “True.”

Elsa fusses at all the activity and Kala bounces her gently. Then she continues to stroke Aria’s hair, looking at her the way she would look at an unsolved equation.

“At least...at least it will be easier to take care of,” she says defeatedly. Then she yawns widely, shifting Aria so she can lean against Wolfgang. She looks at the screen and smiles. “Mm. I like this movie.”
“You...reacted better than I expected you to,” says Wolfgang after a moment.

“Yes, that’s because I’m still somewhat tipsy. I’ll yell at you tomorrow. At nine thirty. Mark your schedule.”

He laughs and kisses the side of her head. “Okay.”

Riley, Sun, and Dani settle on the couch with their children and everyone quiets down and watches the movie. Felix, Dani, and Riley all fall asleep, and so do all of the children except for Jalesh. As the credits roll, Wolfgang smirks.

“Hey, Sun? Do you want to tell my wife that Mun could have helped out tonight?”

Sun looks at him in outrage. “That was a secret Wolfgang Bogdanow.”

He shrugs, unconcerned. He’s out of reach, safe from being slugged in the arm.

Kala looks at Sun with narrowed eyes. “What’s this?”

Sun huffs. “Kwon-ho isn’t at police training. He’s home. Eating ice cream. Watching a reality show about the world’s dumbest criminals.”

“He could have helped babysit!” hisses Kala. “Sun!”

Sun sighs. “He didn’t want to come to Paris, he’s been working too much lately. He needed some time to relax.”

“We all need that,” grumbles Kala, adding, “my daughter fell in a pond tonight, Sun. A pond!” She looks at Wolfgang. “I’ll be yelling at you about that as well.” Then she looks at Jalesh. “And you. You’ll be doing all the dishes for a week.”

“I already put the fear of God into him,” says Wolfgang.

“Yeah, if Wolfie yelled at me like that I would have pissed myself,” Felix mumbles sleepily, turning over to hug Dani, immediately snoring again.

Kala chuckles at this, then looks back at Jalesh, more relaxed.

“Okay, no dishes;” she says. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t think you’re incredibly irresponsible.”

He nods. “I don’t care what you think if I don’t have to do dishes.”

Kala stares, then looks at Wolfgang, “Where did we go wrong with him? What happened?”

He laughs and shakes his head, then nudges her as Elsa yawns.

“Just look at her,” he murmurs. “Look at her nose.”

“Aw, her nose does calm me down,” agrees Kala, petting her daughter’s nose and eyebrows. She smiles to herself. “She’ll never do anything wrong. Look at her.”

He chuckles in agreement, then kisses the side of Kala’s mouth and rests his head on her shoulder.

“Let’s have ten more,” he murmurs.

“Yes,” says Kala lightly. “These four are too well-behaved. Boring.”
He laughs tiredly and kisses her shoulder, and they both drift to sleep while watching Elsa.

Chapter End Notes

Wolfgang absolutely went to work the next day with pink nails without realizing it.

Credit to Nightjar_Patronus (aka chaptersonetoinfinity on Tumblr) for the nail polish idea. <3
Wolfgang looks up from his place on the couch when the front door opens, lifting his head off of Kala’s lap setting his book aside. He sees Jalesh come in, hastily untie his cleats, and stack them neatly on the shoe rack. He blinks sleepily.

“Why is Jali home?” he murmurs to Kala.

She glances at him from over her journal. “It’s almost five.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Shit, really?”

The corner of her mouth twitches and she slides her fingers through his hair. She smiles fondly before answering. “You fell asleep for a couple of hours.”

He shakes his head, surprised. “Sorry.”

She smiles more widely. “It’s okay, I didn’t need help because she fell asleep too.”

They glance across the den at eight-year-old Aria, passed out under the Christmas tree, hugging a large toy penguin.

“How tired her out,” explains Kala.

“Tag tired me out,” grumbles Wolfgang.

“I see that,” says Kala affectionately, thumbing some lingering dirt off her husband’s forehead.

He smiles, keeping her hand close, and turns to kiss her palm. She grins, watching him gently, and only looks up when Jalesh comes into the den. He glances at Aria, asleep, then at Sani, who’s
playing with Legos, then at Elsa, who’s coloring pleasantly. He frowns.

“What did you do to them?” he asks his parents.

“We made them run around for three hours,” explains Kala. “How was practice?”

He shrugs. “We won by three, not awful.”

Wolfgang glances at him. “That’s good, Jali.”

“But the other team can barely kick a ball,” says Jalesh, balancing his soccer ball on his hip.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” says Wolfgang, groaning tiredly as he gets up. He glances at his son again. “Did you walk home in that?”

Jalesh looks down at his uniform. “Yeah, why?”

Wolfgang rubs his face. “You’re going to get pneumonia, shit, Jali…”

He pats his son’s shoulder and directs him towards Kala, who pulls him off-balance and into a hug.

“Mama!” he groans.

“Just because you’re taller than me doesn’t mean I can’t hug you,” says Kala, pressing a series of kisses into her son’s unruly hair.

Jalesh groans again, giving up, unwilling to struggle against her in case he hurts her.

“Papa,” he mumbles as Wolfgang comes back in with a beer and a bottle of water.

“I can’t help you,” says Wolfgang, tossing him the water.

“When did you get so big, hm?” asks Kala, latching her arms around Jalesh’s waist and resting her head sadly on his shoulder.

Jalesh meets Wolfgang’s eyes and slowly shakes his head. Wolfgang cracks up, shoving both of them to the side on the couch and sitting down again. Kala tilts her head at him.

“Were you this big when you were twelve?” she asks.

He shrugs as he sips his beer and reaches for his book again. “Skinnier.” He glances at his son. “You would have kicked my ass."

Jalesh grins and laughs, and then the three of them turn with trepidation towards Aria, who has just hopped to her feet.

Kala braces herself. Aria looks at all of them, then squints at her older brother.

“Did you lose like you always do?” she asks.

“Right, like I always do,” says Jalesh, adding “asshole” quietly, prompting Kala to glance angrily at him.

“She started it,” says Jalesh.

“Mama I’m hungry,” Aria announces, then stomps out of the room without explanation.
Kala closes her eyes and breathes out. She releases Jalesh and pats his side as he walks away, then turns to Wolfgang.

“Do you want to order in?” she asks quietly. “I’m exhausted.”

He nods, glancing around for his phone. It’s lost in the house somewhere, as usual, so Kala uses hers to order some sandwiches and salads. Then she leans against Wolfgang, blinking tiredly, and looks at her journal.

“I’m supposed to be peer-reviewing something,” she mutters.

“Tell them it’s shit and they have to redo it all,” he suggests.

She nods, pushing her lips out as if she’s seriously considering this. “I like that idea.”

He chuckles, then takes the pencil she’s storing behind her ear and sets it aside. He kisses the side of her mouth and squeezes her knee.

“You have to work tonight?”

“I should work tonight.”

“Should and have to are different things.”

She nods primly. “Yes, but after being married to me for this long you should know that I confuse those things on a daily basis.”

He grins and leans heavily against her. “You do.”

They smile briefly at each other, and then Elsa comes up with a sheet of paper in her hand. She has a red marker smudge on her cheek. She blinks up at them with big blue-green eyes, holding the paper close to her chest, smiling to herself.

“Did you draw something?” asks Kala.

She looks down, grinning and swaying. “Maybe…”

Wolfgang chuckles. “Why does she do this?”

“She likes us to guess what she drew,” murmurs Kala. “Is it a...bunny?”

She shakes her head.

“Is it...me?” Kala goes on.

“Kinda,” says Elsa.

Wolfgang squints. “Kinda?”

“It’s me and mama,” says Elsa, turning the paper around. “And a twee.”

“Twee,” says Kala, beaming and taking the paper. “This twee has very nice branches, sweetheart.”

Elsa nods cheerfully. “It’s for you.”

“And you made my hair blue, that’s nice,” says Kala.
Wolfgang picks Elsa up. She yawns and settles against him.

“I like to draw like you,” she mumbles.

He hugs her and glances at Kala. “You know I’ll never be able to say no to her, right? She’s too nice.”

“You’re never able to say no to any of your children,” says Kala with a small smirk, adding, “and you only play favorites with her because she has your eyes.”

He nods, pulling Elsa closer and leaning on Kala again. She puts an arm around both of them and reaches for her journal, but Wolfgang glances at her and she slowly withdraws her hand.

“You’ll get me fired,” she says quietly.

“You own the company,” he retorts.

She hums in response to this, then leans to kiss the side of Elsa’s head and tucks her thin blonde hair out of her eyes. She smiles, then looks up at Sani, who is scrutinizing a tall Lego structure. She’s about to ask him what he’s building, but there’s a sharp cracking sound from the other room. Elsa jumps.

Aria rushes past the doorway with a foam sword raised. Jalesh follows, holding a large nerf gun, and fires. Another sound, another jump from Elsa. Kala rubs her arm soothingly.

“Why did we let Felix get him that?” she asks.

Wolfgang shakes his head, recalling the conversation at Jalesh’s last birthday. It’s good practice, Felix had said. Jalesh asked what it was good practice for, and Felix’s eyes widened in shock. What for? For the real world, little man! Kala glared at Felix until he added, ...not...not that you’ll ever need a real gun...guns are bad. Fun, but bad.

Kala glimpses the memory and shakes her head too. “Guns are fun. He told our twelve-year-old that guns are fun.”

Wolfgang grimaces slightly at another memory, from later that week when Jalesh asked if a nerf gun has similar properties to a real gun. He and Felix were babysitting, and without Kala’s moderating influence, they excitedly explained to him what the differences and similarities were, and let him hold Wolfgang’s old Glock.

Kala raises her eyebrows at her husband, glimpsing this memory too.

“It was unloaded--”

“Oh my God, Wolfgang!”

“He should at least know how to use one--”

“Yes, I suppose he should know how to disarm a security system and crack a safe, too,” she says tersely.

“That’s not the same thing--”

“Stop,” whines Elsa, and they both glance at her, guilty, catching themselves.

They meet eyes apologetically, and then Jalesh jumps into the doorway, takes aim, and a tiny foam
ball hits Wolfgang square in the head.

He looks at Jalesh, disgruntled. “Don’t use that around your sister.”

Jalesh rolls his eyes hugely. “I’m a better shot than that. You taught me.”

Kala looks at Wolfgang with dark, annoyed eyes. “Oh. You taught him.”

But the doorbell rings before he can reply. Kumi barks loudly and streaks towards the door from the back of the house, and Jalesh runs with her.

“I’ll get it!” he shouts.

“Put the gun down first!” yells Wolfgang, and then he leans back, takes his beer off the table, and sighs quietly. “Sorry, Kala.”

Her lips twitch. “Hmph.” She gets to her feet with Elsa in her arms, then goes to the door to pay for the food.

Sani glances up from his Legos and says to Wolfgang, “You’re bad at hiding things from her.”

Wolfgang laughs. “I know. Always have been.”

“Next time, ask her first,” advises Sani. “She lets us get away with things if we ask first.”

Wolfgang nods in agreement, getting to his feet and beckoning Sani to follow him into the dining room. He finds Kala setting out plates, Aria resting her chin on the table and staring at the bag of food with wide-eyed anticipation, and Elsa sitting patiently in her booster seat. Kala looks up at him, her gaze slightly softer.

“You always keep it unloaded, right?” she asks.

He nods. “And locked away.”

“Oh kay,” she says, taking several sandwiches out of the bag and setting them on plates.

Aria emits a high-pitched, impatient whine and stomps her feet. Wolfgang glances at her, trying not to grin, and then crosses the room to Kala and helps her take the rest of the dinner out of the bag. She hip-checks him lightly and smiles to herself.

“You’re more trouble than they are,” she tells him.

He nods. “You knew that when you married me.”

“I did!” she says brightly. “I’m such a fool.”

He laughs, then goes into the kitchen for silverware and glasses of water. He returns and they begin to eat, the children chatting on and off about soccer practice, school starting again, the snowy weather, Christmas, whether they’ll go to Berlin again soon, and if they can adopt a cat. Kala and Wolfgang eat quietly, sleepy, sipping beer on and off and nudging each other when one of their children says something funny or inappropriate.

Aria looks up after a particularly fierce moment of wolfing down her sandwich and squints at Wolfgang, curious. Then she says loudly, “Papa, you eat like a fancy person!”

He glances down at his silverware. “No. I eat how you’re supposed to eat.”
Aria looks at her hands, which are covered in various sandwich fixings, and shrugs. “But the way you eat is slow.”

Kala pats Wolfgang’s shoulder. “She’s right.”

He glances around at his kids, all eating with their hands, and shakes his head slightly. “My mother’s rolling in her grave.”

“What does rolling in her grave mean?” asks Sani.

“It means she’d be disappointed if she was alive,” explains Wolfgang.

“Oh,” says Aria cheerfully. “Good thing she’s dead then.”

Kala’s eyes widen in horror. “Oh, honey. That...that isn’t what he means.”

She glances at Wolfgang and sees he has a hand over his mouth and is trying desperately not to laugh. He shakes his head, barely contained, and reaches for his beer. He drinks some and finally sets the bottle down with a tiny chuckle.

“You shouldn’t laugh at that,” says Kala gently.

“I know,” he replies. “But I love how logical she is.”

“I am logical,” says Aria, sipping her juice and kicking her feet energetically under the table.

Wolfgang snorts, then catches Jalesh stealing a sip of his beer. He yanks the bottle away.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“It was very clear what he was doing,” says Kala, eyeing him.

“I just wanted to try,” says Jalesh with a huff.

Wolfgang raises his eyebrows and hands the bottle back. “One sip or you’re grounded for a week. One sip.”

Jalesh glances cautiously at him and takes a sip. His expression twists and he hastily takes a french fry off his plate and stuffs it in his mouth.

“Ew!” he groans, handing the bottle back. “You drink that? Like, for fun?”

Wolfgang nods, laughing, and Kala shakes her head fondly. Aria glances up at them.

“Can I try?” she asks.

“When you’re twelve,” says Wolfgang.

She pouts and takes an aggressive bite of her sandwich. The family finishes dinner, and then Sani helps Kala collect the plates and take them to the sink. Wolfgang, meanwhile, wrangles Jalesh into helping him do laundry. They stand side by side at the washing machine, pulling things out to put in the dryer. Wolfgang glances at Jalesh with a frown.

“How are you almost as tall as me?” he asks.

Jalesh shrugs.
“I don’t like it,” admits Wolfgang, resting his elbow on Jalesh’s head to seem taller.

Jalesh laughs and shoves him away and Wolfgang smiles to himself. He pulls a white shirt out of the wash, then smirks.

“You know why I don’t let your mama do laundry?” he asks.

Jalesh glances up. “Why?”

“Because one time before you were born, she put something red in a whole wash of white clothes, and everything turned pink. Think about me wearing pink, Jali.”

Jalesh snorts. “Can’t picture it.” Then he adds, “But mama can cook better than you, that’s why she doesn’t let you in the kitchen.”

“I made you dinner last week,” Wolfgang points out.

“Yeah but it was boring,” he says. “Noodles are boring.”

“Well, next time you’re hungry, I won’t make you anything, how about that?”

“Empty threat,” says Jalesh, then goes back to transferring the wash to the dryer. “Besides, even I can make noodles. That’s more than Uncle Will can do.”

Wolfgang grins, feeling Will roll his eyes in Chicago. He flips the dryer door closed, and Jalesh reaches to push the start button, but Wolfgang stops him, noticing a pale bruise on the top of his arm.

“How did that happen?” he asks.

Jalesh shrugs, a sure sign that he’s lying by omission. Wolfgang raises his eyebrows at him and he shrugs again.

“Just some kids,” he says. “A couple boys at school.”


“They just grabbed my arm because I was….” He breathes out hard. “They were teasing Aria so I told them to stop because I was worried about her. Don’t tell her I said that.”

Wolfgang takes a breath, studying his son’s expression. Underneath the discomfort of admitting he cares about his sister, there’s a lingering worry. Wolfgang recognizes the slightly-angled eyebrow—it’s how Kala looks when she’s concerned about something, but not yet ready to talk. Wolfgang turns Jalesh gently by his shoulder and squeezes his arm.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

Jalesh bites the inside of his cheek and finally says, “They tease her a lot. All of us, when we’re walking home, but mostly her because she’s mean right back.”

“What about?” asks Wolfgang quietly.

Jalesh looks down. “They say we’re not from here. And that Elsa isn’t really our sister because she…”

Wolfgang nods slowly, stomach wrenching.
“I don’t know why they care whether we’re from here,” adds Jalesh.

“They don’t care whether you’re from here or not, they care what you look like. Fuck, I’m sorry, Jali.” He pauses to think, breathing out. “How long has this been happening?”

“Since Fall,” says Jalesh. “It’s okay, Papa, I can keep them away from Ari and Elsa and Sani, I promise.”

Wolfgang shakes his head. “I love how brave you are, but that isn’t your responsibility. If you need help, you can ask, okay?”

Jalesh nods and says quietly, “One of them is on the team that plays us, that’s why I’ve been practicing so much.”

Wolfgang smiles slightly. “I was wondering. Thought you were trying to impress a girl.”

Jalesh presses his lips together, annoyed. “No.”

“It hasn’t gotten worse than this?” checks Wolfgang, pointing at the bruise on Jalesh’s arm. “Have they hit you, or--”

He shakes his head, then tilts it and says, “That one on the other team tried after I won a game last week. He’s the goalie and he can’t block for shit and he was angry that I scored past him.”

“I’ve got to stop letting you watch soccer with Felix,” mumbles Wolfgang before continuing more seriously, “I got in a lot of fights when I was your age because no one wanted me where I was. People who believe other people are less human or less valuable because they’re different are really dangerous, okay Jali?” He hesitates, gauging his son’s expression. “Some of the boys that I got in fights with would have killed me if they had the chance. It’s not a game.”

“I don’t think these boys are like this,” says Jalesh.

“You can’t know that,” says Wolfgang.

Jalesh considers, tilting his head. Then he says, “Papa you grew up in a bad place.”

“I know,” Wolfgang says nodding. “And you’re probably right. But you have to be careful.”

Jalesh nods seriously, and they both turn when Kala looks into the laundry room from the hall, carrying Elsa. “Is everything okay?”

“I’ll tell you later,” says Wolfgang quietly.

He nudges Jalesh out of the laundry room, following him past Kala, who meets his eyes warily as she adjusts Elsa in her arms. He shakes his head slightly and they both turn, watching Jalesh go down the hall. He pats Kumi affectionately on the head as he passes her.

“Is he fighting again?” asks Kala.

“Not exactly--”

His sentence is cut off by the doorbell. Kumi barks loudly and Jalesh jogs past them in the hall to open it. Wolfgang turns back to Kala as they slowly make their way after him.

“Yes, he lives here, he’s my father,” Jalesh is saying to the person at the door. “Who are you?”
Wolfgang stiffens as they get closer to the door, and before he realizes it, he’s pushed Jalesh and Kala behind him and extended a protective arm. She’s wrinkled now and her hair is blotchy gray; her earrings weigh heavily on her pendulous ears and she’s wearing a fox stole around her neck.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asks, voice deadly quiet.

Aunt Elke smiles coldly. “I couldn’t believe it. I had to see for myself. I thought you were surely dead. You disappeared quite suddenly, after all.”

Kala breathes in, eyes wide and frightened, and she pulls Jalesh farther away from the door. He looks at her for an explanation but she gives a tiny shake of her head. She holds Elsa closer and keeps Aria and Sani, who came downstairs when the doorbell rang, from approaching any further.

“And look,” his aunt goes on in a light voice, gesturing at Kala. “You settled down. How unlike you.” She looks at Jalesh, then at the other children. “My God, how many do you have?”

“Why now?” Wolfgang asks tersely. “Why come here now?”

“Oh, because I just found out, you see,” she explains. “I was visiting an old friend in Berlin. She told me. And a simple look in a Paris directory gave me your address. This house is quite lovely, how did you pay for it?”

“We don’t want you here,” says Wolfgang.

“Oh, I don’t want to be here,” says Elke. “But I was too curious to stay away. I was understandably disappointed when I learned that Facchini hadn’t killed you. Of course, I never expected you to be stupid enough to become involved with her, but I suppose that is in your blood.”

Wolfgang’s jaw tightens. Kala pulls Jalesh further back. Elke glances at them.

“You don’t want your children to know, do you? Well, why would you…” She shakes her head. “Tell me though, how did you do it?”

Wolfgang shakes his head, confused. “I lived in Berlin for almost two years after that. I thought you knew.”

“I left,” explains Elke. “I went to Italy. It was…difficult for me in Berlin after you abandoned us.” She raises an eyebrow and when she speaks again her voice shakes in anger. “Do you know who rules the East now?”

“I don’t care,” Wolfgang says flatly.

“A newcomer,” hisses Elke. “A Turk.” She shakes her head and adjusts the fox fur around her neck. “It’s a shame, but you couldn’t resist, could you?”

Wolfgang’s pulse pounds in his throat, unsure how to escape before his aunt reveals something that can’t be withdrawn. The corner of her mouth twitches as she meets his eyes, a raptor with her talons on struggling prey. She looks intently at Jalesh.

“This one is handsome,” she says to Wolfgang, adding to him, “How old are you?”

He steps back and doesn’t answer.

“Oh, a talker like his father,” says Elke. She glances at Elsa. “And what a pretty one.” She leans over, looking beyond Kala’s legs to see Sani and Aria. “Hello, you two.”
“Why do you have a dead fox on you?” asks Aria in annoyance.

“I need you to leave,” says Wolfgang quietly.

“Why?” says Elke mockingly. “Are you worried I might say something?”

Wolfgang grits his teeth and says what he’s only managed to say when thinking of Kala or his children. “Please. Please leave.”

“Does she know?” asks Elke in interest, glancing at Kala.

“I know everything,” says Kala fiercely, stepping closer to Wolfgang and gripping his arm.

“Oh, then you are as stupid as he is,” observes Elke. “Unless, of course, he’s lying to you about what everything is.”

“Kala,” Wolfgang says quietly.

She nods, pulling the children farther away from the door, trying to take them out of hearing distance.

Elke smiles in icy amusement. “Be careful, Wolfgang. Chto poseyesh’, to i pozhnesh’.” She turns, appearing to leave, but she looks one more time at Jalesh, then at Wolfgang. “Who knows? Perhaps one day he will do to you what you did to your father.”

Jalesh glances at him in confusion and he looks down, breathing out. Elke smiles, one eye twitching in satisfaction, and then continues down the drive and out to the taxi that brought her here. Kala presses close to Wolfgang, fingers trembling and eyes flashing as she searches his expression. He touches her side gently, guiding her inside, slowly following her. He can feel Jalesh’s eyes on him but he doesn’t look at him.

“How did she know?” Kala whispers frantically in Korean so the children don’t understand. She sets Elsa down and puts her hands on Wolfgang’s shoulders. “How on earth—”

“I told her, years ago,” Wolfgang replies dully. “She wanted to know why I killed Sergei and I told her I was the one who killed my father.”

“Oh my God,” murmurs Kala. She glances at Jalesh, who is watching them with a small wrinkle on his brow. Then she breathes in, eyes fixed on the still-open door, and her lips tremble. “She should have died with the rest of them.”

Wolfgang squeezes her arms and meets her eyes seriously. They look at each other for a moment.

“What do we say?” she whispers.

“I want to tell him the truth if he asks,” admits Wolfgang quietly. “I want to tell all of them when they’re past eighteen.”

“You do?” asks Kala.

He nods. “It’s something they should know about me.”

“I don’t agree,” she says severely.

He glances down, and then over at Jalesh.
“Papa, who was that?” he asks. “And why did she say that?”

Kala puts a hand worriedly through her hair and returns down the hall to shut the door. She looks at Aria, Sani, and Elsa, who are also looking at Wolfgang in confusion, though not with as much trepidation as Jalesh. She meets Wolfgang’s eyes again.

Then she murmurs, “It’s your decision.”

He nods slowly, then looks at his three smaller children and back at her. She nods, understanding, and she guides them towards the den, promising to play charades with them or watch a movie. Wolfgang looks at Jalesh and nods towards the kitchen, and he follows him, brow creased, and sits heavily on a barstool at the center island.

Wolfgang pulls a beer out of the fridge for himself, then pours a glass of chocolate milk for Jalesh and slides it over. He looks at his son for a moment -- still in his muddy soccer gear, dark hair untidy, a question on his lips -- and sits down across from him.

At twelve, Jalesh’s jaw has grown slightly more pronounced; his eyes are more cautious, and he holds himself with his shoulders tall and his back straight. But in this moment, Wolfgang has trouble looking at him without remembering him as an infant.

He glances over his shoulder towards the den, hesitating.

“Who was that?” repeats Jalesh, bringing his attention back.

“My aunt, my uncle’s second wife,” says Wolfgang.

“I didn’t know you had an uncle,” says Jalesh.

Wolfgang nods resentfully and says with a small, sour smirk, “She’s not very nice, is she?”

Jalesh shakes his head. “No.” He sips his chocolate milk and looks back at his father, but doesn’t speak. He toys with the cuff of his shirt.

“Ask me what you want, Jali,” says Wolfgang tiredly, opening his beer.

Jalesh looks at him steadily. “Why did she think you were dead?”

Wolfgang looks at the granite pattern of the countertop, then leans his head in his hand. He hasn’t recalled the images from those days willingly in years. Sometimes they come at night and he wakes up sweating; sometimes they come uninvited when he is too tired or too drunk. Remembering them now, sober and awake, makes his chest twinge painfully.

“Because in Berlin,” he says dully, “almost...fifteen years ago...there was…” He pauses, then goes on quickly, “Different criminal families run different sections of the city in Berlin.”

“Cool,” says Jalesh, nodding. “Go on.”

Wolfgang smiles lightly at this. “My family always ran the east side of the city.”

“Really?” asks Jalesh.

“Yes,” says Wolfgang, continuing carefully, “After my uncle died, there was no one to run the east side, so everyone fought over it. And a woman wanted me to help her run it and the rest of the city. And I wouldn’t help her--”
Jalesh frowns. “Why?”

Wolfgang glances down, thinking, and takes a sip of beer. “Because I was in love with your mother and I didn’t want to live that way anymore.”

“So you were…” Jalesh trails off, looking at his father in interest.

“A thief,” clarifies Wolfgang, and then he rubs his hand over his stubble and mumbles, “Can’t believe I’m telling you this.”

“It’s okay, you aren’t bad anymore,” says Jalesh with an unconcerned shrug. “What kinds of things did you steal?”

“This isn’t something to get excited about,” says Wolfgang quietly, looking at him with a warning in his eyes.

“I’m just asking,” says Jalesh.

“If you break the law to be like me, your mother will kill both of us,” says Wolfgang.

“What kinds of things?” repeats Jalesh more loudly.

Wolfgang breathes out. “Cash, jewelry, diamonds, art sometimes.”

Jalesh nods. “What would you do with it?”

“You’re like Will, you ask too many questions,” mutters Wolfgang, drinking his beer and continuing, “I’d sell them. That’s what my father, uncle, and cousin did too. And Felix.”

“And Felix?” gasps Jalesh.

Wolfgang glances at him. “Don’t ask Felix about this.”


Because he’ll reveal details you aren’t prepared for. “Because he’ll lie to make the story seem more exciting.”

Jalesh nods. “Sounds like Felix. Okay, so, you wouldn’t help this lady, then what?”

Wolfgang glances down, folding his arms as he thinks. He listens to Jalesh slurp the last of his chocolate milk and set the glass down, to a movie gently rumbling from the den, to the echo of Kala’s anxiety in his mind. The last thing he remembers before blackness and pain took over is the colors of Kala’s bedroom in Mumbai, the wind ghosting through the sheer curtains. He breathes in to steady himself.

“She knew powerful people and they made me sorry I met her.”

Jalesh blinks, confused.

Wolfgang glances up with a small, distant smile. “Broken ribs, broken leg. You’ve seen those scars on my chest, that’s how I got those.”

Jalesh stares, then surprises Wolfgang by whispering, “Why didn’t they just kill you?”

“They would have eventually,” says Wolfgang.
Jalesh’s breath accelerates. “How - how did you escape?”

“How did you escape?” asks Jalesh in disbelief.

Mama?” asks Jalesh in disbelief.

Wolfgang smiles faintly. “You’ve seen her when she’s angry.”

Jalesh considers this, then nods slowly. Then he looks at Wolfgang attentively and says, voice low, “I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” says Wolfgang.

Jalesh nods, watching as his father’s jaw twitches in agitation, as his fingers tighten around his beer.

“I know,” replies Jalesh, adding after a moment, “Are you okay?”

Wolfgang nods, breathing in, then smiles to himself. “There’s the part of you that’s from Kala.”

Jalesh grins. “You’re nice too when you want to be.”

Wolfgang chuckles and glances at him, then sips his beer and leans forward, hands in front of him on the counter. “What else?”

“What did she say in Russian?” asks Jalesh.

Wolfgang squints. “Why do you recognize that?”

“You talk to yourself in it sometimes,” says Jalesh with a shrug.

Wolfgang raises an eyebrow. “I do?”

Jalesh nods vigorously. “And a bunch of other languages. It’s annoying.”

Wolfgang grins lightly, exposing faint dimples, surprised he’s this relaxed. “You can tell me to fuck off when I do that.” He pauses and tilts his beer back. “She said you reap what you sow. It means if you do something bad, it will come back to you.”

“Like Karma,” says Jalesh.

He nods.

“What did she mean?” Jalesh asks, fishing his straw around in the bottom of his glass of chocolate milk.

Wolfgang hesitates. “I did things she disagreed with, things she didn’t think I should have done and she thinks the universe will punish me for that.”

Jalesh raises his eyebrows and says openly, “Sounds like it already has.”

Wolfgang folds his hands under his chin, looking at his son with a gentle smirk. “Think so?”

“Yeah, obviously,” says Jalesh, adding, “why did she say it in Russian though?”

“My father was Russian,” explains Wolfgang, adding without thinking, “That’s what they put on his gravestone. That phrase.”
“Huh,” says Jalesh, interested. “How did he die?”

Wolfgang stiffens, pulling up the sleeves of his dark blue sweater slightly. “Jalesh, do you remember when we were in Berlin and I told you what he was like? What he did?”

Jalesh nods, scrunching his brow at the use of his full name.

“I didn’t tell you details because I thought you were too young,” Wolfgang goes on. “But you aren’t now.” He pauses, glancing down, finding Sun’s stability, Capheus’s courage, and Kala’s hope. “He was a criminal, and he was ruthless, and he was nearly always drunk. And if he was drunk he was violent…” He shakes his head slightly; on reflection, his father frightens him less than he astonishes him; it seems impossible in retrospect that any individual could be so unreservedly immoral, that anyone could be so base. His voice is softer, more distant, when he continues. “He hit us every day, Jali, constantly, and my mother…” He breathes in. “She killed herself, and then I was alone and I knew he would kill me eventually. So one night when I was a little older than you, when he was coming home from the bar, I waited for him and I…” He stares straight ahead and the next words come slowly, monotone. “I jumped on him from behind and strangled him.”

Jalesh looks at him for a long time without speaking, hands very still on his glass. Then he sits up slightly straighter and says, “Because he would have killed you eventually.”

Wolfgang nods, watching his expression.

“Okay,” says Jalesh quietly. “How...how did you feel?”

Wolfgang looks at him, unprepared for this question, and the muscles in his jaw jump. “It felt good.”

Jalesh looks down. “Did you feel bad too?”

“No,” admits Wolfgang. “For a long time I thought I should, and I thought there was something wrong with me because I didn’t, but he was a monster.”

“Does mama know?” asks Jalesh more quietly.

“Your mother knows everything,” says Wolfgang with a soft nod.

They look at each other, a trim and tall twelve-year-old with his mother’s cautious eyes and a weary father who looks older than he is in this moment. Then Jalesh nods solemnly and Wolfgang almost smiles, recognizing the fragile but strong expression, remembering it in himself.

“Will this make you think about me differently?” he asks gently.

Jalesh shakes his head and says quickly, clearly unrehearsed, “No. Because I see the way you look at Mama and us.”

Wolfgang glances up at him, caught in the chest. He swallows, throat tight, then nods in response. Jalesh smiles assuredly and shifts in his seat. He puts his hand over Wolfgang’s and gives it a brief squeeze. Then he gets out of his seat.

“I’m going to watch the movie now,” he explains.

Wolfgang nods, touching his shoulder as he leaves. He looks unsurely at his hands, lightly crossed on the counter, and flinches in surprise after a few minutes when Kala wraps her arms around him from behind.
“That was brave,” she says quietly.

“He okay?” asks Wolfgang.

She nods. “I think he likes when you share with him. Even if…”

He nods, understanding, and tilts his head back to look at her. She recognizes the unease in his eyes, so she steps around his chair and hugs him closer from the side. He rests his head in solace on her shoulder and they stay this way for a moment.

Then she touches her nose to the top of his head and kisses it, and he pulls her closer and nuzzles into her side. He breathes in the jasmine perfume off her clothes and smiles gently, pulling his hand down the outside of her leg.

“We should tell him about being Sensates soon,” she murmurs thoughtfully.

He nods in agreement.

“Especially because he could be one,” she goes on. “They all could.”

He nods again, glancing up at her. They hold each other’s gaze for a moment, Kala’s eyes bleak but proud. Her mouth twitches in half a smile, accentuating the wrinkles around her eyes.

“Come watch with us?” she asks.

He nods.

“And then I want you for the rest of the night,” she adds quietly, fingers pulling at his sweater.

He glances at her in surprise.

She smiles, looking down, shrugging gently as she tongues over her bottom lip. “I want to make you feel better.”

“Hm,” he says in response, starting to smirk. “I’d like that.”

She nods, laughing gently, and pulls him to his feet. He kisses her softly and pulls her closer by the small of her back.

“Are you glad you told him?” she asks, tipping her head back to look at him.

He nods earnestly. “He’s sweet.”

She grins softly. “He is. When he wants to be.” Then her brow twitches. “What were you going to tell me? Earlier?”

“Oh,” he says, sliding his hands down her arms and taking her hands. “There are some boys who bully Aria and he tries to protect her.”

Kala presses closer, eyes dark and alarmed. “They bully her?”

“All of them,” says Wolfgang, “but mostly her because she--”

“Talks back,” guesses Kala.

He nods. She hums in response, then glances towards the den in concern.
“He wants to protect them,” she murmurs. “He’s like you.”

“He’s like you, too,” he replies quietly.

She nods, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. “I suppose it’s inevitable. Do you think the bullies are dangerous?”

“I’m not sure, I think we should drive them home from school now,” he says.

She nods again, breathing out. “Aria would rather win than come home safely.”

He smiles softly. “So would Jali.”

She smiles too, shaking her head gently. Then she takes his face in her hands and nudges her nose against his.

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow,” she whispers.

He nods in agreement. They make their way into the den and sit on the couch next to Jalesh, who has an arm loosely around Aria. He quickly removes his arm at their approach and looks at them, checking if they saw.

“We saw,” says Kala.

He sighs, glances at Aria in irritation, then puts his arm back. She snuggles sleepily into him as Spirited Away plays in the foreground. Kala presses her lips together, charmed, and meets Wolfgang’s eyes. He smiles faintly, then shifts down on the couch to rest his head in her lap.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Chto poseyesh’, to i pozhnesh = You reap what you sow

The next chapter, like this one, will be slightly angstier than usual because does Jalesh listen to Wolfgang’s advice about fighting? Of course he doesn’t.

The next chapter will also heavily feature Sani and Elsa, who have been ignored. Jali and Aria get all the attention because they’re naughtier, which makes this fic very true-to-life LOL.
A Week

Chapter Summary

Wolfgang travels out of town on a business trip. Kala watches the kids for the week. She shares stories with Elsa and Sani, Jalesh learns more about his parents, and Aria finds a new use for colored pencils.

Chapter Notes

As you may have noticed, I increased the chapter count to 20! I had no intention when I began this fic to write about all of their children...as usual, the original plan got away from me. The final three chapters will focus on the kids as they get older so that I can write the full story for Jalesh...from newborn to 18. *sheds a tear*

A note on languages -- just assume the kids speak a mixture of German/Hindi/French/English at home. Any time they interact with someone in Paris, they're speaking French.

TW for descriptions of violence/injuries. I warned you about the bullies last chapter so...
*shrugs unapologetically*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sunday

Kala looks in apprehension at her four children, all neatly dressed and waiting near the door. Lately, quiet disturbs her more than chaos -- it means trouble is coming. She eyes all of them and Aria gives her a menacing smirk.

She turns to Wolfgang, who is in the doorway with a suitcase, about to leave for a business trip. He's dressed in a trim black coat and a suit and Kala’s shoulders sag slightly at the sight of him, disgruntled that she can’t keep him for herself when he looks this handsome.

“A week,” she says unhappily, tugging on his tie.

“I know,” he replies, squeezing her waist and pulling her closer.

She huffs and kisses him deeply, her hands cupping his face to keep him close after she pulls away. She rests her nose on his and breathes in deeply, reluctant to let him go. She woke him up at dawn to say goodbye through sex, as always -- she feels incomplete if she lets him leave or she leaves on a trip without that. But this leaves her particularly lonely the first day they’re apart, because she can’t cling to him the way she typically does after they're together. She hums sadly and kisses him again.

Aria groans from behind them. "Stop!"

She pulls away with a gentle smile and meets Wolfgang’s eyes. “Call every day.” She adds in a whisper, “And visit me at night, you know I can’t sleep alone.”
“I would, but our nights are in different time zones now, babe.”

She sighs and rests her head against his chest for a moment. “I don’t like this.”

“Just say goodbye already!” says Aria. “You’re with each other constantly, aren’t you tired of each other?”

They fix their daughter with an identical, icy stare and she rolls her eyes, but doesn’t speak again. They turn back to each other and kiss again, and then Wolfgang steps away and hugs each of his children -- Aria, who grumbles about the prospect of Kala-only supervision, Sani, who politely wishes his father a good trip, Elsa, who starts to sob as expected, and Jalesh last. He stops and looks in his eyes.

“Help your mother,” he says firmly.

Jalesh nods, eyes serious and attentive. Wolfgang smiles at this and squeezes his shoulder, then goes out the door, kissing Kala once more as he leaves. Kala sighs as he disappears from sight, then picks up Elsa to soothe her, kissing the side of her head and bouncing her.

“Let’s go have breakfast, yes?” she asks her. “Do you want pancakes?”

“No!” sobs Elsa.

“Oh, pancakes,” Kala says cheerfully. “I know you want pancakes.”

“Can I help, Mama?” asks Sani.

Kala nods, guiding him into the kitchen. Elsa continues to cry -- loudly, directly in Kala’s ear -- so Kala sets her on the counter and gives her a sippy-cup of juice. She looks at it with a displeased pout, but then she hiccups, drinks some, and cries more softly. Kala pets her hair and kisses her cheek, then looks at Sani, who says, "Blueberries!" excitedly.

"Blueberry pancakes?" asks Kala. "Okay..."

She pours herself a cup of coffee, then starts to pull ingredients from the cupboards, letting Sani take them to the kitchen island. Elsa, still crying, finishes her juice, and then looks at the empty cup in dismay and cries louder.

"It's all gone!" she says mournfully.

Kala closes her eyes. Her youngest daughter has a wide emotional spectrum and, like Lito, the intensity of her emotions is outsized and unpredictable. She tries to take the cup from Elsa's hands, but Elsa yanks it back, then hugs it.

"Elsa!" sighs Kala softly. "Honey I'm just trying to give you more juice!"

Elsa shakes her head, stubbornly hugging the cup. Kala glances at Sani, then picks Elsa up and sits down with her.

"Sani, if I tell you what to do, can you make the pancakes? I don't think she's going to calm down unless I'm holding her..."

Sani nods brightly and Kala looks at him for a moment, cautious. His face is identical to Aria's, so Kala naturally mistrusts him when he expresses any positivity or helpfulness. Aria only expresses those emotions when she's lying, scheming, or manipulating in some way, and though Kala knows
that Sani is unlike his twin sister, his expressions alarm her nonetheless.

"Okay," she says, hugging Elsa closer. "start with the flour, measure out three cups..."

Sani nods. Kala shifts her position so she can play with Elsa's hair, which always calms her.

She starts to braid the silky, corn-colored strands, shaking her head fondly at the color and texture. Though her features resemble Kala, her hair certainly doesn't. At four, she has lost most of her baby fat, except in her cheeks; her face is dappled with light freckles, holdovers from a trip to Mexico City during the fall, and she's missing one of her top teeth. Her eyes, to Kala's amusement, are identical to Wolfgang's.

Sani, like Aria, has stayed quite short, but his shoulders have broadened slightly and his face has grown thinner, with handsome, slender features and Kala's full, colorful lips. Kala's parents find Sani particularly lovely because he reminds them of her, and though Aria looks precisely like Kala did when she was a child, they don't recognize the resemblance as easily in her because of her devil-may-care attitude and her inclination to wear her hair in two chunky buns on the top of her head.

"Mama, now what?" asks Sani.

Kala directs him towards the buttermilk. "Two cups of that."

"What is buttermilk?" he asks.

Before she can answer, Jalesh comes into the kitchen in his soccer gear, grabs a bagel out of the bread box, and waves goodbye without a word. Kala shakes her head.

"Where are you going?" she calls. "You don't have practice today!"

"I want to practice anyway!" he hollers.

Kala glances outside at the frigid rain, consoled by the fact that Jalesh, like his father, is immune to the cold. "Be careful!"

"Yes, Mama," he says dully, and the front door clicks shut.

Kala turns back to Sani. "Buttermilk is the milk that's leftover from making butter. At least that's what it is traditionally. Now, most buttermilk is just milk with some acid added to it."

"Like paneer," says Sani.

She looks at him in surprise. "Yes. How do you know that?"

"Nana and nani," he explains.

She beams. "You're very smart to remember that. You like to cook, don't you?"

"Nana and nani," he explains.

She beams. "You're very smart to remember that. You like to cook, don't you?"

He nods, pouring the buttermilk. He sticks his finger in to taste it and Kala shudders slightly, but reassures herself by remembering they'll cook the pancakes thoroughly and kill any potential germs. She continues to braid Elsa's hair, stopping occasionally to press kisses to the back of her head. The tears have finally abated, and Elsa hands her cup to Sani for a juice refill.

"Why does she cry so much?" asks Sani in interest as he hands the juice back to her.

"She's spoiled," murmurs Kala. "We always baby her because we know we aren't having another one."
"Didn't you know that after me and Aria?" asks Sani.

Kala laughs in surprise. "Excuse me! Life is unpredictable."

"That's kinda my point, Mama," says Sani, searching the freezer for a bag of blueberries.

She grins, setting Elsa down and glancing at her. "Are you happy now?"

"I guess," grumps Elsa.

She gets up to help Sani fry the pancakes, hugging him from the side while he stirs the batter.

"You know," she says, continuing the thread, "sometimes the best things in life are unpredictable. I never expected to meet your father, let alone fall in love with someone who is so unlike me." She smiles to herself, pouring some blueberries into the mix as he stirs. "But being complementary is often for the best because we learn new things about ourselves. Aria may end up with someone quite mellow and that might teach her to be more mellow, and you could end up with a girl who's very outgoing and wild, and that would be good for you." She pauses. "Or a boy! Or neither. Or no one. You don't have to be attracted only to girls, or feel attraction at all." She stops again, frowning slightly. "Or only to one person. Auntie Amanita has three papas."

"She does?" asks Sani.

"Yes," says Kala, nodding. "There's no wrong way to love each other."

She notices Wolfgang is visiting her to observe this conversation and she laughs quietly at herself.

What are you doing? he asks in their shared mind, amused.

She gestures at the air to suggest she has no idea. Giving our eight-year-old a Ted Talk?

He grins in response and vanishes from sight. Kala shakes her head gently, squeezing Sani.

"Did any of that make sense?" she asks.

He nods, adding more blueberries to the batter. "Yes, Mama."

"It's important to know yourself and to do what's right for you," she goes on, stepping aside to heat the griddle. "I wasted a lot of time when I was younger because I always did what others thought was right for me."

Sani nods, then glances at her with his brow wrinkled. "Don't tell Aria that, she'll think you mean she can do whatever she wants."

"Oh Peanut, she already thinks that," sighs Kala. She glances around the kitchen in concern, realizing Aria is nowhere in sight. "Sani, will you find your sister for me, please? Tell her breakfast is almost ready..."

He nods, walking out of the kitchen, and Elsa steps up to Kala and hugs her leg.

"Mamaaahh," she sing-songs, asking to be picked up.

Kala lifts her onto the counter near the stove. "Don't touch anything, it's very hot."

Elsa instantly reaches her hand toward the griddle and Kala sets her on the floor again.
"I don't know what I was expecting," she murmurs to herself, patting Elsa's back and sending her in the direction of the dining table. "Just wait, okay?"

Then she glances up at the sound of a nerf gun being fired, followed by, "Ouch, Ari! Knock it off!"

Kala shakes her head tiredly and pours some batter onto the griddle. The twins come downstairs a moment later, Aria toting the nerf gun, Sani rubbing his eye.

"Did she shoot you in the eye?" asks Kala.

"No," says Aria.

"Yes," says Sani.

Kala sighs, turning Aria around by her shoulders. "Take that thing out of here."

"But --"

Kala swats her backside because Wolfgang isn't here to side-eye her about it. "No guns at the table. And you know you aren't allowed to shoot anyone in the face."

Aria grumbles, putting the gun down in the hall. "Didn't mean to."

"She meant to," says Sani as he sits at the table.

Aria turns around, hands on her hips. "I was defending my fort!"

"From what?" asks Sani indignantly.

"You, obviously!" she says.

Kala goes back to the stove, rolling her eyes. She finishes the pancakes and soon everyone is at the table, eating peacefully. Kala keeps her eyes on Aria, watching for any signs of misbehavior, but the pancakes are a good distraction. She sips her coffee, putting her feet up on the chair Wolfgang usually sits in, and begins to relax, allowing herself to consider this week won't be as difficult as she was anticipating.

Jalesh comes back in the afternoon, soaked, and wolfs down six leftover pancakes while Kala cleans his muddy cleats, watching him out of the corner of her eye with concern.

"Jalesh, slow down, my God," she murmurs.

"Can't, starving," he says.

She shakes her head, continuing to spray the mud off his shoes, looking out the window above the sink as the rain turns to sleet. She sets the cleats on a clean cloth on the counter, then takes her chai off the table, kisses Jalesh's head, and walks into the living room. She sits down on the couch, then smiles in surprise when Wolfgang sits next to her, visiting.

She grins softly at him.

"Where are you?" she asks.

"On the plane," he explains. "How is everything?"

"Elsa misses you, Aria is behaving for the most part, and Jali is going to catch his death in this
"Soccer?" asks Wolfgang.

She nods, smiling. "Of course. How is everything with you?"

"I forgot I had a swiss army knife in the pocket of my suit, which airport security didn't like," he says.

Kala squints. "Why would you have that in a suit pocket?"

"In case," he says with a shrug.

"In case of what?" asks Kala.

"Just...in case," he repeats.

She looks down, laughing and shaking her head, and shoves him lightly. He smiles, tugging on her leg to pull her closer on the couch. She snuggles against him, cradling her tea close to her chest, and he thumbs over her calf. They look at each other gently, then share a quick kiss and stay close.

"In the future," she murmurs playfully, "I think we should screen all of Felix's gifts for the children so we don't have another nerf gun incident."

He grins. "You sure you don't want him giving the kids megaphones or unwashable paints or a nuclear missile?"

She laughs loudly. "Oh my God. Well, that escalated."

He looks down and laughs too. "I like the nerf guns..."

"Your daughter shot Sani in the eye this morning," says Kala darkly.

"Elsa did that?" he asks, joking.

Kala kicks him. "What's gotten into you?"

He laughs and squeezes her knee, about to respond, but they turn at a voice -- Jalesh is standing in the door to the living room, staring.

"Who...who are you talking to?" he asks Kala.

She and Wolfgang look at each other, unprepared. They've never purposefully hidden their connection from their children, but they almost never have a reason to visit each other anymore, and the other members of their Cluster don't often visit, preferring to call so they can interact with the children too. Although the world is safe for Sensates, the identity isn't often openly acknowledged; a stigma still exists that Sensates are unpredictable and best left alone by Sapiens, and Kala knows her children feel different enough as it is.

Jalesh blinks. "Mama?"

He's seen his mother and father talk to the air like someone else is there, but he's never mentioned it, chalk ing it up to an adult idiosyncrasy. But he's never witnessed a full, one-sided conversation.

Kala looks at Wolfgang with wide, confused eyes, and after a moment he shrugs.
"He's twelve, tell him," says Wolfgang.

"I wanted us both to be here," she whispers.

"I've explained enough to him lately," says Wolfgang.

Kala smiles faintly at this and nods, then turns to Jalesh.

"Honey, come here, I have something to tell you," she says.

"Oh great," says Jalesh, walking over and reluctantly sitting on an armchair across from her. "Did you kill someone too?"

Wolfgang raises his eyebrows. "Wow."

Kala clears her throat, avoiding the question, and takes a long drink of her tea. She sets it aside, eyes on the floor, and reaches for Wolfgang's hand. Jalesh squints at this.

Finally, Kala looks at him, "Honey, have you heard of Sensates?"

Jalesh raises his eyebrows. "Yeah. We learned in school about the whole thing with that organization." Then he looks at her, dark eyes flashing. "Oh..."

Kala smiles sadly.

"You -- so you..." He stops, then leans forward and whispers, "Really?"

Kala nods. "Yes, and your father and...Will, Riley, Capheus, Nomi, Sun, and Lito..."

Papa?" he asks, eyes wide. "What? Why didn't you..." He trails off and Kala watches his mind race. When he speaks, his voice is softer and slower, "Did you not tell me because people don't...don't like people like you?"

Kala nods again, reaching to take both of his hands. "Before you were born, it was terribly dangerous to be a Sensate. Many of us died." She pauses and squeezes his hands, looking down. "We nearly did, your father in particular, and your Aunt Riley. It's difficult to talk about, and we wanted you to be old enough to understand."

Jalesh nods cautiously. "So...you can talk to each other without being in the same room?"

Kala nods. "That's part of it. But it's much more about emotions than speech. We can feel each other's...pleasure and pain and hope and fear and everything in between, and we feel it as our own. Does that make sense?"

He nods. "Can you, like, control it?" he asks. "Or do you always feel like that? Because it would be impossible to lie or hide anything."

Kala smiles and pulls her hands away, reaching again for her tea. "We can control it, sometimes at least," she says after taking a sip, "and yes it is very difficult to lie. But it took me a long time to understand what your father's feelings meant most of the time. I had to be with him for years before I felt I understood. Sometimes he still confuses me."

Wolfgang smiles next to her, brushing his touch down her arm. She glances at him warmly before looking back at Jalesh.

"We can also share our abilities," explains Kala. "So, if I needed to, I could fight like Aunt Sun. Or I
could act like Uncle Lito."

Jalesh narrows his eyes. "Papa said you helped save him...is that how you did it? Is that how you fought?"

Kala hesitates, then murmurs, "I didn't need my fists to fight when I was younger." She smirks and adds, "And I saved your father more than once. He had very little impulse control."

Wolfgang chuckles beside her and nods.

"How -- how did you fight?" asks Jalesh, lowering his voice.

Kala breathes in, sips her tea, and says modestly, "I...was rather good at explosions."

Jalesh stares for a moment and finally shakes his head. "Anything other secrets? Like, are you guys spies? Is this secretly the Matrix?"

Kala laughs. "No, honey." Then she tilts her head, "Well, I married someone else before your father. That's a secret."

Jalesh wrinkles his nose. "Why did you do that?"

"Love and marriage are complicated, Jali."

Jalesh raises his eyebrows, unconvincing. Kala breathes out.

"I did that because I was scared. It's what my parents wanted for me. And I was frightened of what being with your father would mean because...well, he's told you. His life was very different from mine."

Jalesh nods.

Kala's lips form a small, wistful smile. "I knew I should be with him, but I wasn't used to listening to myself. He tried to tell me. Do you know what he did?"

"Kala, don't tell him that I--"

"He showed up at my wedding completely naked," says Kala.

Jalesh stares, then bursts out laughing. "What? No! He couldn't have! With all those people?"

"Well, I was the only one who could see him," explains Kala. "Although I...I wouldn't entirely put that past him."

Jalesh snorts, shaking his head. "What did you do?"

"I..." Kala trails off, grinning lightly and blushing. "I fainted."

"You fainted?" he asks incredulously. "Why did you faint?"

"Well honey, your father is a very good-looking man--"

Jalesh hastily covers his ears. "Nope, no, stop."

Kala laughs loudly. "I called my wedding off and everything. And then I still married him. By the time I married your father I felt like I had been married three times."
"Well, papa doesn't talk a lot, he probably had a hard time telling you he liked you," says Jalesh.

"He didn't talk much back then either," agrees Kala, "but he was...far from subtle."

Wolfgang laughs, glancing at her, and her mouth twitches in a smirk. Jalesh watches this and then his eyes widen.

"Wait, is he sitting next to you? Can he hear me?" He pauses, glancing around in alarm. "Mama, can you two always hear whatever I tell either of you? Do you know everything I've ever said to him?"

Kala squints. "He is, yes, and no Jalesh I don't know everything you've ever said to him...do you tell him things you don't tell me?"

Jalesh shakes his head. "N-no."

Kala raises an eyebrow. "Jalesh?"

"Lots, mama, lots, so much," admits Jalesh, sighing.

Kala glares at Wolfgang, who looks away, leans back, and sips something out of a complimentary airline cup. Kala shakes her head, unsurprised.

"You two can't be trusted," she murmurs.

"I tell you the important things, babe," Wolfgang assures her.

"Conspirators," she says, pointing at both of them, dark eyes piercing them.

Jalesh holds still, waiting for her gaze to break. When it doesn't, he looks down. Then he frowns.

"Wait, in class they said there are thousands of you, do you...do you share with everyone?"

Kala shakes her head. "No, only within what we call a Cluster. So your aunts and uncles and your father and I. But if we meet other Sensates, we can share with them. That's what used to be so dangerous, see, because some of the Sensates we met wanted to give us up to that organization."

"Why?" asks Jalesh.

"For their own protection," says Kala.

He squints. "Wouldn't it make more sense to all work together?"

Kala smiles. "Not everyone was so selfless. Remember your father telling you about the woman he met? Who put him in danger? She was one. And the most dangerous people in the organization were too."

"But...if she was one, and you know how each other feel, didn't he know she was going to try to kill him?"

Kala looks at Wolfgang with an expression of heady satisfaction. "Yes, why didn't you? Your son is smarter than you were back then and he's twelve."

Wolfgang frowns at her. "I almost died, Kala, you can't tease me."

"I don't care," she says primly. "I'll never let you live it down." She turns back to Jalesh. "He did know, I think. But she had information. And at first, she seemed safe enough. So he took a risk."
"Yeah, that didn't go well," observes Jalesh.

Kala breathes out and says faintly, "No." She tilts her head in consideration, then continues, "No, Jalesh, it was the worst time in our lives, we lived in constant fear, we almost lost each other and everyone. All of us nearly died. Your father and I, we..." She trails off, throat suddenly tight. "We barely had a moment of happiness together before they took him away and I was so sure I had lost him before I even got to be with him, and that was...the worst I have ever felt in my life, and it went on for weeks."

Jalesh watches his mother with a slight wrinkle on his brow, and then he quietly asks, "Weeks? They...they did those things to him for weeks?"

Kala nods, padding her fingertips at the tears collecting under her eyes. She's about to lean into Wolfgang for comfort, but Jalesh pulls her to her feet and hugs her tightly. She shakes, then hugs him back and snuggles into his shoulder.

"Why are you so tall?" she says through tears.

"I don't know, mama," he murmurs, adding, "I'm sorry."

She nods, closing her eyes while he rubs her back. It's the first time he's provided comfort for her, rather than the other way around. She breathes more slowly, squeezing him, and only pulls away when she notices how sweaty he is.

"Jali, you smell terrible," she murmurs.

He nods. "Yeah."

She laughs tearfully and pushes him away. "Take a shower please."

He nods. "Okay, Mama..."

"You can ask more questions later," she assures him.

He nods again, then leaves the living room with a final, consoling smile. Kala holds still for a moment, then seeks Wolfgang's gaze.

"Was that okay?" she asks quietly.

He nods. "Perfect."

She smiles weakly. "He's so strong."

Wolfgang smiles too. "He is."

Kala wipes her eyes. "He didn't seem extremely surprised, perhaps he suspected something." She chuckles. "He did seem surprised that I fought."

"You're much more dangerous than you look, babe," he says, bringing her closer by her waist and kissing her.

She nods. "You know it..."

He laughs, kissing her again quickly, and then she nuzzles against him.

"I'm going to make dinner now," she murmurs, letting go of him.
He nods. "Miss you."
"Already?" she teases, and then immediately sighs, "I miss you too. We're pathetic. Go before I make you stay here..."
He laughs and kisses her again, and then she's left alone, reflecting on each of her words to her son, a slight frown on her face.

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Wednesday
Kala shifts sleepily against the pillows, spooning around Elsa, a nature documentary playing quietly in the background of the bedroom. Sani is sitting on the edge of the bed, watching raptly as a lemur picks fruit in the canopy of the rainforest. Aria sits nearby, petting Kumi and watching the documentary. Jalesh, meanwhile, sits in his room and reads a WorldSoccer magazine, drinking chocolate milk.

Kala turns over, snuggling into the mattress, half-asleep, exhausted from the day alone with the children. Elsa, troubled by the sudden lack of contact, crawls over to Kala and settles on top of her. Kala laughs sleepily and hugs her, then reaches for the light, deciding against sending her children to bed, secretly looking forward to waking up with all of them piled around her.

She lets her eyes slip shut, patting Elsa's hip affectionately and stroking her hair. The noise of the documentary fades and sleep begins to pull her under. Then she sits up suddenly, noticing a loud crash in the house below her. She looks around, seeing that Aria, Sani, and Elsa are all present.

"Jalesh, is that you?" she calls cautiously.

"Huh?" he calls from his room down the hall.

Kala breathes in, heart pounding, and listens to another crash. She swallows, her mouth dry, and carefully shifts Elsa off of her. She walks stiffly to the dresser across the room, removing Wolfgang's gun case from the top drawer. She unlocks it, then loads the gun, and goes to the door. She looks at Aria and Sani.

"Do not leave this room, do you understand me?" she asks.

They nod, sensing she's serious. She goes into the hall and closes the door behind her, then walks downstairs. She knows it's nearly four in the morning where Wolfgang is and she's sure he's asleep, so she reaches for Will instead. He appears at her side almost instantly and they share a cautious glance.

"I heard a noise," she murmurs.

He nods solemnly and they continue down the stairs. Kala stretches the gun out, breathing hard, and Will gently touches her shoulder, telling her to be quieter. She nods, holding her breath, and they approach the kitchen. There is another crash and Kala recognizes that the sound is coming from the garage.

"Should I call the police?" she asks.

Will grins gently. "We are the police."
Kala laughs shakily. "Okay."

They approach the garage silently, then stop at the sight of Jalesh, who sneaked from his room to the kitchen with a baseball bat in his hands.

Kala stares and hisses, "Jalesh!"

He turns around, bat raised, and looks in alarm at his mother, then at the gun, which she hastily lowers.

"What are you doing?" he asks, eyes wide.

"What are you doing?" she replies.

He gestures with the bat. "Papa isn't home, there was a noise!"

"Oh my God, Jalesh!" sighs Kala, stepping forward to push him aside. "Go upstairs!"

He shakes his head stubbornly and Kala looks at Will, who smiles after a moment. "I think you might have a future police officer..."

Kala huffs, looking at Jalesh. "Fine. Stay behind me."

Jalesh nods. She flicks on the light in the garage, then flings the door open, gun held out. There's a crackle and a thump, and Jalesh instinctively pushes Kala behind him. Kala turns, about to reproach him, but then they see a large raccoon dash across the garage and under the car. Kala lets her arm fall at her side and she looks down, heart racing.

"A raccoon," she says defeatedly.


Then Kala begins to laugh. She pushes the button that opens the garage, and they watch the raccoon streak out of the garage and into the night. Kala laughs softly into her hand, then takes the bullets out of the gun and pours them neatly into her robe pocket.

"I am going to have a glass of wine now, and you are going to promise never to take on a potential burglar with a baseball bat again," she murmurs.

"Yeah, next time I'll use a gun."

Kala stares at him. He holds his hands up.

"I'm joking! Lighten up, mama..."

Kala laughs reluctantly, then glances at Will and smiles in thanks. He smiles back, disappearing, and Kala and Jalesh walk into the kitchen. He sets the baseball bat aside and yawns. She locks the door and pours herself a glass of wine, then looks at Jalesh, hesitates, and pours a small serving for him. He peaks his eyebrows at her and accepts the glass. She smiles gently, and then they both lean on the counter, watching each other.

Kala raises her glass, and he touches his glass to hers. They both take a sip.

He wrinkles his nose. "Well, it's better than beer..."

"Oh, your father will disown you," murmurs Kala.
He laughs loudly, then nods in agreement. "Yeah."

She glances down, chuckling, and they're quiet for a moment.

Then Jalesh says, "You look pretty badass with a gun, mama."

She laughs. "Thank you. You look quite fierce with a baseball bat..."

He grins, sipping more wine, glancing at it with ambivalence. Kala watches him, then breathes in and nudges him with her foot.

"Will was just here," she says quietly, "and he said you remind him of a police officer. Would you like that?"

Jalesh meets her eyes. Kala expects him to respond with instant, thoughtless excitement, but instead, he glances down, grins, and nods sincerely.

"I'd love that, mama," he says.

She grins too, melting. "Maybe you should spend the summer with him. He's a colonel, now, he could make an exception for you so you could ride along with some officers..."

He nods, smiling, then finishes the wine, steps across the kitchen to her, and kisses the side of her head.

"I'm going to go read now, good night," he says.

Kala nods, watching him ascend the stairs while she swishes the wine in her mouth. She glances down, overcome with pride, and then leans her head back, laughing quietly to herself about the raccoon.

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Monday

Jalesh pulls Elsa along the sidewalk, groaning. "Stop stopping!"

"The icicles are pretty," she says, glancing up at the dripping cones of ice on the striped awning above her.

"We're already late," says Jalesh.

Elsa stops again, reaching to touch a pristine layer of snow on a dormant flower bed. Jalesh looks at Aria, who has headphones in. She shrugs helplessly at him and he rolls his eyes at his useless siblings, who make every walk home from school take twice as long due to unimportant missions such as buying desserts, petting dogs, and throwing pebbles in the Seine. They don't understand he has homework to do.

He looks back at Sani, who has stopped in front of the window of a cafe, looking in longingly. His little brother sneezes hugely, leaving a mist of germs on the window. Jalesh sighs and goes back to pull him away from the window, shrugging apologetically at a woman inside the cafe, who is staring at Sani as if he's a disgusting slug.

Sani sneezes again and Jalesh looks at him in alarm. "Are you getting sick? Stay away from me if
you’re getting sick…”

Sani wipes his nose on his sleeve and looks cautiously at Jalesh, who sighs again and tugs Sani’s hat more securely over his ears. His wild hair sticks out from the bottom of the hat, framing his face, and he adjusts his boxy glasses.

“Can we get hot chocolate?” he asks.

“No,” says Jalesh.

Then he glances at Elsa, who’s wandering into the street because of a dog sighting on the other side. He yanks her back and she glares at him. He’s about to explain there are dangerous cars, but before he can do that, he notices Aria has stopped behind them to form a snowball.

“Don’t--”

The snowball flies past Jalesh and hits an elderly woman on the sidewalk. She turns and peers disdainfully at them.

“Where are your parents?” she asks.

Jalesh looks at her with wide eyes and points at himself. “Here! I’m their parents!” He shakes his head and looks at Aria. “Will you hurry up?”

She picks up her pace, but Sani goes into the cafe. Jalesh tilts his head back and groans, putting his arms around his sisters and guiding them inside. Sani walks confidently up to the counter, takes a roll of cash out of his backpack, and orders a hot chocolate.

Jalesh gestures at him. “Where did he get that money?”

“Mama gives him a euro everytime he does a chore,” explains Aria.

“What?” asks Jalesh. “She never did that for me!”

“Elsa too,” adds Aria, glancing at her younger sister and flicking the side of her head.

“Ow!” grumbles Elsa, stepping away, hugging herself, and pouting.

“And me, but I never do chores,” says Aria, shrugging. Then she yells at her twin, “Get me one!”

Jalesh shakes his head bitterly at the injustice of this, nudging the girls towards a free table. Sani sits down with two hot chocolates, and when Elsa looks longingly at them, he gets up and gets two more, one for her and Jalesh. Then he pulls a notebook out of his backpack and starts to work on his homework.

Jalesh stares blankly at his brother for a moment, then says, “I guess we’re staying here.”

“Yep,” says Sani, erasing something.

Jalesh rolls his eyes and takes his phone out of his pocket. He dials, and Kala answers with her typical tone of motherly apprehension.

“Is everything okay?” she asks.

“We’re at the cafe down the street, Sani wanted hot chocolate, also he’s getting sick,” says Jalesh.
Kala sighs. “Okay. I can pick you up in an hour.”

“Sure,” says Jalesh, hanging up and sets his phone to the side.

He pulls his leather jacket off and tosses it onto a free chair, then takes a book out of his backpack and surveys it with a slight scowl. Aria looks over at the geometry textbook and raises her eyebrows gently.

“Don’t say anything, Aria,” he grumbles.

She flashes her eyes at him, annoyed, and takes a science worksheet out of her backpack, scooting closer to Sani.

“Are you doing the space one?” she asks.

He nods, reads the title, trying to sound enthused, “Explore our solar system…”

Aria groans.

“I’d rather be doing astronomy than this shit,” says Jalesh, opening to a page about the Pythagorean theorem.

“I’ll switch with you,” says Aria.

He looks at his little sister for a moment, then slides the book over. “Questions eight through sixteen.”

She nods, pointing at her worksheet. “Name the planets and write a fact about all of them.”

He nods too, and they both get to work. Sani glances at them, twitching his mouth.

“Aren’t your teachers going to see your handwriting is different?”

Jalesh looks at Aria’s neat print and his own thin, sloppy cursive.

“We’ll just copy in our own handwriting later, dummy,” says Aria.

Sani pulls his hat off and shakes the moisture out of it. “You only have one worksheet, Ari…”

“Well, then I’ll erase what he wrote and rewrite it! Ugh, why do you have to be so much like mama?”

Sani rolls his eyes and goes back to his homework. Jalesh and Aria work quietly too, and Elsa leans her head on the table, kicks her feet boredly, and sings au clair de la lune to herself. They sip their hot chocolate while the snow accumulates outside and the wind picks up, and get through most of their work by the time Kala walks into the cafe, wearing a floral pencil skirt and a trim black peacoat, looking beleaguered. She pulls a chair over and sits with them for a moment, rubbing her temples.

“Headache?” asks Jalesh.

She nods. “I might make you make dinner…”

Jalesh nods. “Okay, mama.”

Kala squints at the worksheet he’s doing and he quickly tugs it out of sight. She meets his eyes and he gives her a winning smile.
She covers her face. “God, you look like Wolfgang...you can’t do that to me, Jali, I can’t be angry with you when you do that.”

“Exactly,” he says.

“Are you doing Aria’s homework for her?”

“Yeah, because she’s doing mine, it was a fair trade,” he explains.

“Jalesh is stupid and can’t do geometry,” says Aria.

“Don’t use that word, Aria,” says Kala.

“What else would I call it, mama?” she asks wickedly. “Math with shapes?”

Kala stares at her daughter and doesn't reply.

Jalesh shrugs. “She’s not wrong. I’m bad at this.”

Kala shakes her head gently. “Fine. Are you ready to go?”

Jalesh hesitates, looking at his homework, and says, “Actually can we stay here, mama? You can take Elsa and Sani.”

“I don’t want to go,” says Sani, and then sneezes loudly.

“You’re going right to bed before you get everyone sick,” says Kala firmly, running a hand through his untidy hair.

“Mama,” he sighs.

“Don’t argue,” she says tiredly, coughing into her arm.

He nods. She gets to her feet, adjusting her briefcase on her shoulder and lifting up Elsa. She kisses her hello and Elsa nuzzles happily into her hair.

“Do not stay out past dark,” says Kala, kissing the top of Aria’s head and nudging her oldest son as she leaves.

She coughs again as she and Sani walk out of the cafe and towards the car on the side of the road. Kala buckles Elsa in her car seat and Sani gets in the front with her, which he’s allowed to do since the drive home is very short. Kala blasts the heat and sits for a moment before she drives, taking a deep breath.

“Mama you work too much, we never see you!” says Sani.

“Yeah!” Elsa agrees softly from the back.

Kala looks at Sani blankly for a moment, then tilts her head down and starts to cry. Sani looks back at Elsa in alarm and quickly reaches his arms around Kala.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry, mama!” he says, rubbing her arm.

She shakes her head miserably. “No, no, I’m just so tired, honey, I’m so tired and I’m sick and I miss your papa.”
Sani nods attentively. Kala feels Wolfgang smile at this.

“You didn’t make me cry,” murmurs Kala. “I do work too much, I never see you.”

He nods again and says, “We could watch a movie tonight! And papa’s coming home tonight.”

“He is?” asks Elsa, leaning forward in her car seat, eyes wide.

Kala laughs tearfully and nods. “He is.”

“He is?” Elsa asks again, breathless. “Can I stay up and wait?”

“Maybe,” says Kala softly, smiling. She reaches to squeeze Sani’s hand, then wipes her eyes and pulls away from the curb.

“Please?” asks Elsa.

Kala rolls her eyes. “Well, I guess I know who your favorite is…”

Elsa grins and admits, “Yeah.”

Kala laughs again, looking at her daughter in the rearview mirror. Her smile widens and her eyes crinkle.

“You can stay up,” she tells her.

Elsa brightens and nods. “Okay.”

“He should be here soon anyway…” says Kala thankfully as she turns onto their street, which is unplowed. She sighs. “I hate driving in the snow…this is why Wolfgang isn’t allowed to leave me alone here…”

“But you’re a better driver than Papa,” mumbles Sani.

Kala sucks her cheeks in, believing it’s important to impart to her children that their father is a better driver than he truly is. “Your father is a very good driver…”

Sani raises an eyebrow and Kala leans forward, giggling immediately.

“I know, honey, I know, but it seems wrong to tell you he’s a bad driver, because bad drivers are dangerous, and I don’t want you to be scared,” she explains.

“Too late,” Sani tells her, eyes wide and fixed on the dashboard, remembering a particularly thorny moment on the road with his father.

Kala shakes her head gently and pulls into the driveway, then the garage. She helps Elsa out of her seat and carries her in, hanging up her keys, and pats Kumi’s head as she approaches them. Sani coughs hard as they enter the kitchen, and Kala quickly steers him into the living room and towards the stairs.

“Pajamas, bed, now,” she directs.

He groans, hanging his head and coughing as he goes upstairs. He coughs too, chest aching, and lets out a long sigh. She wants to go upstairs, take medicine, and sleep for three days, but she knows Elsa and Sani are hungry so she walks into the kitchen where she finds Elsa sitting on the floor, petting Kumi’s gray muzzle.
“Mama, is she old?” she asks.

Kala hesitates. When Aria asked this, there was a follow-up question about dog lifespans that left Aria crying because Wolfgang didn’t feel the need to soften the topic.

“Yes…”

“Okay,” Elsa says brightly, hopping to her feet and trotting out of the room.

Kala breathes a sigh of relief and takes a tray of Kartoffelkloesse out of the refrigerator, glancing around for a pan to heat them up in. Elsa returns, holding her favorite doll, watching Kala in interest. Kala smiles lightly, picks her up, and puts her nearby on the counter.

“How was school?” she asks.

Elsa tilts her head, considering. “I don’t want to do nap time.”

Kala meets her eyes, smiling as she pours the Kartoffelkloesse into the pan. “I didn’t like nap time either.”

“Papa says I should whisper to the other kids so the whole class is awake so the teacher gives up!”

Kala pauses in her effort to dislodge the final dumpling from the container. “Elsa please don’t do that.”

“I tried today but Alodie told me to stop,” grumbles Elsa. “Dumb Alodie…”

“Who’s that?” asks Kala, putting a cover on the pan and searching for her milagu jeera rasam spice blend in the counter.

“A girl in class,” explains Elsa, adding, “She has earrings, can I have earrings, mama?”

Kala bites her bottom lip, smiling. “Of course.” She finds the spice mix and pours some into a mortar and pestle. She grinds the spices, coughing weakly, and closes her eyes, exhausted. “Why don’t you like nap time?”

“Too quiet,” groans Elsa.

Kala nods, continuing to make the peppery soup her father would prepare whenever she was sick. Her muscles twitch in fatigue, but she thinks of Sani and perseveres.

“I could never sleep if it was quiet,” she tells her daughter. “And your father thought that was strange about me. But if it’s too quiet, even if I’m surrounded by people, I feel like I’m by myself.”

Elsa nods, eyes wide with agreement. “Yeah!” Then she glances at her lap. “Mama, will the teacher not like me if I ask if we could do music? For nap time?”

Kala looks at her as she heats a pan and sprinkles mustard seeds into the sputtering oil. “No beta, she won’t dislike you, playing music is a good idea.”

Elsa nods again. “Like Woofgang Amdo Mozart.”

Kala pauses, then puts a hand over her mouth and gently laughs. “Oh no. Say that again.”

“Woofgang—”
Kala cuts her off with an exuberant laugh, covering her face. She glances at her daughter through her fingers.

“Can you say your papa’s name?”

“Woofgang--”

Kala wheezes. “Promise me you will call him that when he gets home.”

Elsa nods. “Woofgang.”

Kala nods too, stepping over and hugging her while she laughs. “Perfect.”

Elsa grins and lifts her arms around her mother’s neck, so Kala holds her while she stirs the dumplings. Elsa yawns and nestles against Kala’s shoulder, and Kala glances at her with a faint smile, suddenly remembering how it felt to hold her as a baby. She hums wistfully, and then Elsa matches her hum with her own and mumbles the first line of a Hindi song Kala would sing her to sleep with. Kala looks at her in surprise and murmurs the second line, and Elsa bursts out joyfully with the third.

Kala grins. “You like to sing, hm?”

Elsa nods vigorously and Kala sets her down so she can chop a tomato. She coughs hard and sniffs, then groans.

“I like to sing too,” she says, voice gravelly. “Though I don’t know how nice I would sound right now…”

“Mama, you need to go to bed,” says Elsa.

Kala coughs again and nods. “I will. Let me give you these…can you say Kartoffelkloesse?”

Elsa shakes her head and Kala laughs. Elsa continues to sing sleepily and Kala finishes the soup, then dishes up some dumplings for Elsa and soup for Sani.

“When is Papa home?” asks Elsa.

“Soon,” murmurs Kala -- based on the buzz of activity in her mind, she assumes he’s at the airport.

Elsa nods, accepting the dish and padding to the kitchen table. Kala goes upstairs to give Sani soup and he eyes it suspiciously, dipping a finger in before eating it with a spoon.

“It’s good, it’s the soup I always make you when you’re sick,” explains Kala, blinking blearily in the fading light.

He nods and eats. She distantly wonders where Jalesh and Aria are, but then she lies down next to Sani, curling around him for warmth. She closes her eyes and drifts instantly to sleep.

Elsa, meanwhile, sits alone in the kitchen and eats her dumplings, glancing around as shadows fall. She slurps the last bit of butter out of her dish, then crosses the kitchen and stretches to reach a light switch. Then she goes into the garage, holding her breath because it’s dark and it echoes, and drags a small stool up the stairs and into the kitchen. They used to keep a stool in the kitchen so the children could help cook, but that tradition ended when Aria used the stool to reach a glass, and brought down an entire shelf, covering the kitchen with shards.

Elsa gets on the stool in front of the stove and ladles some soup out for Kala. She carefully steps off
the stool with the bowl, balancing it as best she can, and starts up the stairs. She goes into her parents’ room, expecting to find Kala there, but when she doesn’t, she continues into Sani’s room where she finds her older brother browsing a GEO Ado magazine and her mother snoring faintly, with her legs and half her head off the bed.

Sani looks at Elsa, then at the heavy bowl in her hands, and says quickly, “Oh no.” He shakes Kala awake, and Kala sits up, blinking in confusion. Then she sees Elsa and she holds her breath.

“I brought you soup!” says Elsa, walking towards the bed.

“Oh, be careful—”

But before Kala can get to her feet to help, Elsa stumbles slightly on the rug next to Sani’s bed and pours the soup directly over his bright white comforter. Sani looks at Kala in alarm, then grins into his hands and laughs. Kala stares at her daughter, who is holding the upturned bowl with a look of astonishment and betrayal, as if the bowl should have kept the soup from spilling out. Then her chin quivers and she starts to cry.

“I’m -- I’m sorry!”

“No, no,” says Kala quickly, getting up. “You were trying to do a good thing, don’t cry.” She kneels in front of Elsa and takes the bowl out of her hands, then strokes her hair and kisses her forehead. “It’s okay.”

“I’ll help!” Elsa says, still crying.

She dashes into the bathroom and returns with wads of toilet paper.

“Here!” she says, dabbing at the soup with the paper.

Kala smiles to herself and tries not to laugh. “I don’t think that will work…”

Elsa keeps cleaning the soup until Kala gently pulls her away. She takes the blanket off the bed and carries it downstairs to the laundry room, Elsa trailing her and sniffling.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats.

Kala shakes her head in amazement. Getting “I’m sorry” out of Jalesh, Aria, and even Sani generally involves threats or deadly glares.

“You were bringing me soup, that’s very sweet,” Kala assures her as she stuffs the blanket into the washing machine.

Elsa glances at her. “Shouldn’t you wait for papa?”

“To do laundry?” sighs Kala. “I dyed something pink one time, thirteen years ago…” She looks at Elsa and notices she has soup on her dress. “Could you give me that?”

Elsa nods and takes the dress off, then flings it at Kala, giggling madly before dashing up the stairs. Kala blinks and gestures at the air, unsure why her daughter found this so exciting, then shakes her head and puts the dress in the washing machine.

Elsa returns a moment later, wearing pajamas with tigers on them, her hair in a messy ponytail. Kala pulls her close, takes the elastic band from her hair, and redoes the ponytail so it’s smooth. Then she picks her up and hugs her tightly.
“Mm, thank goodness you aren’t like Aria…” she murmurs, walking into the living room and sitting with her on the couch.

She reaches for the remote and searches for a movie to play - “Not Frozen!” insists Elsa - and decides on Madagascar. Sani comes down the stairs, dragging a blanket, and curls up next to Kala. She snuggles with him, sniffing, feeling the flu in her lungs and her bones. She moans in pain and sighs.

“How do you feel?” she asks him.

He groans in response and she nods. Elsa nestles against her and watches the movie for a moment, then hops up, takes a chair away from the table in the corner where she colors, and drags it without explanation into the foyer.

Kala turns her head over her shoulder. “Elsa? What are you doing?”

“Waiting for papa!” she calls back, setting the chair near the door and sitting primly in it.

Kala puts a hand up to her mouth, endeared, grinning. Then she nuzzles Sani’s hair with her nose and pulls the blanket more securely around them both, once again drifting to sleep. Elsa waits in the foyer, watching the sun go down through the narrow window by the door. She blinks sleepily, swinging her feet off the chair, listening for any noise. After five minutes, her head tilts back and she falls asleep, her long blonde ponytail touching the floor behind her.

Half an hour later, Wolfgang unlocks the door, shouldering his bag, slightly bent due to fatigue. He breathes out in relief at the scent of home, hanging his keys on the rack near the door, and sets his bag on the entryway table. He turns, intending to go into the living room where he assumes Kala and the children are, but then he sees Elsa.

He chuckles instantly, grinning, and then walks up to her without making any noise. He kneels in front of her and gently shakes her knee. She sits up, blinking, and then screams in delight. He laughs and picks her up.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi!” she shouts, hugging him tightly.

He laughs and kisses the side of her head. “I missed you, forgot how loud you are…”

She grins.

“Where’s your mama and the others?” he asks.

“Mama and Sani are sick, they’re sleeping so shh,” she explains.

“Oh, you’re shushing me?” he asks.

She nods, the irony of this lost on her. He chuckles and walks towards the living room.

“What about Jali and Aria?” he asks.

She shrugs. “Out.”

He frowns and glances outside at the gathering dusk. “Out?”

She nods, unconcerned, and he carries her into the living room where he finds Kala and Sani, asleep
and snuggled together. He sets Elsa down and sits next to them, about to shake Kala awake, but Elsa belts out, “PAPA’S HOME!” and Kala sits up with a start.

“Oh my God,” she murmurs, disoriented.

Then she sees Wolfgang. She throws her arms gratefully around him and kisses him, melting into him and knitting her brow, overwhelmed. He smiles against her lips and pulls her closer.

“I missed you so much, oh my God, you aren’t allowed to leave ever again,” she whispers fervently when she pulls away. She thumbs affectionately over his cheeks and takes in the sight of him, shaking her head softly. “God I missed you.”

He chuckles and kisses her again, hugging her. “I missed you too.” Then he glances at Sani, who is still asleep, desensitized to Elsa’s tendency to scream in excitement. “Someone’s tired.”

“Oh, he’s so sick, poor thing,” murmurs Kala, stroking her son’s forehead.

Wolfgang nods. “You too?”

She sighs. “Yes. I haven’t been sleeping, the business about the IPO is...overwhelming.”

“Mm, becoming a millionaire, so stressful,” he replies.

She looks at him fondly, adjusting the collar of his jacket. She kisses him, then pulls away quickly to cover a violent sneeze. He tucks her hair behind her ear and nudges her.

“You should go to bed, I’ll go pick up Jali and Aria…”

She closes her eyes, shoulders sinking. “Oh, Ganesha.” She looks at her watch and then out the window. “They should be home soon, they’re at a cafe doing homework. Doing each other’s homework,” she adds with a frown.

“Is this because Jali can’t do math?” he asks.

She nods. “It is.” Then she glances down and smiles widely. “Wolfgang, Jalesh was so good this week, he was wonderful, he helped me get them dressed in the morning and he made lunch sometimes and he walked home with all of them and on Wednesday there was a raccoon in the garage, and I thought it was a burglar, so I took your gun and went downstairs--” She pauses at his expression. “It was a raccoon, Wolfgang, it was fine...anyway, by the time I got there, Jali was already there with a baseball bat. And he was shaking a little bit, but he was so brave...I was so proud. He deserves something, I think, a new bike or...we could take him to a soccer game. Something big, he was so responsible.”

Wolfgang smiles and nods. “As much as it concerns me that our twelve-year-old thought he could take on a burglar with a baseball bat, I agree with you.”

Kala smiles faintly. “He’s bigger than me, he tried to push me behind him when we were going into the garage…”

Wolfgang shakes his head. “He’s spending too much time with Will.”

“Maybe,” laughs Kala. “But I think he got that from you.”

Wolfgang hesitates, glancing down, then nods. “Yeah, he’s going to get himself hurt. He’s overconfident.”
“That’s one word for it,” Kala says with a light smirk. She looks at Elsa, who is standing at the edge
of the couch, waiting to be invited up. Wolfgang pulls her up and Kala cuddles her quickly. “She
learned how to say your name.”

He looks at his daughter with an eager smirk. “You did?”

She nods. “Woofgang.”

Wolfgang laughs hard, squeezing Elsa’s foot and nodding. “You got it.” He turns to Kala. “I’m
changing it to that.”

She nods, playing along. “I think it sounds much better like that.”

He grins. “Definitely.” Then he gets to his feet and lifts Sani in his arms. He carries him to his room
and Elsa follows him, chirping about soup and spills and laundry. She clings to his leg after he puts
Sani in bed.

He smiles, picking her up. “I’m not leaving again, I’m right here…”

She rests her head on his shoulder with a pout. “Good.”

He covers Sani with a blanket and goes back downstairs, and when he reaches the couch, Kala
stretches her arms up.

“My turn,” she says.

He grins, setting Elsa down -- “Papa, no!” she whines -- and then he scoops Kala up. She rests her
head on his chest, smiling, and he meets her eyes, mouth twitching.

“How old are you?” he asks.

“I like being carried,” she says innocently, adding, “Too old for you to ask me that, we aren’t going
to talk about how old we are.”

“Yeah, I’m too old to carry you,” he mutters.

“No,” she says lovingly, tilting her head up. “You’re still strong.”

He raises his eyebrows, unconvinced as he walks up the stairs with her. He sets her gently on their
bed, then glances at her, realizing she’s still wearing her work clothes. She looks down with a sigh,
then coughs hard and moans in pain.

“Why can’t I just…snap my fingers to change my clothes?” she murmurs after a moment, as he tosses
her some pajamas. Where is the app for that? It’s 2032…”

“I’m your app for that, say take my clothes off, when have I ever said no?”

She grins and laughs, then coughs again and groans. She rubs her eyes wearily before sitting up and
taking her shirt and bra off, replacing it with a soft tank. He sits next to her, lifts her chin up and
kisses her gently, then unzips the side of her skirt and she giggles.

“Mm, I wish I wasn’t sick,…”

He nods, nuzzling into her neck and tugging the skirt down. She groans quietly and he kisses her
again, tossing the skirt aside and gently squeezing her thigh.
“I’m going to get you sick,” she murmurs when he pulls away, dragging her fingertips lightly over his lips and his tinged-gray stubble.

“I don’t care,” he says warmly. “I missed you, babe.”

She smiles and nods. “I missed you, too.” Then she pushes him away and buries a cough in her arm. “I’m going to sleep now, and you are going to find our delinquent children.”

He nods. “I’m sure they’re walking home.”

“Yes,” she agrees.

He kisses her quickly before leaving the room. She finishes getting into her pajamas and finally pulls the covers over her, curling up like a cat underneath.

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Jalesh looks up from his book, blinking in surprise as he sees the last sliver of sun slip beyond the Paris skyline.

“Shit,” he murmurs, looking at Aria. “We have to go, hurry up, mama’s going to be worried…”

They hastily put away their things, zip their backpacks, bus their dishes and head for the door. The snow has accumulated on the sidewalk, and they face a blizzardy walk home given the uptick in the breeze. Jalesh zips his coat and checks that Aria is wearing a hat, then texts his mother to explain they’re walking home. They walk past a series of ornate apartments and turn the corner, continuing alongside the tree-lined park where Jalesh usually plays soccer. It’s shorter to cut through, but he hesitates, looking warily at the dusky trees.

“Don’t be a baby,” says Aria, nudging him.

He breathes out, grip tight on the straps of his backpack. “Okay. Don’t wander off.”

She rolls her eyes and they turn into the park, staying close together. He looks at his phone and sees a text – **Okay, be careful. Should I send your father to pick you up?** He texts back to say no, continuing through the trees, past a pond, and towards the edge of the soccer field, which is a flat plane of white. He can perceive the lights of their street from here and he increases his pace, nudging Aria to keep up. They turn around the soccer field, shuffling in the snow, but Jalesh stops at a noise. He glances at two boys standing near the soccer net and swears softly.

“Shit, keep walking,” he whispers.

Aria looks too and her eyes widen in alarm. “Ew, them.”

“Just keep walking,” he advises.

She nods. They pass the basketball courts quietly, and have nearly reached the crosswalk when they hear a taunting call of, “Oh look who it is!”

Jalesh bends his head down and makes an annoyed grunt. “Don’t answer.”

Aria grumbles. “I want to.”
“Well, don’t,” he says, pressing the crosswalk button.

They hear steps, so Jalesh turns and pushes Aria behind him. Two boys approach -- brothers from their school, fourteen and twelve, both bigger than Jalesh. The twelve-year-old is on the team which opposes Jalesh’s team, a goalie with a stocky build; his brother is skinnier, but taller. Jalesh looks at the two of them in dislike and Aria peeks around his side.

“Weren’t you going to stop to say hello?” teases the older one.

“Why would we do that?” asks Jalesh brusquely.

The goalie shrugs. “It’s only polite.”

Jalesh shakes his head and turns again, guiding Aria. “Los geht’s…*”

“Aw, they're speaking their dumb language again,” says the goalie.

“It’s German, idiot,” says Jalesh. “Du spinnst wohl…*”

“You’re not German,” says the older one, snorting at the idea.

“Wenn ich nicht bin, warum kann ich dir sagen, dass du ein Idiot in dieser Sprache bist?*”

The boy looks at his older brother, perturbed. “What’s he saying?”

The older boy shrugs and snaps, “This is our city, speak our language.”

“This is our city too and we’ll speak what we want to,” says Jalesh angrily, then gestures at the soccer ball the younger one is holding. “Practicing in all this snow won’t make you any better, it won’t help you win tomorrow.”

The boy throws the ball hard at him and he catches it. Then the boy saunters forward and walks in a slow circle around Jalesh and Aria. Jalesh looks at him cautiously, then at Aria, sensing a change in the boy’s intentions.

“Isn’t it past your bedtimes?” asks the older one, scowling.

His brother grins maliciously. “Yeah, shouldn’t you be home?” He smacks the back of Aria’s head. “Your mother might be upset if anything happened to her, aren’t you supposed to be watching her?”

Jalesh drops the soccer ball and shoves him. “Don’t touch her.”

“I can do what I want,” the boy says, pushing Aria down.

Jalesh gets in front of her and shoves the boy again. They look at each other for a moment, breathing hard, and then the older brother steps closer, arms folded.

“You know what would help you win tomorrow?” he asks the goalie, smirking. “Making sure he doesn’t play…”

The goalie glances at his brother and nods. Jalesh ducks in time to miss the first punch that the goalie throws, and when he straightens up, he punches him hard in the face. Aria screams and puts her hands over her mouth, scrambling back in the snow. The goalie wipes some blood off his lip, then leaps at Jalesh and tackles him to the ground.

“Stop, stop!” shouts Aria. “Don’t hurt him!”
“Shut up!” snarls the older brother, joining the scuffle and kicking Jalesh in the side.

Aria looks around wildly. She knows Jalesh’s phone is in his pocket, but she can’t reach it without getting hurt. She considers sprinting home to get help, but she doesn’t know what might happen to him in the time she’s gone. She watches breathlessly as Jalesh wraps his ankle around the goalie’s leg and flips him, then knocks his head hard against the ground. Her eyes widen hopefully, but then the older boy pulls Jalesh up, shoves him against the fence, and starts to hit him.

“Stop!” shrieks Aria, stepping back in alarm when the younger boy gets up and joins his brother.

Aria looks around for someone, anyone, but the park is vacant due to the snow. She turns her eyes back to the fight, terrified. It’s clear to her that Jalesh is a better fighter, but he’s outnumbered; she’s surprised how many of his punches have landed, but she knows it’s only a matter of time before he’s too exhausted or too hurt to continue. She watches him cough weakly and take a hit in his chest, and before she’s considered the consequences, she’s picked her backpack up and swung it fiercely against the back of the older boy. He grunts in pain and Aria quickly swings the backpack again.

But the younger boy turns and pushes her to the ground, then takes her backpack and pours the contents of it into the snow. She reaches for a book, intending to smash it over one of the boy’s heads, but Jalesh catches her eye and shakes his head seriously. He avoids a punch, then knees the older boy and swings at the younger one.

He takes a steadying breath, more angry and awake than he ever has been. He takes the younger boy’s head in his hands, then throws his own head against it, and the boy stumbles back, disoriented. The older boy grimaces and punches Jalesh in the face. Aria screams at them again and finally resorts to shouting “Au secours!*” to the empty air.

Jalesh spits blood on the snow and yells, shoving the older boy back.

“This isn’t working!” shouts the goalie. “Just hold him!”

His brother nods, wrangling with Jalesh, finally holding his hands behind his back. Jalesh looks at the goalie in alarm, trying to free his hands, but he can’t. He braces himself. He’s been in pain before, broken bones and sprained muscles, but he prefers pain when it’s sudden. He doesn’t want to know it’s coming, the way he does now.

Aria watches in horror as the younger boy hits her brother over and over, as Jalesh begins to crumble.

“Stand up straight, don’t be a pussy!” yells the goalie.

Jalesh spits on him in response, which prompts him to punch Jalesh in the face. Aria watches blood pour out of Jalesh’s nose and notices his expression swirl, as if he’s losing consciousness. She starts to cry.

“Stop!” she shouts. “Please, please, stop!”

When they don’t stop, she takes a deep breath, picks up a purple colored pencil, and approaches them. She raises her hand high, then plunges the pencil into the goalie’s back. He yelps in pain, turning around and looking at her in disbelief. She backs away, breathing rapidly, and he yanks the pencil out of his back.

“What the hell?” he asks.

His older brother shrugs. “Whatever.” He shoves Jalesh down in the snow. “Let’s go.”
He picks up the soccer ball, then pats his brother’s shoulder and pushes him in the direction of the street. They plod through the snow, looking over their shoulders in dislike at Aria and Jalesh. Aria races to her brother’s side, tears streaming down her face, and quickly kneels by him.

“Jalesh, Jalesh!”

He coughs and shakes his head, too dazed to speak.

She digs in his pocket for his phone, then dials her papa on instinct, though she doesn’t know if he’s home yet. When he picks up, she splutters, “Jalesh got in a fight he’s really hurt I don’t know what to do I tried to stop them--”

“Aria, slow down. What?”

She pauses to sob, then says shakily, “Jalesh got in a fight, we need help!”

“Where are you?” he asks.

She trembles at the fear in his voice and says, “At the park! Right by the house!”

“Stay there, okay? I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” she murmurs, watching Jalesh, who is slumped against the fence, eyes shut tight, panting. Her chin trembles. “Papa, he’s hurt bad, there were two boys, they were bigger than him…”

“I understand,” says Wolfgang. “I’ll be there soon, okay?”

“Okay,” she whispers, pressing closer to Jalesh.

She swallows and puts the phone in her pocket, then wipes her face. She takes her scarf off and presses it into Jalesh’s hand, and he puts it up to his nose to stop the blood.

“It’s going to be okay,” she says nervously. “Papa’s coming, it’s going to be okay, you’re going to be okay.”

Jalesh nods dully, pressing his teeth together, trying not to cry. They sit quietly for a few minutes, both shivering in the darkness. Aria looks through the trees at the brightly lit buildings, stunned how alone it is possible to feel in a city this large, and trembles at the sound of a siren. She looks at Jalesh worriedly.

“I shouldn’t have made you walk through the park,” she says, crying again.

He shakes his head slightly in response.

She swallows, playing with her fingers in her mittens, and searches for something else to say. Then she sees Wolfgang running towards them from the street and she sprints to meet him.

“Over here!” she says breathlessly, pulling him towards the soccer field.

Wolfgang’s eyes widen at the sight of Jalesh — he’s covered in blood and his face is puffy and badly bruised. He’s holding himself stiffly, eyes shut. He kneels in front of him, pulse quick with rage, and gently touches his shoulder.

“Jalesh, who did this?”

Jalesh breathes in and opens his eyes, then mumbles, “Sorry, we were supposed to be home
earlier…”

“Don’t apologize,” says Wolfgang softly.

“They pushed Ari, I didn’t want her to get hurt,” Jalesh adds.

Wolfgang nods, thumbing over his son’s temple and studying his face. “Who did this to you?”

He hesitates, so Aria sniffs and explains, “Two boys from school, one of them is that goalie on the other team.”

“The boys you told me about last month?” asks Wolfgang.

Jalesh nods reluctantly, then groans quietly in pain, looking down. His shoulders shake and Wolfgang watches him carefully.

“It’s okay to cry,” he murmurs. “You’re in a lot of pain.”

Jalesh stubbornly shakes his head. Wolfgang breathes out, caught in competing emotions - fury at the boys who did this, distress that his son is so much like him, heartache for how much pain he’s in, pride in his willingness to persevere in a fight he knew he would lose. He looks at Jalesh for another moment. The bruises and lingering rage accentuate their resemblance to one another.

He squeezes his son’s shoulder soothingly and glances at Aria.

“Why did they stop?” he asks.

Aria hesitates, then gestures at the purple pencil in the snow. The top inch of it is stained with blood. Wolfgang stares at it, then down at his daughter -- with two large puffs of hair atop her head and a glittery headband, she appears too innocent to have stabbed someone with a pencil.

“You -- you stabbed him with a pencil?”

She nods nervously.

“Good for you,” Wolfgang says seriously, turning back to Jalesh and combing his hand through his hair. “Jali, I think you broke your nose, so we’re going home to get your mother and then we’ll go to the hospital, okay?”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital,” mumbles Jalesh.

“Fixing a broken nose yourself isn’t fun,” says Wolfgang. “The doctors will give you some medicine. You’ll feel better.”

“Have a soccer game tomorrow,” says Jalesh, slumping again. He blinks. “I’m tired…”

Wolfgang’s brow twitches in concern and he shakes his shoulder gently. “Jalesh?”

Aria sighs. “He hit his head really hard, maybe he has a concussion.”

Wolfgang is too worried to question why Aria knows the word concussion. He nods. “How did that happen?”

“He hit his head against the other boy’s head,” explains Aria.

“Jali, you can’t do that to someone your own size,” murmurs Wolfgang. “They have to be smaller.”
Jali nods, disoriented. Wolfgang takes both of his hands and pulls him to his feet. He sways slightly, and Wolfgang braces against him, his shoulders under his son’s arm. Aria gathers her things in her backpack, and then puts an arm around Jalesh’s waist on his other side. Together, she and Wolfgang help him walk to the car at the side of the park. The motion of walking is painful and Jalesh looks down, gritting his teeth. Wolfgang notices a few tears combine with the blood on his face, but doesn’t mention it.

“I would carry you but you’re too big,” says Wolfgang quietly.

Aria glances at him. “You think Jali would let you carry him?”

“No, but I would have tried,” says Wolfgang.

They help him get into the passenger’s seat and Aria sits in the back. They don’t speak on the short, snowy drive home and when they pull into the drive, Wolfgang sprints up the stairs to the front door, then upstairs to his and Kala’s room.

She’s asleep with her phone in her hand, the last texts still visible on the screen.

Kala, 6:07 p.m. -- Okay, be careful. Should I send your father to pick you up?
Jalesh, 6:08 p.m. -- No, we’re okay.

Wolfgang breathes out, preparing, and shakes Kala awake. She groans sleepily and sits up, rubbing her eyes.

“What?” she grumps, then softens at his expression, experiencing his fear as her own. “Wolfgang, what happened?”

“Jali got in a fight, he’s going to be okay, but I want to take him to the hospital,” explains Wolfgang. “What?” whispers Kala, hastily getting out of bed and putting her arms around Wolfgang, searching his expression. “They were just walking home! Is Aria--”

“Aria is fine,” Wolfgang says temperately. “But Jalesh…” He trails off, rubbing a hand worriedly over his stubble. “He got beat up badly, babe, I think he has a concussion. It was two against one.”

Kala gasps and shakes her head. “No, no, oh my God! Let me put on my coat…”

He nods, letting her go. She puts on a coat, a hat, and her snow boots, then wakes up Sani and directs him to get dressed. They go downstairs and collect Elsa from the couch, then hurry to the car. Kala, Elsa, and Sani get in the back. Aria, Sani, and Elsa look in astonishment at their older brother. Kala leans forward, holding Jalesh’s shoulder, eyes flashing to see his reflection in the mirror.

“Oh my God,” she murmurs. “Wolfgang. He--”

“I know,” says Wolfgang quietly.

Kala’s eyes darken. “Who did this?”

“Will I be able to play tomorrow?” asks Jalesh, speech slurring.

Wolfgang shakes his head as he turns onto their street. “It’s in his blood,” he says. “None of the men in my family knew how to recognize danger.”

“But we raised him differently, we--” Kala cuts herself off, huffing. “Jalesh, we’re right here, okay? You’re going to be alright and you’ll feel better soon, I promise.”
“He was just trying to protect me,” Aria says ruefully, glancing at her lap.

Kala breathes out, overwhelmed, and squeezes her daughter’s hand. “It’s okay, honey.”

“They were bigger, he should have walked away,” Aria goes on. “One of them is fourteen.”

Jalesh coughs and says weakly, “I’ll get them back, mama.”

“No, you won’t,” Wolfgang says firmly.

Kala’s heart leaps in her chest and she shakes her head. “Jalesh, it isn’t your responsibility to protect everyone.”

“Just should have...tried harder,” mumbles Jalesh.

Kala and Wolfgang meet eyes despondently in the mirror and don’t respond. Kala squeezes Jalesh’s shoulder and covertly wipes the tears off her cheeks. No one speaks on the rest of the way to the hospital.

Once there, Kala and Wolfgang help Jalesh through the doors, and the receptionist looks at them expressionlessly. By now, she knows the Dandekar children by name -- there’s usually one emergency a year between Jalesh and Aria.

She hurriedly finds a doctor for them. Kala puts on a surgical mask since she’s sick, and puts one on Sani as well, who pouts. Then the six of them go through swinging doors into the ER, where they are greeted by their usual pediatrician, a slim Japanese woman with boxy glasses.

She glances at Jalesh. “A fight?”

Wolfgang rubs his face tiredly and nods.

"Okay, young man, let’s get you some help...”

Twenty minutes later, having given him some codeine, the doctor evaluates him for a concussion and schedules an x-ray. Kala and Wolfgang sit in the exam room with their other children, leaning on each other. Elsa keeps herself occupied with a magazine and Sani dozes with his head in Kala’s lap. Aria stands by Jalesh’s bed, asking endless questions of the nurses.

“I don’t understand,” Kala murmurs dispiritedly.

“He’s my son,” Wolfgang murmurs in response.

“Blood isn’t everything,” says Kala, playing with Sani’s hair to soothe herself. “Of course genes affect how we look, but not who we are...”

“I don’t think that’s true,” says Wolfgang, glancing at Elsa. “You know she’s exactly like you, Kala.”

Kala breathes out, frustrated, and after a moment she whispers, “I don’t want him to be related to...the men you were related to.”

“I don’t either,” he says solemnly. “But he is. But he only fights in self-defense. He would never hurt someone if he didn’t have to.”

Kala nods. “That’s true. But any kind of fighting scares me because he doesn't know when to stop.” She shakes her head tiredly. “His heart is so good. He knows what’s right and he’s so protective of
They watch their oldest son for a moment as the doctor examines his eyes.

Kala glances at Wolfgang. "Did you know what he told me?"

He shakes his head slightly, brow wrinkled.

"He wants to be a police officer, he wants to spend next summer with Will."

Wolfgang doesn't react for a moment, and then his mouth twitches and he laughs. "My son can't be a police officer. I spent half my life running from them."

"The irony is delicious," says Kala, satisfied.

"If you told me when I was twenty that I would raise a son to become a cop..."

She grins. "I know. But he would be good at it."

Wolfgang nods slowly. "He would." Then he rubs his face and murmurs, "Fuck, that's a dangerous job."

"I know," Kala says in a soft voice.

"I wish he would ask for help sometimes," says Wolfgang quietly, adjusting his arm around Kala and squeezing her waist. "He thinks he has to do everything alone."

"Like I said...he's like you," says Kala with a faint smile.

Wolfgang chuckles. "I know. Wonder how much trouble he's going to be with girls."

Kala groans and quietly laughs. "I don't know. Better than you, but that's a low bar."

"Thanks, babe," Wolfgang replies.

They watch Jalesh for another moment and Kala nuzzles her head against Wolfgang's shoulder. She isn't surprised by her son's fearless, sometimes reckless, attitude but she is surprised, after raising him with freedom and safety, with kindness and understanding, that he doesn't feel comfortable expressing his troubles to them. They never punished him for telling the truth, even if the truth was difficult to hear.

"I didn't realize it was this bad," says Kala regretfully.

"He didn't tell us," says Wolfgang reassuringly. "He insisted he could handle this."

"I didn't realize the boys he was talking about are...older and bigger." She shakes her head. "I can't believe how badly they hurt him."

Wolfgang nods. "I know. If Aria hadn't..." He hesitates, continuing more softly, "Don't overreact."

Kala looks at him in concern. "Why? What did she do?"

"She stabbed one of the boys with a pencil to make them stop," he explains.

Kala's eyes widen and she stares at Aria. "She did what? Oh my God..." She covers her face, unsure whether to laugh. "I can't believe she was brave enough to do that!"
Wolfgang looks at Aria, who is excitedly holding a stethoscope and beaming up at the pediatrician, asking if her brother’s nose will be crooked now. He smiles faintly.

“I would never have been that brave at her age,” Kala goes on.

“You would if you needed to protect someone,” he replies.

She hums in thought. “I suppose.” Then she looks again at Jalesh and adds, “We can’t let them walk home anymore.”

He shakes his head. “No.” He adds after a pause, “This city isn’t safe for them.”

Kala looks at the floor and breathes out, considering. “I thought it would get better with time.” She glances at Wolfgang with reluctance. “Wolfgang, would you consider moving back to Berlin?”

He looks at her in surprise and doesn’t answer immediately, but when he does, his voice is soft and sincere, “Yes, I miss it.”

Kala smiles. “I think it’s safer. And I’ve been wanting to expand the company there.”

He nods. “Okay.”

“And we could always have a summer home here,” she goes on.

He smiles gently and shakes his head. “Summer home…”

“Your wife is very successful,” she says flirtatiously.

He laughs and she smiles widely, squeezing his hands.

“So we’ll talk about it?” she asks.

He nods, looking at Jalesh. “Of course.”

Kala follows his gaze and murmurs, “I still want to hold him sometimes, is that silly?”

Wolfgang shakes his head, smiling. “No.”

“Do you think he’s okay?” she asks more quietly.

“Yeah, Bogdanows have thick heads,” he says, adding with a frown, “literally and figuratively.”

Kala grins, amused, and nestles the top of her head against his jaw. “You do. You’re indestructible.”

“And dumb,” he adds.

Kala laughs. “Not an ideal combination.”

He nods in agreement, chuckling and kissing her head. She thumbs over his palms, and they look down at Sani, who is snoring into his mask.

“How do you feel?” asks Wolfgang.

Kala sighs. “Startled into health because of Jali. There’s something physical about being a mother. I can feel them the way I feel you, even though they aren’t Sensates. They were part of me and I still remember that connection.”
He nods.

She smiles. “I remember Nomi telling me the sweetest story about Amanita’s mother, how she lost her once in a crowd and found her again through her heartbeat. I know how that feels.” She breathes out and glances wistfully at her hands. “Mm, I miss the intimacy of having a baby to hold.”

He smiles sleepily, leaning his head back. “Me too.”

“We should visit Nomi and Amanita soon, their daughter is only two,” she murmurs.

He nods. “And Aria loves them.”

Kala beams. “She does.”

The doctor turns to them, setting aside her flashlight and pushing her glasses up on her head. “He does have a concussion. This means he shouldn’t run around or do too much school work for a few weeks. He needs rest. Now we’ll x-ray his nose, but the visual exam tells me it isn’t too bad and if it’s broken it will be easy to set. I’ll bring a nurse from radiology, hold on…”

They nod as she leaves the room, then get up to sit near Jalesh, who grins uninhibitedly at them with a mouth full of blood. Kala winces at the sight.

“I lost so bad,” he says cheerfully.

Wolfgang glances at the IV bag. “Codeine’s working, hm?”

“So bad,” repeats Jalesh, adding, “Papa will you teach me how to really fight?”

"I'm sure you fought well, it's hard to win against two people who are bigger than you," says Wolfgang kindly.

"It wasn't fair," adds Aria. "He did fight good but they were bigger and one of them just held him while the other beat him up."

Kala's eyes cloud with rage. "What?"

Jalesh nods blearily. "Yeah. What Aria said."

Kala looks at Wolfgang in fear, and then she sits carefully on the hospital bed and puts her arms around Jalesh. She rests her head on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," she murmurs. "That must have been so scary."

"I wasn't scared, I was mad," he explains.

Wolfgang nods, unsurprised by this. Aria shakes her head.

"I was scared," she admits. "I didn't know if they were going to stop!"

Wolfgang pulls Aria into a hug from the side and watches Kala and Jalesh for a moment, weighing the consequences. Then he says, very softly, "Yeah, Jali. I'll teach you how to fight, really fight."

Kala meets his eyes and nods in earnest agreement. Jalesh nods too, and the doctor comes back to wheel Jalesh to radiology for an x-ray. An hour later, after a bone-resetting and a lesson about concussion care, the family tiredly pulls back into their driveway. Wolfgang leans over the steering wheel, pausing for a moment to gather the strength needed to walk into the house. Kala coughs into
his arm, also slumping.

They look at each other after a moment, smiling in relief to be in each other's presence again, and then get out of the car. They help Jalesh walk inside and get into bed. Kala makes him tea while Wolfgang wrestles Elsa, Sani, and Aria into bed, insisting their brother is fine and that they can't sleep in his room. Kala brings Jalesh the tea and he drinks it, and Wolfgang pulls two chairs into his room. Jalesh looks at them and squints, two black circles forming under his eyes from his broken nose.

"We have to wake you up every few hours," explains Wolfgang.

"Well, set an alarm, you don't have to be in here..."

"We're too worried to leave you alone," Kala says simply.

Jalesh groans, pulling the covers over his head. Kala chuckles and sits next to Wolfgang, reaching for his hand. He dims the lights and they lean on each other, silently watching.

After ten minutes, Aria comes in and sits on the floor next to Jalesh's bed without comment. After five more minutes, Elsa and Sani join her.

Wolfgang and Kala glance at each other with a soft, proud smile, then turn to watch Jalesh again.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Kartoffelkloesse = potato dumplings
Milagu jeera rasam = pepper cumin soup
Los geht's = let's go
Du spinnst wohl = you must be kidding/you're crazy
Wenn ich nicht bin, warum kann ich dir sagen, dass du ein Idiot in dieser Sprache bist = If I'm not, why can I tell you that you're an idiot in that language? (Jalesh is sassy)
Au secours = Help
The Chase

Chapter Summary

Jalesh and Mimi get in trouble. Felix convinces Wolfgang to talk to Jalesh. Kala naps.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jalesh pats the back pocket of his jeans for the third time, making sure his wallet is there. Mimi rolls her eyes and shoves him.

“You’ve checked two times already! Calm down…”

Since moving to Berlin, he’s spent a lot of time with his ten-year-old friend, and in that time she’s grown to feel like his sister. She’s uncommonly reckless, has gotten him grounded twice this year, and has shared stories about their fathers’ escapades that Jalesh neither wanted nor needed to know, but he loves her nonetheless.

He shoves her back and glances at her in annoyance. She's tall for a ten-year-old, skinny like her father, with waist-length sable hair to which she's added a single, light pink streak. She wears large hoop earrings and favors what Felix calls "rocker chic" outfits -- black tights, a dark patterned skirt, a tank top, and a hat. Today, however, a sickly hot August afternoon, she's wearing black shorts and a tank top with a blazing orange phrase on the front -- "Onyango 2034," campaign swag she picked up while on vacation in Nairobi. She insists she's more stylish than Jalesh, who can't be bothered to vary from a black shirt and jeans.

"I can't lose my wallet, mama gave me a lot of money," he says, adding quickly, "For groceries, Meems. Groceries."

She rolls her eyes. "You're no fun."

"Yeah, if we could, you know, not do anything illegal or dangerous this time, that would be great," chirps Celisa, now nineteen and de facto in charge of Jalesh and Mimi, a pair that Kala refers to as "the new Wolfgang and Felix."

Celisa, though older than Jalesh, is his height exactly, with creamy skin, brunette hair, a constellation of freckles, and ever-present bruises on her legs from her soccer hobby.

"We never do anything illegal," says Mimi.

Jalesh looks at her. "You literally got us all to trespass into that office building last week because you wanted a view of the city. We got caught, and kicked out, and I got yelled at."

"Trespassing isn't illegal," laughs Mimi.

Jalesh and Celisa exchange a concerned glance. Jalesh, having just returned from two months with Will and Riley in Chicago, feels he's an authority on what is and is not legal. Mimi has pointed out to him that American law differs from law in Germany, and he always retorts "Not that much, use your head, Meems!" He knows Mimi finds his new knowledge of laws and police work annoying and
considers it a betrayal of their friendship, which is largely built on creating trouble. He's tried to explain to her that their fathers broke the law because their circumstances were dire, but every time he tries, Mimi insists they broke the law for fun. Jalesh knows she's right, but he doesn't think about this too much.

"Trespassing is illegal, Meems," says Jalesh.

Celisa nods. "Totally illegal."

Mimi rolls her eyes. The three of them continue down Leipziger street towards the grocery store. Celisa clicks her tongue at the dog -- a four-month-old Rottweiler called Laika, named after the first dog in space. Aria picked the name since she was the most devastated by the loss of Kumi last year. Wolfgang pointed out to her that Laika didn't survive the space flight (Kala looked daggers at him) but Aria shrugged and insisted the name should be tragic to honor Kumi.

Laika trots to catch up with them, sniffing at Mimi and making her grin. They pass under an awning of a cafe and Jalesh groans happily in the sudden shade.

"I hate this weather," he says.

"Isn't Paris hot too?" asks Celisa.

He shrugs. "Yeah, I'm used to it, that doesn't mean I can't hate it..."

Mimi laughs. "It's just some sun."

"You spend every summer in Mexico!" argues Jalesh.

Celisa rolls her eyes and coaxes them towards the store. She waits outside with Laika while Mimi and Jalesh go inside.

Mimi and Jalesh grin gently at each other, now unsupervised, and take a shopping basket. Jalesh hands Mimi a list of ingredients.

"Cake is so boring," she says. "Why do grown-ups always want cake?"

Jalesh shrugs, adding, "Mama has to make their birthday cake every year because papa's useless."

Mimi shakes her head, eyes wide. "Papa tried last year, but what he made kinda...collapsed in the oven and mama thought it was really cute which is, like, gross."

Jalesh tosses a pack of katzenzungen* into the basket. "Don't complain, my parents are freaking ancient and they still snuggle or worse whenever we watch a movie."

"You wouldn't be so salty if you had a girlfriend," says Mimi with a superior smirk, dashing ahead of him to retrieve some oranges and bananas.

Jalesh rolls his eyes. "I don't want to freak mama out."

"Ooh, so there is a girl--"

"No there isn't," Jalesh says honestly.

"Why would it freak her out?" asks Mimi, before snorting and adding, "I guess I know why. She wouldn't want you to be like your papa. My papa told me--"
"Don't want to know."

Mimi huffs, placing the oranges and apples in the basket. "Why don't your parents tell you anything? I know everything my parents did."

"They've told me enough," says Jalesh. "What else is on the list?"

Mimi rolls her eyes at this obvious deflection and reads off, "Sugar, baking powder, butter, cream, and strawberries. And champagne, Celisa has to buy that..."


"Oooh someone knows French," replies Mimi, unconcerned by her mispronunciation.

Jalesh rolls his eyes, putting an arm around Mimi as they walk to the aisle with baking supplies.

"Want to go to the park after this?" she asks.

"We have to drop off the groceries first, Meems," he says.

"Ugh, why are you so responsible?" she replies. "Just give them to Lisa, and we'll take Laika, she can go swimming in that park near here. I don't want to go back yet, there's too many people."

Jalesh reflects on the presence of his grandparents, aunts, cousins, Felix, Dani, Will, Riley, their children, and his own family. He makes a face. He especially doesn't want to deal with Aria, who is bitter that he spends so much time with Mimi when Mimi is her own age.

"You know I'm right," says Mimi.

"Yeah, okay," he agrees. "But--"

She huffs. "I won't get us in trouble!"

When Mimi suggests "going to the park" he knows it's code for starting something, but he tends to go along with her wild schemes. He knows she would get into more trouble if he wasn't there to get her out of it, and he has to admit, their shenanigans are worth it (despite the lectures from Dani, Kala, and Wolfgang.)

They continue shopping, then explain their plans to Celisa after she purchases some champagne for the party. She looks at them suspiciously, but lets them take Laika and returns to the apartment in Mitte with the groceries.

The apartment is the top three stories of the building, not counting the rooftop where there is a garden and a pool; the first floor includes the living room, kitchen, and dining, the second is bedrooms, and the third is a large lab with an office, where Kala spends most of her time. It's decorated rather sparsely, except for Elsa's room, which is an explosion of color, stuffed animals, and art supplies.

Celisa comes up from the street-level and into the living room, where several wary adults look at her. Her parents, Dani, Felix, Wolfgang and most of Kala's family are on the couch, watching a cricket match, eating ice cream, and chatting.

"Where are Jali and Mimi?" asks Dani with a raised eyebrow.

"They went to the park," Celisa explains.

Wolfgang glances at Felix, who shakes his head.
"Jali is barely home anymore," says Felix, "you know what that means..."

Wolfgang, who would prefer not to talk about whether his son has a girlfriend in front of his wife's elderly family, raises his eyebrows at him. Over the years, Kala's family learned a good deal of German, and they tend to follow conversations quite well.

Felix holds his hands up. "All I'm saying is that if he's anything like you..."

"Yeah," adds Dani through a mouthful of chocolate ice cream, "when are you two going to have the talk with him?"

Wolfgang closes his eyes, asking the universe why he's surrounded by people who don't understand the concept of timing.

"Well Schatz, he already knows a bit," says Felix.

Wolfgang glances at him. His eyes widen and he sets aside his dish of ice cream, cagey.

"We may have watched Titanic during movie night last week," he admits.

"Oh!" says Auntie Ina excitedly. "A very good movie!"

Wolfgang covers his face. "Felix..."

Felix gestures defensively. "He's fourteen! There's just some tasteful nudity. And tits. And the car sex is really vague, it's just--"

"Stop," interrupts Wolfgang.

Will and Riley squeeze each other's hands, not daring to look at each other, knowing they'll burst out laughing at this interaction.

"What did you tell him?" asks Wolfgang.

Daya inches closer, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Are you telling me you let them all watch Titanic? Oh my God, Kala is going to lose her mind, tell me everything."

Wolfgang groans quietly, listening to the lively chatter of Sanyam, Kala, Elsa and Sani in the kitchen nearby.

"We read a Wikipedia page," Felix fills in.

Wolfgang stares at his brother and Dani, then whispers, "You read them a Wikipedia page?"

"That's what the internet is for," says Ina nearby, nodding knowingly.

Felix shrugs. "Jali didn't seem too surprised, I think he got the info from someone. Probably kids at school."

"You read that to all of them?" asks Daya. "Little Elsa?"

"No, we covered Elsa's ears," says Dani.

Wolfgang shakes his head in amazement. "I'm supposed to have this conversation with him, not you two--"
"It was an in-the-moment thing, Wolfie!" complains Felix. "And I did you a favor, brother, that was as awkward as a pig in a currywurst store. He got real quiet and nodded a bunch. Awful. And seriously man? You haven't talked to him? He probably has a girlfriend!"

"He's a good kid, it's fine--"

"Bad strategy!" argues Felix.

"He would have told us, he tells us everything," says Wolfgang.


"Yeah, and he's your kid. Remember when you were fourteen and you and Sabine Klein were--"

Wolfgang clears his throat, looking pointedly at Kala's family.

"Ooh, who is Sabine Klein?" asks Daya. "Did you date a lot of women before my sister?"

Wolfgang silently communicates to Felix that he's going to murder him at the first opportunity.

Felix grins, unfazed. "Well, I wouldn't say dated..."

Daya gasps and squeezes Wolfgang's arm. "You were a womanizer, weren't you, oh my God! But fourteen! That is so young!"

"He's going to kill you, babe," Dani informs Felix, watching Wolfgang's expression. "Slowly and tortuously."

Felix shrugs. "I could barely get you out of that girl's house! Her parents hated you. Good times. Anyway, you were fourteen, he's fourteen, he's your son, you've got to fucking talk to him!"

"He may be my son, but unlike me, he didn't grow up without a childhood and he isn't unloved and touch-starved."

Felix pauses, then whistles slowly. "That got real dark, Wolfie."

Wolfgang shakes his head. "He's Kala's son too. He has her genes with this, trust me."

Daya smirks. "You'll regret it if you become a grandfather at age forty-six..."

"Who's becoming a grandfather?" asks Priya, turning from the television.

Daya points at Wolfgang. "Him, if he doesn't educate his children."

Priya blinks, shakes her head tiredly, and turns back to the cricket match, unsurprised by the conversation her son-in-law and his friends are having.

"I agree with you, though, Wolfgang," says Daya. "Jali is very sweet and responsible like Kala."

Felix pats Wolfgang's knee and gets up to take a seat closer to Dani.

"Mark my words, Wolfie..." he says superiorly.

"I hate all of you," murmurs Wolfgang, getting to his feet and walking into the kitchen, where he finds Sanyam, Kala, Elsa, and Sani. Kala and Sanyam are huddled over a pot with identical frowns, Elsa is on the counter with a blue-stained popsicle stick in her hand, and Sani is standing on a step-
stool to see what his mama and Nānā are doing.

Wolfgang hugs Kala from the side and kisses her temple, then lifts Elsa in his arms and glances at her bright blue mouth. She grins at him with equally-blue teeth and he nudges Kala to look up.

Kala stares at Elsa for a moment, then grins gently and laughs. "Oh. Dad, look."

Sanyam glances up and laughs too. "Ah well! Blue is her color."

Kala laughs more loudly at this, then steps back from the stove, wets a cloth at the sink, and begins to wipe the blue color off of Elsa's mouth. Elsa wrinkles her nose and shakes her head, giggling, then reaches up and slides her hand over the side of Wolfgang's head.

"There. For you, papa."

Kala pauses, meeting Wolfgang's eyes.

"I have blue syrup in my hair now, don't I?" he asks.

Kala bites her bottom lip playfully, struggling not to laugh again. "You do."

He chuckles and Kala tries to wipe the goo out of his hair. Elsa grins proudly, chewing on the popsicle stick. Sanyam smiles to himself and nudges Sani, asking for the jar of tamarind. Sani hands it to him and they discuss how much to add to the chutney. Kala glances over and gives her input, then turns back to Elsa and Wolfgang.

"How's it going in there?" she murmurs, continuing to clean up Elsa. Wolfgang raises his eyebrows. "Other than Felix and Dani talking about the sex scene in Titanic in front of your mother and aunt?"

Kala's shoulders sink and she whispers, "God! Why did we invite them?" Then she frowns. "Did they watch that with our children for movie night?"

He nods. "Are you surprised?"

"No," says Kala, fondly pinching Elsa's ear as she sets the cloth aside.

"They also told Jalesh what sex is," he goes on, "and said we should be grateful we don't have to now. Oh, and Daya called me a womanizer and suggested we're about to be grandparents."

Kala nods. "I see...so far so good."

He nods, going along, and then they both laugh, leaning on each other and squishing Elsa.

"Oh dear," murmurs Kala. "Poor Jali."

"I think he'd rather hear it from them than from us," says Wolfgang honestly.

Kala laughs. "Yes, most likely, though he already knows. They teach that in secondary school." She pauses, gaze lost for a moment over Wolfgang's shoulder. She smiles sadly. "He's so old, Wolfgang, he's going to be an adult before we know it."

Wolfgang breathes in and shakes his head slightly. "I know."

"At least we have this one," says Kala, tugging on Elsa's foot.
Wolfgang squeezes Elsa, then says, "And we'll be grandparents, soon, so--"

Kala laughs and shoves him. He grins and sets Elsa back on the counter, then returns to the living room to monitor Dani, Felix, and Daya.

Meanwhile, Jalesh and Mimi are trekking through a large park, under the trees next to the playing field, sweating despite the shade. Mimi holds Laika's leash, and is tugged forward every time Laika sees a squirrel. Jalesh finally takes pity on her and holds the leash instead, and Laika finds him too heavy to jerk forward every few seconds.

Mimi glances up at him. "We could just let her off the leash."

"And have Aria literally murder me? Yeah, no."

"It's not just Aria's dog," says Mimi.

"Ari doesn't know that," replies Jalesh.

Mimi rolls her eyes, but is quickly distracted by a cart on the sidewalk selling ice cream. She hangs on Jalesh's arm for a moment, then turns him and looks him up and down.

"Hang on, you have something on your shirt..." she says, pretending to wipe off some dirt while sneaking her hand into his back pocket.

As soon as she has a good grip on his wallet, she yanks it out of his pocket and takes off at a run towards the ice cream cart. Jalesh stands still for a moment, arms extended in disbelief.

"What's wrong with you?" he shouts after her.

She dances backward, hoisting the wallet over her head. "I'm teaching you a lesson! You could have been pickpocketed!"

He shakes his head, hollering, "Get me a strawberry one!"

She comes back after a moment with two huge cones, dripping with chocolate and nuts, and hands him his wallet.

"How much were these?" he asks in alarm.

"I don't know, a lot," says Mimi.

He rolls his eyes and accepts one of the cones. "Great."

"Your parents are really rich, calm down," she says.

"Mama likes us to be careful anyway," he explains, nudging her back to the path as they begin to work on the huge scoops of ice cream.

"Why?" asks Mimi, letting Laika lick some extra ice cream off her finger.

Jalesh shrugs. "Because not everyone has what we have. I guess she doesn't want us to forget that."

Mimi thinks about this, leading Jalesh down a smaller path towards the lake in the southeast part of the park.

"I guess," she finally says. "But they help a lot of people, anyway."
Jalesh smiles. "Yeah. But I like that about them."

Mimi elbows him. "You're a softie."

He rolls his eyes and they walk quietly for a few minutes under low-hanging trees, past deserted benches, and to the shore of a large lake with islands and boats. Mimi pops the end of her cone into her mouth, then untethers a boat from one of the docs and waves Jalesh towards her.

He glances around. "Uh -- this isn't our boat."

"So?" she asks. "No one's out today, it's too hot."

He hesitates, then grins excitedly and follows her, lifting Laika into the boat and helping Mimi so she doesn't fall. He looks around once more, then pushes away from the dock with an outstretched foot.

They drift for a while on the water which is spotted with seeds and leaves which fell in a recent thunderstorm. Laika stands on the edge of the little boat, panting and looking at herself in the water. Mimi steers with some old paddles, grimacing and laughing whenever they bump into the edge of an island. Jalesh leans back in the boat and stares at the sky, twitching his lips in thought.

"Don't want to go back to school next week," he tells Mimi.

She groans in agreement.

"I don't like it," he continues, appreciating that Mimi actually listens, unlike his younger siblings. "I'm not very good at it."

"I thought you were good at, like, reading and stuff."

"Yeah but I can't do math at all," he says with a laugh. "I think mama's sad about it but she doesn't say anything."

Mimi rolls her eyes. "Math is useless, okay?"

"I know, but I need it for my abitur and--"

"Ugh, that's like three years away!" sighs Mimi. "Calm down!"

"Yeah but what if I fail and I can't graduate--"

"Yikes, Jali, shut up!" she says firmly.

He breathes out. "Okay." Then he says, "Mama said Kiani skipped a grade because she's so smart and she gave me that...look. You know the one. The one she gives papa whenever he does something really dumb."

Mimi squints. "Capheus and Zakia's daughter? I didn't know about that."

"I've only met her once like...five years ago. But apparently she's really smart."

"Why do you care?" asks Mimi. "You aren't even going to university."

"Yeah, don't tell mama that yet," he mutters, adding worriedly, "I could have just done fucking hauptschule and be done this year but I didn't want to tell mama I don't want to go to university, she wants me to do that before police academy."
"Well police academy is kind of like university," says Mimi reasonably, adding in an envious tone, "you get to spend years away from your parents, lucky. You'll get away with everything there."

"Yeah, I'm sure the supervision at police academy is really relaxed," he replies, smirking to himself.

"Exactly," says Mimi.

"No, Meems, I'm being sarcastic," he says, laughing. "And anyway mama will make me come back every weekend or some shit."

Mimi rolls her eyes. "Yeah." Then she kicks him lightly. "You sure about being a cop, Jali?"

He shrugs. "Yeah, I like the idea, this summer was really fun."

"You're only saying that because you got to play with cool weapons," she grumps.

He grins. "Fuck yeah. That's not what it's about though."

Mimi smirks. "Did you get to use one of those, um..." She gestures as if she has something on her shoulder, then says "Boom!" to clarify.

"Oh, an RPG? No, who uses those in real life?"

Mimi raises her eyebrows. "You really need to ask your papa more questions."

He holds up a hand. "Nope. You tell me way too much unbelievable stuff, Meems."

"It's all true!" she argues.

"Uh huh, like they actually stole millions in diamonds."

"Wow," says Mimi. "You sad little fool."

Jalesh snorts, sitting up to look at her. "That's nice, Meems."

She shrugs and goes back to paddling the boat towards the other side of the lake. Laika takes her paws off the side of the boat and trots up to Jalesh to lick his face, and he laughs and struggles with her for a moment before feeling the boat hit the earthy bank. He sits up and looks around.

"Want to get out?" asks Mimi.

He nods in agreement and they get out of the wobbly boat, then tie it to a nearby dock and brush themselves off, stepping onto the sunny path again. Jalesh digs in his pocket for his sunglasses, and while he's doing this, Mimi eyes him with a smirk. She bites her bottom lip, then steps behind him, lets go of Laika, and leaps onto his shoulders.

"Ugh, Meems!" he shouts.

"Piggyback!" she yells.

"Damn it, Mimi..."

She grins, latching her legs around him. "You have to carry me now, I'm tired."

He rolls his eyes, then breathes in and whips around. "Shit, where is the dog?"

"Oh, I let her go, she'll stay here, it's..." Mimi trails off, realizing that Laika has taken off at a sprint
down the path. "...fine."

Jalesh sets her down.

"Meems, you're dumb," says Jalesh defeatedly.

"Yeah," she agrees.

They look at each other for a moment, then run as fast as they can after the dog.

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Meanwhile, Kala is balancing Elsa on her hip and stirring a pot of butter chicken. Her father is helping Sani measure some dal to add to the dosa batter, smiling to himself when he sees that Elsa is nearly asleep, her head resting on Kala's chest.

"Is she getting heavy?" asks Sanyam.

Kala laughs. "Yes, she's a pain, she likes to be held but she's getting too old for it. Well, Wolfgang can hold her for hours, but I'm too small for this." She kisses the top of her daughter's head and adds, "How is the dosa coming?"

Sanyam nods. "Good." Then he chuckles. "She's like you, she likes to fall asleep in the kitchen."

Kala smiles. "She does. We have to play music to get her to go to sleep in her room."

Sanyam nudges Sani. "One time, your mother fell asleep in a booth in our restaurant, and she was very small so no one noticed her. And one of our customers sat right on her."

Sani perks his eyebrows. "She did?" Then he laughs loudly. "That's silly, mama."

Kala rolls her eyes. "Don't start with the stories, Dad--"

Sanyam grins, showing deep wrinkles around his eyes. "And one time," he continues, "we were making modak to take to the temple, and we told her that we always fill modak with something precious to please Ganesha. So, we left her alone to make it because it was her first time making it, and we took her to the temple. And on our way back, Priya noticed her earrings were missing. She had put every piece of jewelry she owned in the modak. We meant that the coconut in the filling is precious, but she didn't understand."

Kala tips her head back and groans. "Oh dear. This is why they like to be with you. You tell them embarrassing stories." She shakes her head. "I never saw that jewelry again."

"Elsa, you like to sing," says Sanyam.

"Once, your mother was singing in a chorus at school," says Sanyam. "But Daya tricked her into thinking the words of the song were different. So by the time she actually performed at school, she had learned the wrong lyrics, so she just had to stand silently in the back of the group."

"I cried for days, I was so embarrassed," says Kala.

"That's not as bad as what happened to papa," says Sani, grinding some rice and checking the consistency of it.
"No," agrees Kala.

"Why did you believe Auntie Daya?" asks Elsa.

Kala grins. "I don't know, but I never trusted her again."

"Yes you did, there was the time she convinced you to eat an entire pepper," says Sanyam.

"Like a spicy pepper?" asks Sani in alarm.

Kala nods. "Yes. I had to go to the hospital."

Sani grins. "Uncle Felix dared Jali to do that one time when they were babysitting."

Kala raises an eyebrow. "Did Jali do it?"

"Yeah, of course he did, Mama," says Sani with a shrug. "It's Jali."

Kala and her father meet eyes with a small smile. She takes the spoon from his hand to taste the curry, then nods in satisfaction and gives a bite to Elsa.

"How is he?" Sanyam asks warmly. "Jalesh?"

Kala smiles again. "He's good. Less fighting than in Paris. And he struggles a bit in school, but he's very responsible lately."

Sanyam nods.

Kala tilts her head, stirring the curry. "He does study, but he doesn't seem to understand math. Wolfgang thinks it's okay, but..."

Sanyam puts an arm around her. "Well, not everyone can be as smart as you, dear. He's smart in other ways. He's an excellent soccer player."

Kala smiles. "He is. But do you know the headaches that has given us? He gets hurt so often..."

"Yes, I can't imagine," says Sanyam. "That's why we're grateful we only had girls."

Kala grins. "Oh, it isn't just boys that get hurt. Aria is terrible too." She shakes her head. "But Jalesh...it's like he doesn't feel pain when he's playing, which Wolfgang insists is natural, but...I worry that he wouldn't notice when he's actually hurt. Whereas this one..." She bounces Elsa slightly. "She cries every time she stubs her toe."

"Do not," pouts Elsa.

Sanyam chuckles and Kala smiles faintly.

"Is it okay?" she murmurs. "That he doesn't do well in math?"

Sanyam nods. "You and Daya were both quite book-smart so I can't speak from experience, but if a child isn't excelling in something, it just means they'll excel in something else. And you and Wolfgang are wonderful parents so you can't go blaming yourself."

Kala smiles more widely. "Thanks, Dad."

Sanyam nods, checking the fragrance of the chutney, and adds, "And I know you say he's like
Wolfgang. But I think he's like you. He's very dedicated and he's very kind."

She smiles. "He's like both of us. He's too much of a fighter to be just like me."

Sanyam chuckles, but he says, "I know my daughter. You're more of a fighter than you realize." He sprinkles some cumin into the dosa batter and glances at her. "Priya and I were so worried for you when you were younger. We didn't know what your life would amount to after you met Wolfgang. How silly of us. You have your own company and it's even more successful than..." He lowers his voice and takes on a spooky tone to make her laugh. "...Rasal Pharmaceuticals."

She grins. "Yes, I see him sometimes at conferences, it's not as awkward as I expected it to be. We show each other pictures of our children."

Sanyam laughs. "It sounds like it could be worse. Though I imagine he will be rather jealous when Time selects you for person of the year--"

Kala rolls her eyes. "Dad! You know that isn't going to happen."

"Why not? You patented that excellent HIV vaccine!"

"I know, but--"

"And you made it affordable!"

"Yes, but--"

Sanyam laughs and pats her back. "Well. You are my person of the year."

Kala meets his eyes and smiles. He smiles back and goes back to tinkering with the chutney. Kala sets Elsa down and puts an arm around her dad, glancing past him at Sani, who is peeling garlic.

"Do you need help?" she asks.

He shakes his head, then looks at her. "How do you get the smell off?"

"Steel does," says Kala immediately. "The molecules in the steel bind with the sulfur molecules on your hands and take the smell away. I think the sink is made of steel, you could try that..."

Sani raises an eyebrow. "Really? Cool..."

Then Aria runs through the kitchen, followed by Wolfgang, who's shouting, "Give that back! Aria!"

Kala turns and puts a hand on Wolfgang's arm. "What did she take?"

"Money, out of my wallet."

They hear the front door slam.

"And she's gone," he says, putting his hands on his hips and nodding.

Sanyam raises an eyebrow. "How's that going?"

Kala sighs. "She's angry at everyone. She's angry at me because I didn't let her go to a movie last week, she's angry at Wolfgang because he yelled at her yesterday for dangling Elsa off the roof, she's angry at Sani because he's taller, she's angry at Jali because he spends more time with Mimi than with her..."
"She dangled Elsa off of the roof?" asks Sanyam.

"Does that honestly surprise you?" murmurs Kala, adding to Wolfgang, "Are you going to follow her?"

"No, if she gets lost that's what she deserves," he says.

Kala breathes out. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, it would teach her a lesson. She can find her own way home."

"She's ten..."

"She's completely disrespectful and I'm fucking tired of it--"

Kala clears her throat and Wolfgang glances at Sanyam.

"Sorry."

"No, no, you are justified in swearing, I don't understand how you keep up with that girl."

Kala laughs quietly at this, then squeezes Wolfgang's arm. "How much money?"

"About eighty-five euros..."

Kala blinks. "Well, she's grounded indefinitely."

He nods, then reassures Elsa, who was frightened by his yelling, by squeezing her nose. She relaxes and reaches her arms above her head, asking to be picked up. Wolfgang lifts her, then glances at Sani, who is blowing on a spoonful of curry and looking steadily at him.

"Maybe you should send Aria to one of those prisons for bad kids," Sani says, straight-faced.

Wolfgang nods. "We're going to, she's leaving tonight."

Sani brightens. "Really?"

Wolfgang laughs and musses his hair. "No." Then he glances at Kala. "Maybe we should."

"Yes, let's send our ten-year-old to a youth detention center..."

"She'll end up there eventually anyway."

Kala sighs and runs a hand through her hair. "Don't say that."

Wolfgang shakes his head and returns to the living room, where Felix shouts, "I see you passed on the thief gene!"

Meanwhile, Jalesh and Mimi have made no progress catchin up with Laika. Jalesh leans over, bracing his hands on his knees and panting.

"Mimi I'm going to kill you."

She wipes sweat off her face and coughs weakly. "I can't run anymore."

Jalesh drags his arm over his brow and straightens up, looking around the round-about which skirts the Siegessäule. He squints in the sun.
"If she gets hit by a car they'll never let me leave the house again," he says.

Mimi nods. "We'll find her."

Jalesh shakes his head, slightly nauseous from running in the heat. He takes his shirt off and tucks it into the back of his jeans.

"I wish I could do that," grumbles Mimi.

He's about to snark at her, but then he notices Laika across the street, trotting around in the grass underneath the Siegessäule.

"There!" he shouts, pulling Mimi at a run into traffic, avoiding cars and flipping off a driver who beeped.

They reach the other side -- Mimi shoves him hard and looks at him with wide, startled eyes -- and he sprints towards Laika, who runs out of reach behind the tower.

"We almost got hit by a car!" Mimi shouts.

"Almost!" retorts Jalesh, adding to Laika, "Stop running!"

Laika does not stop running. She continues over the grass, then trots into traffic on the other side of the tower. Jalesh stops, holding his breath, and watches as she averts a collision with a motorcycle and makes it to the other side in one piece. Mimi catches up with him and they look at each other, then rush across the traffic again and follow Laika into the park once more. She maintains a steady pace ahead of them and Jalesh looks at Mimi as they run.

"Why did you let go of the leash?"

"I didn't think she would run away!"

Jalesh rolls his eyes and picks up his pace, urging Mimi to keep up. They race through the hilly trees of the park, calling for the dog repeatedly.

"It's like she's running home!" says Jalesh in disbelief.

"Maybe she is, maybe she misses Aria," says Mimi, adding, "how do you run all day like this?"

"Soccer, stubbornness, deadly fear of my little sister."

"She won't be that upset--"

"She'll try to kill me, just watch."

They follow Laika down a hill, past a pond, and over a large grassy section where several families are picnicking. Jalesh senses disaster, but before he can say anything, Laika has snatched a sausage out of the hand of a child and run away with it. The child begins to cry loudly.

"Shit, shit, Meems we're both so dead," he says, sprinting past the horrified family and yelling, "Sorry!"

The parents of the crying child gesture angrily at them, but they avoid a conversation and continue after Laika. For a brief moment, it appears she's going to stop to consume the stolen sausage, but she keeps running, leash flying behind her. She knocks over a jogger and Jalesh cringes, pulling Mimi behind a tree so the jogger can't spot them and report them to the authorities for a loose dog. When
the jogger gets up and limps away, they continue to run, both exhausted. Laika, now far ahead of them on the park pathway, pauses to itch. Mimi and Jalesh look hopefully at each other, but Laika springs to her feet at their approach and keeps running.

"What the fuck is wrong with this dog?" pants Jalesh.

Mimi shakes her head, breathing too hard to reply. They follow the dog across another, less-busy street, past a war memorial, and into the field bordering the Reichstag Building. Jalesh leaps over a hedge, dodging tourists and visitors, dragging Mimi after him. Laika trots along the side of the building and Jalesh stops suddenly, noticing that several dozen diplomats are gathered in chairs in front of the building, listening to a speech. Laika walks confidently up to them.

"Oh no, oh no," murmurs Jalesh. He covers his mouth as he watches Laika stab her snout against the legs of various cabinet members. "How. How is this possible."

Mimi doubles over, catching her breath.

Jalesh watches in disbelief as Laika trots through the diplomats, nosing them and wagging her tail. Finally, the man giving the speech loudly asks, "Whose dog is this? Excuse me! There is a dog here!"

Jalesh timidly walks closer to the chairs, and sheepishly yells, "Laika!"

One of the diplomats, an elderly woman in a red suit, turns in her chair and eyes him. He gives a feeble wave in response. Laika runs up to him and sits next to him, panting. He grimaces and takes her leash.

"Uh, sorry," he offers.

The diplomat gets up, despite the speech continuing. She walks up to him and folds her arms.

"What's your name, young man?"

He hesitates. "Jalesh Dandekar."

"Oh, Kala Dandekar's son?"

Jalesh pales. Oh shit. He envisions the blurb in the news. Local CEO's son makes a complete ass of himself at the Reichstag Building.

"Um, yeah, I am," he admits. "But she didn't raise me to be this way."

The woman snorts and smiles. "Do you know how to get home from here?"

He nods.

"Okay, next time, don't let go of the leash," she says kindly, adding, "and put a shirt on."

"With all due respect ma'am, it's way too hot for that."

She raises her eyebrows, amused. He clicks his teeth at Laika, then jogs back to rejoin Mimi, who is laughing into her hands.

"She knows mama," says Jalesh. "I'm never hearing the end of this."

"At least Laika didn't pee on one of their legs or something," giggles Mimi, plucking at her shirt to
create a draft and cool off. "Can we take the metro back?"

"No, Laika isn't allowed on there, she's considered an attack dog."

They look at Laika, who is lying in the grass, tongue out, blinking happily in the sun.

"What a vicious killer," he murmurs.

Mimi groans. "I'm too tired to walk back, Jali."

"This is your fault, you're walking back," he says.

She groans more loudly, plopping down in the grass and shaking her head. Jalesh rolls his eyes and pulls her to her feet.

"Want a piggyback ride?"

She brightens. "Yeah, I do."

Twenty minutes later, they make their way towards the apartment in Mitte, Mimi leaning her cheek on the back of Jalesh's head. Laika, tired out from her two-kilometer jaunt across Großer Tiergarten, lingers behind them, sniffing at bushes and trash bins.

"I can't believe I carried you all the way here," Jalesh mumbles.

"You're always bragging about how strong you are," Mimi retorts.

They've nearly reached the entrance to the apartment when they spot Wolfgang outside of it. He glances at them, holding still, taking in the details. Mimi slides off Jalesh and watches Wolfgang carefully.

"What did you do?" he asks.

"Nothing," says Jalesh.

"Why were you carrying Mimi?"

"She was tired."

"Why was she tired?"

Mimi opens her mouth and Jalesh smacks her arm. Like her father, Mimi has a tendency to blurt out incriminating details.

Wolfgang squints at this. "And you took your shirt off because...?"

"Hot out," says Jalesh.

"Uh huh," says Wolfgang, unconvinced.

Jalesh gestures at him. "Why are you outside?"

"Waiting for Aria so I can yell at her privately," explains Wolfgang.

Jalesh rolls his eyes. "You're outside because there's too many people inside and you're getting sick of them."
"That too."

"What did Aria do now?"

"She stole money out of my wallet and ran out the door."

Jalesh glances at Mimi. "Sounds like someone I know."

"It wasn't your money, Jalesh."

"Oh you stole money too?" asks Wolfgang.

Mimi shakes her head rapidly. Wolfgang terrifies her despite never giving her a reason to. He assumes this is because Felix has told her too many stories about who he used to be.

"I'll pay you back," says Jalesh.

Wolfgang shakes his head. "You don't have to." He's about to continue speaking, but Aria comes around the corner. Jalesh looks at her with a slight frown – her frizzy hair is piled in a messy bun at the very top of her head, she's wearing bright pink sunglasses, and she's throwing some jelly beans into her mouth. Lately, merely the sight of his little sister annoys him.

Her eyes widen at the sight of Wolfgang, and she tries to backtrack, but he takes her arm and yanks her closer.

"I can explain!" she yells, holding up a bag. "It's a gift!"

"Why would you steal money for a gift?"

"Because I was mad at you for yesterday and I didn't want to talk to you and I would have had to talk to you to ask."

Jalesh rolls his eyes. "How dumb are you?"

"Shut up, Jalesh!" She pulls her arm away from Wolfgang's grip, then eyes Mimi and Jalesh. "What were you two doing with my dog?"

"Hold on," says Wolfgang. "A gift. For who? What is it?"

"It's for you and mama, it's your birthday."

"So you're mad at me but you got a gift."

She nods. "I'm not that mad."

Wolfgang groans. "Aria, you can't steal money."

"You have," she retorts.

He shakes his head dully, asking himself why he told his impressionable, badly-behaved daughter this detail about his life.

"That doesn't make it right, Aria," he says.

She rolls her eyes in response, then claps her hands at Laika and kneels down to greet her. Laika runs up to her and yanks Jalesh forward.
"She's exhausted," complains Aria. "What did you do? It's hot outside, you can't just let her run around!"

"We didn't mean to--"

Jalesh glares at Mimi so she stops speaking. Aria narrows her eyes.

"You didn't mean to what?"

Mimi shakes her head. "No, nothing."

"We didn't mean to stay out so long," says Jalesh.

Aria sets her bag down and walks up to Jalesh, looking at him defiantly and taking off her pink sunglasses.

"Is that supposed to scare me?" he asks.


Wolfgang shakes his head in the background, dreaming distantly of traveling somewhere alone with Kala, a generous supply of beer, and books to read, free from screaming children, in-laws, and his sloppy, oversharing brother.

"I didn't do anything with Laika--"

"I know you're lying!"

Mimi bites her bottom lip. "She um... we let go of the leash for a little bit, it was an accident."

Jalesh groans. "Mimi..."

"What?" says Mimi. "She was going to find out!"

Aria growls. "How long was she loose, Jalesh?"

He hesitates, and Mimi blabs, "A while she ran across the park but she didn't get hit by any cars and we got her by the time she reached the Reichstag because she stopped because there were a bunch of fancy people outside and she had to sniff them all."

Wolfgang almost laughs, but then Aria launches herself at Jalesh, slapping him everywhere she can reach.

"You let my dog run across a street? You idiot! You're such an idiot, I hate you! I hate you! She could have died!"

Wolfgang quickly pulls her off of Jalesh, but she turns around, shoves him as hard as she can muster, and goes back to kicking and pushing her brother, who decides it's best to cover his face and wait it out.

"You're never walking her again, I hate you! You're so stupid!"

Wolfgang pulls her off of Jalesh again, turns her, and holds her wrists so she can't hit him.

"Ari, hey, calm down."
She starts to cry loudly. "I don't want another dog to die!"

"I know," Wolfgang says patiently.

She looks down and continues to cry, so Wolfgang pulls her into a hug and rolls his eyes at Jalesh and Mimi.

"And that," says Jalesh to Mimi, "is why you shouldn't open your mouth."

"Wow," murmurs Mimi. "You okay?"

"I've been hit a lot harder than that," replies Jalesh.

Mimi nods and says brightly, "That was a shitshow."

Wolfgang snorts.

"Don't laugh at me," mumbles Aria.

"I'm not laughing at you," says Wolfgang, picking her up and groaning quietly at the weight. "C'mon, we'll go inside."

Aria sobs, mostly for attention, somewhat out of spite. Wolfgang breathes out measuredly, then opens the door for Jalesh and Mimi, who herd Laika inside. They all walk upstairs to the living room, where Kala's family, Felix, Dani, Riley and Will all look up.

"Don't ask," says Wolfgang, passing them to reach the kitchen while Aria cries.

He enters the kitchen, where Sanyam, Sani, and Elsa are working on a cake recipe.

"Have you seen Kala?" he asks loudly, to be heard about Aria's crying.

Sanyam nods. "She went to go lie down."

Wolfgang nods and goes upstairs, still carrying Aria. He walks into their bedroom and finds Kala on her back in bed with her shoes still on.

"Who's crying?" she groans, sitting up slightly.

Wolfgang sets Aria down, and she immediately gets on the bed and clings to Kala, still crying. Kala closes her eyes and breathes out.

"Did you yell at her?" she asks, stroking Aria's hair affectionately.

"No, the dog got lost, she got scared," says Wolfgang.

"The dog got lost?" asks Kala.

Wolfgang smiles faintly and gets on the bed next to her. "Jalesh might be fourteen but he's still a dumb kid."

"Ah," says Kala, also smiling. She shifts so Aria is in between them, curled up, sniffling, and pets her arm. "She feels everything so intensely."

Wolfgang nods.

"What did she steal the money for?" asks Kala.
He smiles. "A present for us."

Kala aws softly and kisses Aria's forehead. "Well, she can't be in trouble for that."

"And jellybeans," adds Wolfgang.

"Oh, nevermind, we have to cut her thieving little fingers off," says Kala, taking Aria's hands and kissing her fingers.

Aria laughs and tries to pull away. "Mama, stop..."

"Honey, next time just ask for some money, okay?" whispers Kala.

Aria nods and snuggles into her. Wolfgang rubs her back and glances at Kala.

"Are you in here to escape everyone?" he asks.

She laughs quietly. "Yes. I don't know why we invited so many people. My sister, why did we invite my sister? And why on earth did we invite Felix and Dani and let them stay in the same room as my poor mother?"

Wolfgang chuckles and shakes his head, then reaches to tuck Kala's hair behind her ear. She smiles gently and nudges him with her foot, and then she glances at the slender watch on her wrist.

"When is Jali's game?" she asks.

"That's today?" asks Wolfgang.

"It's Tuesday, so yes," says Kala.

Wolfgang rolls onto his back and blinks. "But I want to sleep."

She hums in agreement, then glances at him. "Do you want to sleep with me in here?"

"Fuck yes," he agrees.

Aria, no longer sniffing, gets to her feet and trots out of the room. Wolfgang lifts his head to watch her leave, then pulls Kala against him and nestles his face into her hair. She smiles sleepily.

"You know, when I say sleep with me you assume it means a nap now..."

He laughs, then kisses the side of her mouth. "That's the paradox of having kids. You have to have sex to have them, and then they grow up and make sure you never have sex again."

She grins and snuggles against him. "I thought they would be easier to raise as they got older but..."

"No, Aria's going to make sure our life is hell when she's older."

Kala sighs. "At least she's a good student."

"Yeah, that'll go away as soon as she tries drugs and dating."

Kala groans. "I know we say Jali is the most like you but..."

He laughs. "No, it's Aria."

"You're more stoic," murmurs Kala. "She expresses all the annoyance and anger the moment she
feels it. She's very dramatic."

"And fearless, I was trying to make her stop hitting Jalesh--"

Kala sighs deeply.

"--and she turned around and shoved me."

"Making her braver than most grown men," says Kala, adding, "or dumber."

"She'll learn when she shoves someone who will fight back," says Wolfgang, adjusting around Kala and holding her closer.

"You could be a bit tougher on them," she murmurs.

"I'm not going to fight my ten-year-old daughter."

"No," says Kala with a smirk. "You might lose."

He laughs and shoves her gently. She turns to face him and touches her nose to his.

"Go to sleep now," she says.

He kisses her playfully and she laughs, turning over to smother him. He laughs and puts his arms around her and they settle like this, closing their eyes.

An hour later, Felix creeps along the hall with Elsa and Jalesh, who is now in his soccer gear. He encounters the shut bedroom door and raises his eyebrows.

"Bad sign," he observes.

"Ew," complains Jalesh.

"Ey!" shouts Felix, knocking on the door. "You can't just abandon a party to bone--"

"Uncle Felix," says Jalesh, mortified.

A moment later, Wolfgang opens the door with a groggy scowl. "Nothing we haven't done before, but this time we were sleeping, and we want to keep sleeping, so fuck off." Then he glances at Jalesh and shuts his eyes quickly. "You didn't hear the first part of that."

"Yes I did, but I'm pretending I didn't."

"We have to go," says Felix. "Jali's game."

"You don't have to come--" starts Jalesh, but Wolfgang shakes his head.

"No, we're coming, we can't miss a game of yours."

Jalesh smiles at this and nods. The group eventually gathers in the living room, all dressed for a sunny afternoon, except for Aria who insists she isn't going because Jalesh doesn't deserve her support. Kala yells at her to get dressed, and after ten minutes, Aria comes back wearing the colors of the opposing team.

Felix and Dani both laugh richly at this, proud of their petty goddaughter. Will and Riley also chuckle and so does Oliver, but Celisa looks at Jalesh as if to apologize for Aria's behavior and he
smiles, knowing she's the only one who understands what's at stake with soccer.

The group goes outside, Aria toting Laika on a leash, Kala and Wolfgang holding hands and yawning, and Sanyam still sporting a sprinkle of flour on his clothes. He finished the cake with Sani and Elsa's help, electing to let Kala sleep.

Jalesh and Mimi walk ahead of everyone with Will and Felix, chatting about soccer, and eventually the group reaches a large playing field with an old mural of an elephant on a building nearby. Jalesh hurries to meet his team, and as he's passing the bleachers, two girls say in unison, "Hi, Jalesh!"

Wolfgang whips his head around, frowning slightly. Felix meets his gaze.

"What did I tell you, Wolfie..."

He watches as the two girls pass Jalesh and smile. Jalesh stops to grin at them, and Wolfgang passes him, hits the back of his head, and says, "Focus on the game."

Kala looks cautiously at the two girls, then at Jalesh, who's staring after the girls with a look of interest and confusion. She glances at Wolfgang and raises her eyebrows, barely resisting a laugh.

"Look at that," she murmurs.

"All the girls like him because he plays soccer," huffs Aria. "I guess they don't care he looks like a butt."

"Aria, be nice," sighs Kala.

"Aria, be nice," says Aria mockingly, walking ahead of them and slugging Jalesh in the arm as she passes.

Felix joins Kala and Wolfgang, who have stopped by the side of the bleachers, watching Jalesh as he makes his way towards his team at the other end of the field.

"I don't want to say I told you so, but I fucking told you so," he says.

Wolfgang rolls his eyes and tugs Kala with him, up the steps to their usual seats. Felix and Will sit on either side of them, and the Dandekars all take seats in the row above, excitedly passing around water bottles, visors, and signs that support Jalesh's team. Kala glances behind her at them and smiles, catching her father's eye.

"It's just a soccer game, Dad," she says warmly.

Sanyam waves his sign that says "Go #8!" on it. "It is my grandson's soccer game and I intend to celebrate it properly."

Kala laughs, grinning, and turns around again. She leans against Wolfgang and sips a bottle of lemonade that Riley hands her. The game begins and Celisa leans forward interestedly.

"He's really good," she remarks.

Mimi nods, munching on some caramel corn. "He could do this instead of police academy since he's not going to university anyway." She quickly adds, "You didn't hear that, Auntie Kala."

Kala rolls her eyes, watching the game. Felix, Wolfgang, Celisa, and Sanyam cheer loudly whenever Jalesh's team scores, but positively explode when Jalesh does, disturbing everyone sitting around them, making Priya gasp in alarm, and embarrassing Jalesh who can hear them even on the field.
He's the team's best player, but like Wolfgang, tends to draw fouls and tends to argue needlessly with the referee until he's threatened with a yellow card.

Kala winces watching one of these events, covering her ears to drown out Wolfgang's yell of "That wasn't offsides, asshole!", Felix's addition of "Do you have fucking eyes? No foul!", Dani's jeering, Sanyam's booing, and Celisa's ranting. She watches Jalesh gesture animatedly at the ref while the coach covers his face.

"When will he learn?" Kala murmurs.

"Oh, fuck off!" shouts Felix at the ref.

"Sir, this is a family event!" yells a woman from a few rows back and Dani doubles over, giggling.

Jalesh eventually waves the ref off and returns the ball to the other team. The rest of the game continues smoothly until Jalesh scores by aiming the ball at the goalie's head, resulting in a successful goal and a grisly bloody nose for the goalie, who leaves the net to shove Jalesh, suggesting he aimed intentionally, and Jalesh shoves him back.

"Why?" sighs Kala.

"This is getting spicy," says Dani excitedly.

Priya leans forward and yells, "You show him, Jali!" She imitates a punch. "Knock his lights out!"

"Mom!" shouts Kala.

The coach separates the goalie from Jalesh after the ref holds up a yellow card. The players stalk away from each other, looking over their shoulders in dislike.

The game continues for a few more minutes, ending with a win for Jalesh's team, though a narrow one. He jogs to the side of the field to drink water and talk with his teammates. Then he pauses to talk to one of the girls from earlier, and Wolfgang watches the girl lean in, kiss Jalesh's cheek, and walk away as his teammates jostle him and holler.

Felix pats his shoulder as he leaves the bleachers, whispering, "Enjoy your grandchild-free life while it lasts."

Wolfgang shakes his head in annoyance, but hangs back while Kala joins her family and begins to walk towards the street. Jalesh sees his family leaving, so he says goodbye to his team and goes to join them, but Wolfgang intercepts him at the side of the bleachers, tugging him backwards by his collar. He groans.

"Papa, I'm hungry, I want to go home--"

"Is that girl your girlfriend?"

He throws his head back and groans again. "No!"

"Okay, Jali--"

Jalesh holds his hands up. "Nope. Heard it all. Nope."

Wolfgang puts an arm around his shoulders and guides him to the side of the field, near a line of trees and a small fence. Jalesh drops his soccer ball and stands apart from Wolfgang, and they kick the ball back and forth for a moment. Kala watches them from afar, and suspecting the conversation might
last long, directs the other to head home with her.

"I'm not going to torture you with details," says Wolfgang with a small smile. "I know you learned at school. But that's only half of it."

"You know," says Jalesh, "every time you've ever pulled me aside for a conversation, you tell me things I don't want to know."

Wolfgang laughs and kicks the ball back to him.

"I know," Wolfgang agrees. "But listen. Girls can be confusing and you have to be careful. If you're doing anything with a girl--"

Jalesh sighs and shakes his head despairingly.

"--even if it's just a kiss, you have to know she's into it, okay? You have to hear her say yes. You can't just assume and the context doesn't matter. If you're at a party and she's drunk, that's not a yes. It's not a yes if you're drunk. It doesn't mean yes just because she doesn't say no. And you can't assume that just because you've kissed her you can have sex with her, or if you've had sex with her, that doesn't mean you get to again. You have to make sure every time. It's your responsibility, okay?"

Jalesh nods slowly and kicks the ball. "Yeah, they told us about this in school too."

"But they do a shit job with it," guesses Wolfgang.

He nods again, adding, "And the teacher is a dick about questions."

Wolfgang smiles. "Yeah, they usually are." He kicks the ball back to Jalesh. "It can be hard, alright? If you're with a girl and she tells you to go home, it's hard. It's uncomfortable. But you have to respect that. Men who make assumptions about what women want are the worst kind of people."

Jalesh nods again.

"I know you'd never do anything intentionally but it can be confusing," Wolfgang says more softly. "I know when I was your age and girls told me to fuck off, I didn't understand it."

"But did you?"

"Fuck off? Yeah. Always. My mother--" He pauses, then breathes out heavily and shrugs. "Men didn't always listen to what she wanted."

Jalesh nods, understanding.

"So I knew better," he goes on. "But that didn't make it easier." He pauses again, glancing at his son, who seems young and pure despite his age, height, and athletic build. He holds up a hand to preempt Jalesh's protests. "It feels good, better than anything else really, to be with a girl and it's hard to stop yourself. But it's not impossible and that's what you have to do if she tells you to." He stops the ball with his foot when Jalesh sends it to him. "And you know the rest. Don't get anyone pregnant, don't get an STD--"

"Yes," groans Jalesh. "They told us all this."

Wolfgang raises an eyebrow. "I didn't know this when I was your age."

Jalesh rolls his eyes. "Your school didn't teach it and even if they did you never showed up to class."
Wolfgang laughs. "Yeah." He kicks the soccer ball. "And do what you want, Jali, wait for someone you care about or don't, but be careful." He pauses and shrugs. "I wasn't when I was your age but I was lucky."

"My age?" asks Jalesh in a mumble, eyes widening.

"I was a shithead with no role models," explains Wolfgang, adding more quietly, "I wasn't used to touch feeling good. It was always a bad thing, so when I started fooling around with girls it was a relief, it was the first touch that wasn't painful. But that isn't true for you, you don't have to use it like a drug, okay?"

Jalesh nods. Wolfgang accepts the soccer ball again and pauses.

"This goes for guys too."

Jalesh shrugs. "I think I like girls."

"Okay. If you have questions you can always ask me or your mama."

He nods again, then laughs, "Yeah, I don't think I'll ask mama."

Wolfgang laughs too and kicks the ball to him. Jalesh flips it up with his toes and catches it, then balances it on his hip and looks at his dad.

"Hey papa."

Wolfgang stiffens, waiting for a confession of some kind.

"I was talking to Mimi earlier..."

"Yeah?"

"Well, she was asking me about police academy and...I don't want to go to university," he says quietly. "I don't know how to tell mama."

Wolfgang nods slowly. "I was wondering about that."

"She's going to hate me--"

"No she isn't," says Wolfgang firmly. "She knows you don't like school the way Aria does."

Jalesh hesitates, dragging his foot in the dust. "You know how I told you I got a 3 in algebra last year?"

Wolfgang nods slowly. "I was wondering about that."

"She's going to hate me--"

"No she isn't," says Wolfgang firmly. "She knows you don't like school the way Aria does."

Jalesh hesitates, dragging his foot in the dust. "You know how I told you I got a 3 in algebra last year?"

Wolfgang nods, trying to not smile, knowing what's coming.

"I actually got a 5," murmurs Jalesh. "So, failed, basically. Got my friend to forge the report card to show mama." His lips twitch in embarrassment. "I think I should get a tutor before my abitur or I'm going to be...fucked."

"Still not allowed to say that, and forging's not great, but I understand."

Jalesh thinks for a moment, watching Wolfgang's shadow grow longer in the fading lavender light. "But I don't want to drop out or anything because of the team."

Wolfgang nods.
"And my marks in history and shit are fine. I have like...3 points average, that's not awful."

"No," laughs Wolfgang, "I had 5 points and then I dropped out when I was 13."

Jalesh smiles feebly. "Yeah, but...Ari and Sani are both smarter than me and they're younger. Maybe...I don't know, papa, maybe my brain is screwed up or something."

Wolfgang shakes his head. "You're smart, Jali, you can read people. And I could never do what your mother could in school but she doesn't think less of me."

"But she's...not wrong, I should go to university just to try it, and then go to police academy--"

"You should do what you want to do," says Wolfgang seriously.

Jalesh doesn't answer, but he nods after a moment and checks, "She won't hate me?"

"No, I promise," murmurs Wolfgang.

Jalesh nods. "Okay."

"But you want to stay in school?"

He nods again. "I want to graduate, yeah. And I might have to go to university eventually, I need to if I want to be a constable or something."

Wolfgang nods too. "Just get through the last few years, see what you want then, and we can get you a tutor if you want. Send you to live with Capheus and Zakia and Kiani..."

Jalesh laughs. "Yeah, no wonder she's smart with those parents."

"Hey," says Wolfgang.

"You're smart too, papa," says Jalesh quickly, adding, "unless everything Mimi's told me is true."

Wolfgang pulls his upper lip into his teeth and chews it lightly. "Uh."

"An RPG, really? Really, papa?"

"RPG's are fun," says Wolfgang quietly, crossing the distance between them and putting an arm around Jalesh's shoulders, guiding him towards the exit of the field.

Jalesh shakes his head. "How didn't you get arrested, like, every day?"

"No idea," admits Wolfgang as they walk through the gap in the fence and back onto the street.

Jalesh laughs. "Probably because the cops were corrupt because you were a fucking Bogdanow."

"Language," says Wolfgang. "And you're right. That was why."

"Think I can use that?"

Wolfgang laughs. "No."

Jalesh grins. "Too bad."

They continue along the street towards their neighborhood, the light fading behinds the buildings. Jalesh glances at Wolfgang.
"Thanks," he mutters.

Wolfgang looks at him. "For what?"

Jalesh shrugs. "Listening, I don't know." He pauses. "You're a good dad."

Wolfgang looks down to hide his smile. "Thanks, Jali."

He nods, readjusting his soccer ball in his arms and glancing at his feet. Then he looks at Wolfgang.

"Hey papa, you hate people."

Wolfgang snorts and doesn't think to argue.

"And so do I, want to go get dinner somewhere without people?"

"Sure but we have to come back for cake or your mother will kill me. What do you want?"

"Pizza," says Jalesh.

Wolfgang nods, and they turn down the next street, heading towards the Spree and their favorite pizza place.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter features Nomanita, Herlito, and Zapheus!! Stay tuned ;)
San Francisco

Chapter Summary

The family goes to San Francisco to help Nomi and Amanita paint their new house. Jalesh connects with Kiani, Sani and Elsa misbehave at a hardware store, and Aria shares a secret.

Chapter Notes

I hope you all like Kiani! This chapter is very OC-heavy, but the next one will involve a lot of Kalagang ;)

ONE MORE CHAPTER! *sobs*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sani groans and covers his ears as the plane descends towards the San Francisco Airport. Elsa, next to him, is crying loudly due to an earache.

"It's just a few more minutes," says Kala, petting her hair. "Just hang on, sweetheart."

"I can't take much more of this," says Sani seriously.

"Shouldn't have forgotten your headphones," sing-songs Aria from beside him, dialing up the volume on her phone.

Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other in solidarity. Wolfgang adjusts his watch to the local time, then finishes his drink and looks at Jalesh, who's next to him reading *The Golden Compass* and frowning. At seventeen, Jalesh is as tall as Wolfgang and nearly as strong, though somewhat slimmer like Kala; he's grown slightly quieter over the last three years and picked up a reading habit, though this has done nothing to improve his academics.

"This guy uses like a thousand unnecessary words, we get it, you're educated," he mumbles.

Wolfgang laughs.

"Good story though," he goes on, looking up and glancing at Elsa. "Her ear again?"

Wolfgang nods.

"She has undersized ear canals," explains Kala.

"She has undersized everything," says Sani.

"Yes," says Kala fondly, kissing the side of Elsa's head. "She may be small but we love her."

Elsa turns her face and cries into Kala's shoulder. The plane drops steadily in elevation and finally
touches the runway. Elsa sniffs and Kala coaxes her to open and close her mouth so her ears pop.

"Like you're diving, remember when we went diving?"

"Are you done?" murmurs Sani faintly, removing his hands from his ears.

"Sani, be nice, she can't help it," says Kala.

He shakes his head in annoyance. Aria cautiously takes her earplugs out and looks at her baby sister, disgruntled. She and Sani share an eye roll with each other and begin to pack up.

Elsa hiccups, stops crying, and then says, "I'm hungry."

"Just like that," laughs Wolfgang.

Kala grins and rubs Elsa's shoulders. "She recovers from things quickly."

The plane taxis to the gate and Jalesh is the first to get up, swinging his bag down from the luggage rack, then doing the same with Kala's and his sisters'. Elsa gets up next to him, hugging a stuffed giraffe and sniffling, and he guides her carefully down the aisle.

Everyone else follows, yawning, and they trek through customs and finally towards the exit, where Capheus, Zakia, and their sixteen-year-old daughter Kiani are waiting. They arrived earlier and decided to wait for the Dandekars so they could all travel to Nomi and Amanita's together.

They find the family of three waiting in the breezy transportation hall just outside the airport. Capheus waves jovially at them, wearing a hoodie with the Kenyan flag, looking relaxed; Zakia grins in greeting, one of her arms around Kiani, who is short, strong, and talkative, with long crinkly hair and eyes that seem to draw everyone's attention; she, like her grandmother, is attracted to bright patterns and colors, and tends to wear floral sundresses, chunky boots, and worn-out jean jackets. Today, she's wearing a rose-patterned dress and platform heels that Amanita sent her for her sixteenth birthday.

She beams at them. The last time she saw any of them was seven years ago, and none of them remember it well.

Jalesh slows his pace at the sight of her, deciding she's cuter than any girl he's ever seen, already dreading that he has to keep his cool for an entire week. He shoulders his bag higher and straightens his permanently-messy hair, a gesture that Wolfgang side-eyes him for.

"Don't," says Jalesh hastily.

"Subtle," says Wolfgang.

Jalesh rolls his eyes and they approach Capheus, Zakia and Kiani.

Kiani immediately shakes Jalesh's hand and he squints.

"We...we have met, you know."

"It's been a long time and we were children and we're not now," she says with a shrug. "It's like meeting for the first time."

He laughs. She shakes the other children's hands, then hugs Kala and Wolfgang. Capheus and Zakia do the same, and then the group walks towards the platform for the tram that will take them into the city. They all chat about their flights, yawning, and sleepily purchase transit tickets.
"I can't wait to meet Zena," murmurs Zakia while they wait for the train. "I was so touched that Nomi and Amanita did that."

Kala smiles. "It's what any of us would have done. I learned how to spell my name for her in ASL."

Zakia grins. "So did I! Mine is fun, the Z is just a swooshing shape in the air..."

"That was a good idea," Jalesh says to Kiani. "I should have done that."

"Oh, signing your name?" she asks. "I'll show you. How do you spell it?"

"You know ASL?"

"I learned the alphabet for this trip."

"That was nice of you," he says.

She smiles. "I want to know six languages by the time I die. I already know four, but I'm not sure I can count them, because I speak Swahili as my first language, I grew up with English so that didn't take any effort, and Spanish and Chinese because of my Cluster, so that didn't take effort either. I'm thinking about Russian, what do you think? And I like sign language too it's quite fun."

Jalesh blinks. Finally, someone with the potential to out-ramble his mother.

"Russian's interesting, great expressions," he tells her.

"Like what?"

"Uh, veshat laphu na ushi," he says. "It means "hang noodles on your ears."

She grins. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're lying," he says. "Like, if a person lies, someone could say they hung noodles on their ears." He pauses, reflecting on why he chose this topic to talk about with a pretty girl. "No idea why they say that."

"Idioms are weird," she says with a shrug, adding excitedly, "Oh my God, you know different languages than me, you're totally teaching me some this week, okay?"

"O-okay," he says.

"You know German and Hindi, right?"

"And French," he says.

"Oh true, you grew up there," she says, nodding. "Say your favorite French word."

He frowns. "I'm not sure I have one."

"My favorite word in Swahili is tumbili, it means monkey, isn't that fun to say?"

"Tumbili," he echoes, laughing, adding, "oh, in French, parapluie. Means umbrella."

"Ooh, that's pretty, parapluie..."

Kala and Wolfgang listen in on this, meeting eyes, silently communicating their surprise and amusement. Zakia smiles.
"She talks more than anyone we know," Capheus murmurs fondly.

The train arrives and everyone gets on it, gathering in a booth and storing their luggage away. Elsa leans against Wolfgang, yawning. Aria and Sani sit with Capheus and Zakia and chat about school and clubs, and Kiani sits across from Jalesh. She fluffs her hair over one of her shoulders, then reaches into her bag and applies some strawberry lip gloss. Jalesh stares, then inhales sharply, remembering himself.

"So, sign language," she says, then pauses. "Actually, I should sit next to you, Aria will you switch places with me?"

Aria grumbles but does so, and Kiani sits by Jalesh and extends a hand.

"Okay, this is how you do A, this is B..."

She goes through the alphabet and he copies her. She pauses halfway through and puts her fingers on his wrist so he stops.

"What did you do to your finger?" she wonders, scrutinizing it.

He stares at her fingers on his wrist. "Um. I..." He shakes his head slightly. "I broke it." He bends his right index finger, which is crooked. "Playing soccer, I dove for the ball and miscalculated a little. It was cool, the bone poked through my skin."

"It was cool," she murmurs.

He laughs. "It was."

She laughs too and they continue with the alphabet. Aria scoots over to look out the window and Elsa falls asleep against Wolfgang. Everyone but Kiani and Jalesh stop speaking, resting sleepily against the seats as the sun slips beyond the horizon.

Jalesh practices signing his name several times and feels sure of it by the time the train slows near Union Square. They all step off the train and walk down a block to meet Nomi and Amanita.

"Stay close, this city's not very safe," says Wolfgang to Aria, who leads the way down the sidewalk. Jalesh picks up his pace to walk with Aria, and Kiani glances up at him.

"I thought about going to university here," she says. "But it is quite unsafe and, well..." She puts her fists up. "I'm not much of a fighter and being five feet tall doesn't help. So I may go somewhere in London and actually, Berlin seems nice, I've been meaning to explore more of it."

"You should, I could show you around," he offers.

"Are you staying there for university?"

"I'm not going to university," he says with a shrug. "Police academy."

She glances at him, then nods. "Are the police there less corrupt than here?"

"I think so," he responds, adding, "not perfect, obviously, any time you give people guns and some authority, shit happens."

"Shit happens," she repeats, nodding. "I like that phrase. It should be the motto of the police here."
He snorts, adding to her, "I like how you pronounce that. You make it sound classy."

"Shit? Yes, I do, don't I?"

Wolfgang smirks behind them and calls, "Jali, don't teach her bad words."

Kiani looks over her shoulder. "I already know them all!"

Zakia chuckles. "Oh, great."

Capheus laughs and nudges his wife. "It is your fault, you swear when you're writing your reports."

"I know," Zakia grumbles. "Of course, Kia always swears in a language we don't understand, something her Cluster-mates teach her."

She's the only child in the Cluster who's a Sensate -- something she discovered last year. Her Cluster is two other girls, three in total, and already she's visited them in person in Brazil and London.

Zakia smiles and gestures at her and Jalesh. "They seem to be getting along."

The others nod and chuckle in agreement, pausing at a crosswalk. They spot Nomi and Amanita across the street, waiting for them, and all wave. The light changes and they continue across, and Amanita dashes to greet them, hugging everyone she can reach and half-lifting Elsa, exclaiming about how big they all are.

"You're nearly as tall as me," she grumps at Aria.

Aria grins. "You're really short though."

Sani joins them, glancing at his twin sister. "I'm still taller than you."

"That's because you're a boy, that doesn't count," she retorts.

Nomi joins Amanita, grinning breezily and carrying Zena, their one-year-old who they adopted after her biological mother passed away suddenly. Lola, Amanita's friend at the hospital, knew it would be a challenge to find adoptive parents for a deaf child, but Nomi and Amanita didn't mind the communication barrier.

Kala sighs at the sight of Zena. "A baby! Oh, hello, hello! Ah..."

She pauses and signs her name, then points to herself. Zena looks at her with big hazel eyes and blinks. Nomi grins.

"That's sweet of you, learning to sign that," she says.

"So did we," says Kiani, signing her name, then watching Jalesh as he signs his. She smirks. "I didn't know your name was Jaleah."

He holds her gaze for a moment, then glances away, slightly flushed with embarrassment.

"The A's and the S's are really similar," he says defensively.

She grins. "True enough."

Amanita holds up her car keys and shakes them. "Let's move our asses, Lito and Hernando are already there, and they're making enchiladas."
"Fuck yes," says Nomi happily, before quickly covering her mouth and glancing at Elsa, who's only nine.

"My mom's there too," adds Amanita as they walk towards a parking garage. "She's making fish tacos and margaritas and...unf, you guys are going to be so spoiled this week."

They go into the parking garage and find their yellow van -- "Yes, we know, it's a mom van but at least it's a fun color," says Amanita -- and everyone gets in, though Jalesh hesitates.

"Can I drive?" he tries.

Wolfgang rolls his eyes and pushes him towards the door. "No."

"It's stupid to wait until I'm eighteen," he argues as he gets in after Kiani.

"Right?" she whispers. "It's such a long time. I got my motorcycle license this year though."

"You ride a motorcycle?" asks Jalesh faintly.

She nods. "A small one, you know. The kind you see in cities."

He narrows his eyes. Beyond being intelligent, witty, and gorgeous, she also rides a motorcycle. He hopes he isn't staring at her with a stupid expression.

"That's really cool," he says openly.

She brightens. "Thanks. Most guys don't say that."

He squints. "Why not?"

"Because it threatens their masculinity," she retorts, crossing her legs and glancing into the front of the car. "Could someone please turn on the air conditioning?" She looks back at Jalesh. "Boys always try to outride me."

"And you always kick their asses," replies Jalesh.

"You know it," she says with a grin.

"God, will you two knock it off?" groans Aria, balling her jacket up and shoving it into her backpack.

"Are you always this rude?" Kiani asks her.

"Only when Jali is being annoying, so yeah, usually..."

Kiani grins at this and leans back in her seat. Nomi cranes in from the side to buckle Zena into her car seat next to Kiani.

"She's so sweet," says Kiani to Jalesh, gently poking Zena's belly. "I've always wanted a younger sibling."

"You don't want siblings," Jalesh says seriously. "They ruin your life."

"It's lonely without them though," she says quietly, glancing at her parents and adding, "before I met my Cluster I had to do everything alone."
He shrugs. "I like being alone. Doesn't happen very often."

"Do you really though?" she asks. "So many guys say that but it's not true."

"I like being with...the right people," he says slowly. "Mimi's cool." He glances at her. "You seem okay."

She laughs. "So do you."

Amanita pulls the van out of the garage and they make their way over the Golden Gate Bridge and into Sausalito, where Nomi and Amanita's new house is. Nestled on the hillside overlooking the bay, there is a large cottage with a sprawling deck and garden; its paint is shabby and a few shingles are falling off, but with a week's worth of work, they're sure it will look like home.

Everyone piles out of the van once it's parked in the driveway. Mimi, who's been staying with her family at Lito and Hernando's for two months, runs out the front door and slams into Jalesh. He laughs and hugs her tightly, and she pulls back, holding his arms.

"How's Berlin without me?"

"Um, in less danger of being burned to the ground," he tells her.

She sighs. "Boring, you mean." She tugs him towards the house. "C'mon, we're making dinner."

The others follow more slowly, taking the bags in.

"She looks just like Dani," says Kala fondly.

At thirteen, she's tall, brown from the summers in Mexico, and always wearing a bright color on her lips. She's as gorgeous as Dani was when she was that age, though since she's still a child, she doesn't realize this. Felix insists that she's taking years off of his life. The last time he came over for dinner, he shook his head darkly, said "teenage boys have a special place in hell," and told Jalesh to "chase off every pervy loser" or better yet, "kill them." Jalesh explained that Mimi has a wicked slap and isn't afraid to use it, and Felix was so proud he brought home a kitten for her.

"She does," agrees Wolfgang, lifting out Aria's suitcase, which is huge and heavy, "but her expressions are all Felix." He motions at the suitcase. "What does she have in there?"

Kala rolls her eyes. "Enough clothing for six months."

"Why did you let her pack?"

"Have you tried telling a thirteen-year-old how to pack?"

He shrugs in concession and they go inside together, finding Dani, Lito, Hernando, Leo, and Grace in the kitchen, all cooking and listening to upbeat Latin music. Everyone hugs and says hello excitedly, and Elsa brightens noticeably at the sight of Leo, Dani and Felix's younger child, who she shares a theatre group with.

They hug each other and giggle, and then Felix sticks his head into the kitchen, sipping a beer with a straw and wearing a large ballcap with the German flag on it.

"The fuck are you doing, Felix?" asks Wolfgang.

"Good to see you too," Felix says with feigned indignance, coming over to hug his brother.
"He's watching Germany get their fannies kicked," says Dani.

Felix points at his wife. "We are one point behind. You're fucking overconfident."

"And the straw is for...?"

Felix turns the beer around, exposing a Bud Light label. Wolfgang grimaces.

"Yeah. Gotta get this piss water down somehow. The straw lets me get it from the bottle, into my stomach, without tasting it."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" snarks Amanita, coming inside with Zena. "I didn't realize we needed to get you fancy beer!"

Nomi shoots her an appreciative smile, helping Kala, Zakia, and Kiani unpack and put things away.

"It smells wonderful in here!" Kala calls as she lugs a suitcase into a spare room.

Hernando grins, throwing a kitchen towel over his shoulder. "Thank you!"

After twenty minutes, everyone is situated around a large table outside, taking in the evening view of the bay, kept warm by two fireplaces. They dig into a huge spread of tacos, enchiladas, guacamole, salsa, crispy potatoes, chips, and margaritas, all talking with more energy than they actually have, invigorated to be around each other. Felix and Jalesh furtively check soccer scores on their phones while they eat until Dani scolds them about it and tell them to "be in the goddamn moment."

Kiani giggles at this. Jalesh flushes and hastily goes back to his food, until she nudges him and points at Grace and Zena. Grace is feeding Zena tiny bites of avocado and Zena is kicking her feet happily at each bite.

"She's so sweet!" Kiani calls to Grace across the table.

Grace beams and snuggles her granddaughter closer. "Isn't she? She's a very polite eater, she reminds me of Amanita."

"I like her name," says Kiani.

Amanita grins. "Thanks. It means new beginnings, we liked it for her."

"And for you, Mama Caplan," says Nomi, smiling.

Grace grins. "It's a lovely old Jewish name. Perfect for her."

"It sounds like a warrior or a princess name," says Kiani appreciatively.

"So does yours, it's cool," Jalesh tells her.

Wolfgang squeezes Kala's knee under the table, leans close, and whispers, "He's trying too hard."

Kala laughs and sprinkles some crumbly cotija cheese on her taco. "He really is."

Kiani smiles at Jalesh. "Thanks. You can call me Kia, by the way." She rolls her eyes. "Yes, like the car."

He laughs and nods, then offers her the bowl of chips that's being passed around. "Want some more?"
Kala grins and leans to nuzzle Wolfgang's cheek. "I want popcorn, this is better than a movie."

"He's better at flirting than I was at his age," laughs Wolfgang.

She shakes her head, chuckling. Then Felix leans over, points at Jalesh, and says, "He's better at this than you were" and Kala laughs wildly.

Jalesh looks indignantly at her and she innocently sips her margarita, looking away.

At the other end of the table, Hernando, Lito, and Zakia are asking Sani, Elsa, and Leo about school, and Elsa is loudly recounting her latest choir recital.

"--and then we sang about spring and then we sang about a robin in a nest and then we sang about rain and I got to do a solo for that and they're gonna let me sing at graduation after next year, they said they would let me sing next year but another girl auditioned first so I get to do the year after." She pauses and gasps for breath. "And I don't know what I'll sing for that but I might ask Jali because he's graduating--"

"If he doesn't go belly up..." murmurs Aria, adding to Kiani, "he's totally failing, like, several classes."

Jalesh rolls his eyes.

"Are you?" asks Kiani warmly.

"Not failing," he says. "Bit worried about the tests."

"Like A-levels?" she asks.

He nods. "Like that."

"What subjects?" she wonders.

He shrugs, dishing up a third enchilada and some guacamole, which Kiani supposes she shouldn't judge him for considering he's almost a foot taller than her.

"Math mostly," he downplays. "Sometimes science."

"Mm, those are my worst subjects too, " she says sympathetically.

He glances at her with a smile. "Yeah, but you mean you got a 97 instead of 100, don't you?"

She hesitates.

"Don't be embarrassed about it," he says. "You should be really proud."

She tucks her hair behind her ear and looks at him, seeing him in a new light. She smiles softly. "Thanks. Most guys--" She stops. "I'm sorry. I've said that to you already."

He shakes his head to show it's okay.

"Most guys tell me I have a big head," she explains.

Jalesh tilts his head, smirking. "Well..."

She laughs and shakes her mass of frizzy curls. "I don't mean physically!"
He grins. "I know, I'm just giving you shit."

She rolls her eyes and nudges him. "Anyway. You haven't said any of the annoying things most guys say. It's nice."

He nods in response and smiles, and they eat quietly for a few minutes while Kala and Wolfgang watch them with amused, affectionate gazes.

Zakia sits next to Kala after a moment, reaching for a margarita off the tray nearby and glancing at her.

"Kia's thinking about going to university in Berlin," she tells them as she takes a sip. "What do you two think?"

"She would love it," says Kala. "And there are some very good schools. What is she studying?"

Zakia grins. "She thinks she wants to do international relations...and then business school. She wants to open a nonprofit to benefit girls education. She might do the diplomacy route instead and go to law school, and she's debating about a public health approach too."

"That's wonderful," Kala says warmly.

Zakia smiles. "I agree. She could really benefit by spending some time with you since you do all sorts of philanthropy."

Kala grins. "She could do an internship at my company."

"She would love that," says Zakia, adding with a roll of her eyes, "I'm trying to make her take a gap year but she insists she wants to start college as soon as possible."

"She's not terribly young," says Kala with a shrug. "And if she's in Berlin, she would always have a place to stay and someone to talk to."

"That would make me feel better," agrees Zakia.

She's about to continue, but Felix tosses his phone angrily on the table and shouts, "Goddamn it!"

Dani smirks. "Did Mexico score again? Oopsies..."

"It is a testament to the strength of your marriage that you haven't killed each other over sports," says Capheus genuinely, nodding.

Everyone laughs, and then Jalesh glances at Felix.

"So what's the score?"

Felix grumbles. "4-2."

"Fuck, really?" he groans.

Kiani laughs. "You like soccer, apparently."

"Like it?" says Mimi, leaning to look at Kiani. "He loves it, he plays really well, he's the captain of the team at school and he's got recruiters interested in him!"

Jalesh's brows peak in mild confusion. "Uh, thanks for the sales pitch, Mimi..."
Mimi points at Kiani when she isn't looking and says in German, "She's cute, go for it!" and Jalesh hastily reaches for his water to disguise his expression.

"I don't know anything about soccer," says Kiani. "Maybe you could show me a few things."

Across the table, Wolfgang shakes his head and murmurs to Felix, "Wonder where your daughter learned to be such a good wingman..."

Felix snorts. "I was an unintentional wingman, Wolfie, I never tried to get you laid. I was shit at flirting and fucking obnoxious, and the girls would all talk to me, then look at you, and you know what would happen then!"

Dani pats his arm soothingly, and then Hernando and Lito glance at Felix from beside her.

Hernando adjusts his glasses and says, "Wait, what is the score?"

Felix repeats it, and then Lito whoops loudly, jumping to his feet with his hands above his head.

"That's what I am talking about!" he shouts. He takes his napkin and begins to wave it around his head. "Mexico! Mexico!"

Dani joins them, and so does Mimi, Leo, and Hernando. Suddenly there's an entire chorus of "Mexico!" interspersed with "Boo Germany!"

Nomi and Amanita look at each other and shake their heads, laughing.

"Why did we invite these dummies during the World Cup?" murmurs Nomi.

"No idea," says Amanita, grinning hugely, adding, "about time to go in?"

Nomi nods. "For sure, it's getting chilly."

She stands up with her empty plate in hand and everyone follows suit. The kids help clear the table and bring in dishes, and then the adults -- which includes Jalesh and Kiani, at Kiani's insistence -- sit around the cozy living room eating mocha cheesecake.

Jalesh follows the conversation distantly, but mostly he watches Kiani, who's sitting by the fire and eating each bite of cheesecake slowly. Her expression is peaceful and she's making no attempt to join the conversation, content to listen -- he always feels that he should talk more, and he likes that she doesn't share this anxiety. He also likes how genuine she is, and how receptive she is; he doesn't feel the need to choose his words carefully around her, which he can't say about other girls. He's sure if he brought up some obscure topic no one is interested in, she would be interested; and he could listen to her talk about anything.

Sure, there are girls at school he doesn't mind talking to, and he's gone on a few dates where he didn't hate every minute, but he's never felt particularly attracted to anyone. Kala told him she was the same as a teenager and never truly liked anyone until she met his father, so he didn't let this worry him too much -- if he'd rather stay at home or play soccer than spend time with girls, then so be it.

The only disadvantage, of course, is that he's had no practice with girls and he's sure he'll make some fatal mistake over the course of the next week. And besides, Kiani is clearly too smart and too pretty for him -- he glances at her again, taking in her soft profile and long crimped hair -- and briefly wonders how it's possible for anyone to be so gorgeous.

He knows the week is going to pass in the blink of an eye, but somehow feel like an eternity at the
same time; he's not confident he can make it seven full days without blurting out some insanity like "want to get dinner sometime?" to a girl who lives eleven thousand kilometers away.

He runs his hand through his hair in thought, staring at his plate; then he glances up and catches her watching him, and she looks hastily away with a faint smile. He lets himself briefly consider that maybe the situation isn't as hopeless as it seems.

Everyone finishes up their cheesecake after a few more minutes, and then they all head to bed. Jalesh settles on a sleeping bag and glances around the room he's sharing with Sani, Aria, Elsa, and Leo. He props his head up with his arms crossed under it, staring at the ceiling.

Aria looks at him for a moment, then says reluctantly, "She clearly really likes you."

He looks at his sister in surprise, then smiles and mumbles, "Thanks, Ari."

***

Amanita wakes up the house the next day by loudly clanging on a pot and shouting, "We have pancakes! Blueberry! Chocolate chip! Banana! Peanut butter!"

Aria rolls over in her sleeping bag and groans. "Why..."

Jalesh rubs his eyes and sits up blearily, glancing around and seeing that Sani and Elsa are both absent. He glances at his watch and sees it's only ten past seven, and closes his eyes again, unwilling to wake up so early during the summer.

He and Aria get up, exchanging an annoyed glance, and join the other weary guests in the hall -- Dani and Felix are standing in the door to their room, arms crossed, with identical scowls; Kala is leaning against Wolfgang, half-asleep, and he's holding Elsa, who had a nightmare and insisted on sleeping with them; Hernando is grumbling, searching in his robe pocket for his glasses; and Capheus, Zakia and Kiani all have their hands on their hips, slightly disgruntled.

Wolfgang shakes his head and walks towards the kitchen, flicking Jalesh in the chest as he passes him. "Put on a shirt, you're at someone else's house."

Jalesh gestures at Felix, who's also shirtless.

"You too," Wolfgang says to Felix, laughing.

Jalesh rolls his eyes and darts back into his room, digging around for a tee-shirt. By the time he finds one and comes into the kitchen, everyone is seated and Lito and Sani are dishing up pancakes.

Jalesh glances at his little brother. "You make all these?"

He grins. "Yeah, I got up at six."

"What's wrong with you?" laughs Jalesh, ruffling his hair.

"We got up at six," says Lito, transferring a plate of bacon over to the table.

"Ew, Lito," Kala and Amanita complain concurrently.

"More for us," says Felix happily, grabbing four slices of bacon off the top.

Everyone pours coffee and mango juice, chatting about the plans for the day which include scraping the old paint off the house and picking a new color. Dani jokes that Nomi and Amanita invited
everyone for a fake vacation, and the real intention was to recruit free workers; they shrug and nod, and everyone laughs at the blatant admission. After breakfast, everyone gets dressed and splits into groups -- the ones who will strip the paint off the house, and the ones who will go pick new colors.

One of these jobs is more appealing to the children than the other, and most of them rush to stand with Hernando and Amanita by the door, hoping to get out of hard work in the hot sun. Only Jalesh, Mimi, and Kiani are interested in the real work.

Kala eyes Aria and Sani. "You two should stay here."

They both whine "No!" and step closer to Hernando.

"We're okay, we don't need them," says Jalesh, hoping that without Aria here to tell Kiani embarrassing stories, he'll make more progress with her.

"Yeah," agrees Kiani.

Mimi nods too. "Let them go, they'll screw something up anyway."

Ten minutes later, Aria and Sani are in the back of Amanita's van, grinning in success at each other. It already promises to be a hot day and once in the city, Amanita stops to get everyone lemonade. From there, they walk to a huge hardware store, and all pause in the air-conditioned entrance, planning.

"Who wants to help me pick colors?" asks Hernando.

Elsa and Leo raise their hands.

"And who wants to help me pick lights, plants, and new deck tiles?" asks Amanita.

Aria and Sani agree to go with her, and Hernando takes Elsa and Leo's hands and walks towards the paints.

He lowers his voice as if sharing a secret. "So. What are your very favorite colors?"

"Blue," says Elsa.

"What kind of blue?" asks Hernando.

"Like... when the sky is really blue," she explains.

"What about you?" Hernando asks Leo.

Leo shakes his head, dark messy hair flying. "Not sure."

"He likes red," says Elsa.

He nods. "Yeah."

"So you're the painter, then," murmurs Hernando, squeezing Elsa's hand. "What do you like to paint?"

She smiles. "Birds and trees and people."

"You know, I get the sense that you are like your grandmother," says Hernando warmly as they reach the large section of paints and brushes. "Your papa's mother, that is. She was quite artistic and
she liked to sing like you. And you are named for her, after all."

Elsa wrinkles her nose. "Her name was Elyse."

"Yes dear, but it is the same root," explains Hernando.

"Root?" queries Elsa.

"Yes, Elsa and Elyse are both derived from the same word originally...they're simply variations on each other. They mean the same thing."

"Oh," says Elsa. "What do they mean?"

"Noble," says Hernando, laughing gently. "I'm sure they didn't pick it for the meaning, it's somewhat arrogant, isn't it?"

Elsa grins. "Yeah."

"Your papa's name also means that," adds Hernando. "Something like...noble wolf."

Elsa laughs. "Wolves can't be noble, they eat people."

Hernando raises his eyebrows, laughing more loudly. "That is a very good point."

"What does my name mean?" asks Leo.

Hernando grins. "Lion!"

"Cool," Leo says fervently.

"Papa says I'm like her too," says Elsa as they walk down an aisle with paint samples. "Well, that I look like her."

"You look like him," says Hernando with a chuckle. "It's quite remarkable, actually, how much variety there is with genetics. Just think, a single nucleotide can alter appearance."

"Nucleotide?" sounds out Elsa.

"Well, your DNA is made up of many components, some are called nucleotides...they are the building blocks of your genes."

"You sound like Aria," mumbles Elsa.

Hernando laughs. "She likes science, yes?"

"Yeah, she's good at it," says Elsa, adding, "so that's why I look different?"

Hernando shrugs. "There is so much variety and so much that makes you unique. It would be fascinating if it didn't--" He pauses.

"If it didn't make people act crazy?" suggests Elsa. "Yeah. A few years ago Jali got in such a bad fight because of these stupid boys who'd tease him and Aria about how they look." She smiles. "He still gets in fights sometimes, but he wins now."

"I heard about that," murmurs Hernando, adding with a laugh, "Of course he wins now." He stops in front of a variety of paint samples. "Okay. Pick anything you like, and we'll show it to Amanita."
Meanwhile, Aria skips alongside Amanita's cart, taking in the large store and the light fixtures all around her.

"It's pretty in here," she says. "We don't have stores this big, really." She whoops and listens to the sound echo. "Wow."

Amanita laughs, glancing down at Zena, secure in a baby sling on her chest, and sees she's asleep. Then she tugs on one of Aria's braids to tease her.

"This is what America does best," she says. "A totally unnecessary amount of choice! Ah, capitalism..."

"Ooh," says Sani, pointing out some bright blue lights. "Those would look cool."

"On the porch?" asks Amanita. "Very cool. Noms would like them."

"When are we going to pick out plants?" asks Aria, while Sani pulls a box of twinkle lights from the shelf and examines it.

"Soon babe," says Amanita. "Lights first. What do you have there, Sani?"

"These are cool too," he says, passing them to her. "And they're LED, they'll last longer."

Amanita laughs. "You kids are the nerdy ones, aren't you?"

"Yeah, we got all the brains," says Aria, nodding.

Sani laughs. "Well, Elsa is smart."

They laugh together and Aria squeaks, "Poor Jali."

Amanita rolls her eyes. "He's smarter than you give him credit for. Your papa never went to college and he's definitely intelligent."

"Yeah, we shouldn't make fun of Jali too much," admits Sani, adding to Aria, "especially you, he always gets you out of trouble."

Aria tosses her braids over her shoulder in annoyance. "No he doesn't, he just interferes because he thinks I'm reckless."

"You are!" laughs Sani. "Ari, you've gotten yourself nearly killed like ten times." He looks at Amanita to make his point. "You know what she did last year? She stole papa's keys and backed the car out and hit a light."

Amanita squints. "Why?"

Aria shrugs. "For fun. I thought I could at least drive it down the street."

"I'm sure Wolfgang was really happy with you," laughs Amanita.

"I told him Jali did it," says Aria.

"Which he didn't believe for a second," says Sani.

"So then I just copied Elsa and apologized a lot and cried," says Aria, adding knowingly, "crying is the key with him. Mama doesn't buy it but he always does. Pathetic."
Sani points at Aria and looks at Amanita. "Evil. Pure evil. I shared a womb with her, I'm probably like...possessed or something."

"I'm not evil, I'm smart," says Aria.

"That's even scarier, you don't realize you're evil."

"It's his own fault, he let me get away with too much."

Amanita shakes her head and laughs. "She's right, Sani. She's not evil, your papa is a huge softie which is...not that surprising." She laughs. "You know, when I first met him, Noms said something like he's really withdrawn, he doesn't talk much, he doesn't open up...and then I saw him with your mama and knew all that was bullshit." She pauses in front of a display of lights and grins. "It's amazing what the right person can do."

Aria glances up at her and says without hesitation, "Hey Auntie, when did you know you liked girls?"

Amanita's eyes widen. "Oh. Big question. Okay." She glances at Aria. "When I was about your age. But as I got older, I think I looked back and noticed things about myself when I was even younger that should have clued me in. But when was I actually aware of it? Yeah, about thirteen. Why babe?"

Aria shrugs. "Just asking."

Amanita smiles carefully. "You sure?"

Aria works her bottom lip in her teeth.

Amanita looks at Sani. "Hey Sani, want to go check out those plants ahead of time?"

Sani rolls his eyes. "Subtle." But he nods and goes in the direction of the greenhouse.

Amanita smiles more surely at Aria. "What's up, sweetie?"

Aria smiles slightly and shrugs. "I don't know, I just...Sani came home the other day talking about a girl and I just...I never do that with guys, you know? And maybe it's just taking me longer but..."

"I get it," says Amanita warmly. "I think the question you have to ask isn't how you feel about guys, though, it's how you feel about girls. Do you want to talk about girls the same way Sani does?"

She nods slowly. "Yeah. Or at least...I know exactly how he feels when he talks about girls. Or when I see Jali with girls. But that's...I don't know. Guys treat girls differently than girls do."

Amanita groans and laughs. "Yeah, if that ain't the truth."

"What's it supposed to feel like, though?" Aria asks, almost shy.

"Liking girls?" asks Amanita. She pauses. "I think it's like this...if you feel like you could be vulnerable with a girl, without feeling afraid, then that might tell you all you need to know. That's what you need to feel about someone. If you're afraid or uncomfortable, then something's wrong."

"Yeah," murmurs Aria, glancing at her feet. "Yeah, I never...feel like I want to be alone with a guy, you know? Like friends, sure. But..."

Amanita swallows, suddenly emotional, and squeezes Aria's shoulders. "Listen sweetie, it's okay to
be unsure, in fact it's really normal. So you don't need to feel like you have to figure all this out right away. I didn't ever think I could be with someone like Noms, but once I met her, all that changed. We're always evolving to become who we truly are, and I think it can take a whole lifetime to figure out."

Aria smiles. "Thanks."

"Have you talked to your parents at all?" asks Amanita.

Aria shakes her head. "They're not like this, so."

"But they'll understand," says Amanita.

"What if they can't, though?" asks Aria.

Amanita shakes her head and tucks a stray curl of Aria's behind her ear. "I know what you mean, but your parents are Sensates. They'll get it because they share so much with my Noms and Lito."

Aria nods. "That's true. Can we pick out lights now?"

Amanita chuckles. "Sure, babe."

Meanwhile, in the paint department, Elsa and Leo have picked out several dozen paint samples, which Hernando is sorting through. They range from sage green to neon orange, which he laughs at. Elsa and Leo, now bored with picking paint, are standing near the counter, watching an employee mix different colors in a big spinning drum. Leo begins to ask questions about this process, but Elsa wanders off, going in search of something more interesting. She leaves the paint department and turns down an aisle with cabinets and shelving, and then she turns towards the greenhouse. She spots her older brother and jogs to reach him.

Sani looks at her. "Did you leave Hernando?"

She shrugs. "So. He'll figure it out."

"Elsa," he sighs, putting an arm around her while they walk.

"I got bored," she says defensively. "Are you going to look at plants?"

He nods, guiding her in that direction. They step into the sunny greenhouse, looking at all the plants for sale. Elsa drags her fingertips along some ferns and glances cautiously at Sani.

"Hey, Sani? What happened to papa's mom?"

Sani pauses behind a small palm tree. "Uh. You're kind of young for that, Elsa."

Elsa huffs, taking her notebook out of her purse, flipping it open to a clean page and beginning to sketch a nearby flower.

"You should just ask him," says Sani.

"So you know," says Elsa.

Sani shrugs. "Yeah. Jali told me."

Elsa leans against one of the crates the plants are stacked on, biting her lip as she sketches. She tucks her filmy hair out of her eyes and murmurs, "It wasn't good, was it?"
"No," says Sani quietly. "What brought this up?"

"Hernando says I'm like her," says Elsa. "I want to know...if that's a good thing."

Sani breathes out, wondering why his parents thought it was best to tell Jalesh everything first, then let the details trickle down from him without context or explanation. He looks at his diminutive sister, notices the tiny hearts and flowers on the margin of her notebook, and shakes his head, deciding there's no way he can explain it.

"It's a good thing because she was a good person, okay? She was really artistic and talented and I think she loved papa a lot. Her life was just hard, that's all."

Elsa nods slowly. "I'm already so different from all of you, so..."

"No, you're our sister," says Sani firmly. "And nothing changes that, okay?"

She sniffs and nods. "Okay." Then she smiles. "Thanks." She puts her notebook away, continuing along the rows of flowers. She stops when she notices a basket of bishop's weed which is dying from dehydration. "Don't they know they have to water things?"

Sani laughs. "No, apparently not."

Elsa looks around and spots a hose. She goes to get it, then notices many of the other flowers are wilted and dying.

"Oh honestly!" she mumbles, something she hears her mother say in moments of intense annoyance.

"This is really mismanaged," mumbles Sani. "It's like they haven't watered things in a week."

Elsa unspools the hose, glancing around for onlookers, and then turns the spigot and begins to water all the plants that need attention. Sani cautiously finds another hose and begins to help her, and after a few minutes, they jump at a voice.

"Young lady, what are you doing?"

An employee in an orange vest is approaching Elsa with folded arms. Elsa hesitates.

"Are you in charge of this greenhouse?" she asks.

"Yes," the man says tersely.

"Are you aware half of these plants are dying?" she goes on.

"It's a large greenhouse, we can't get to everything," says the man.

"Isn't that, like, your job?" asks Elsa.

Sani looks at her in interest -- her tone of voice sounds much more like Aria's than it usually does.

"Alright, it's time to put the hose back," says the man. "C'mon. Where are your parents?"

"In Sausalito," says Elsa honestly.

"Ha ha, put the hose back," the man tells her.

Elsa shrugs. "Okay."
Then she directs the hose at him and sprays him directly in the face. He splutters and jumps backward. Sani stares.

"That's for the plants!" she says, dropping the hose, grabbing Sani's hand, and rushing out of the exit on the side of the garden center.

Twenty minutes later, everyone is outside, walking to the car. Amanita and Hernando glance at Elsa and Sani, who have received lifetime bans from the Home Depot.

"Sorry I ruined the trip," Elsa murmurs.

Amanita tries not to grin, but she can't help it. "Stick it to the man, Elsa."

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Kiani pulls her mask down from her mouth and exhales sharply. "This is very hard work."

Jalesh nods in agreement. They're both on high ladders on the side of the house, working alongside Mimi and the others to strip the paint from the siding.

"If I had known this, I might have gone with the others," she says.

Mimi groans. "Same! This is ridiculous."

"Stop complaining!" laughs Wolfgang.

"Oh, I'm sorry, but some of us have noodle arms, okay?" asks Mimi. "We can't all be buff like the Bogdanows."

"Tell him, Mimi," agrees Felix.

"Yes," says Kiani. "Noodle arms, I like this phrase."

Dani groans next to them. "Okay, it's as hot as the devil's tits out here, I'm taking a water break."

Jalesh and Felix both snort at the expression. Kala and Zakia sigh. Wolfgang glances at Dani.

"Where do you come up with this shit?" he asks.

"I have a creative mind!" shouts Dani.

Lito chuckles, hopping down from the last rung of his ladder. "I will go make mimosas."

"Tell you what," says Nomi, dropping her scraper into a bucket. "It's hot, we can all go swimming, there's a great spot down the hill."

Everyone nods in agreement, going inside to wash up and get changed. Lito packs a few bottles filled with mimosas and stashes these in a picnic basket. Then everyone, in swimsuits, towels, and sandals, makes their way down a rickety staircase to the beach below. There's a short stretch of pale sand, shaded by madrona trees, and a small pier; two kayaks are propped against one of the trees and there are several beach chairs.

"Ooh," says Kala. "This is gorgeous. Wolfgang, we should buy a beach house..."

He laughs and puts an arm around her, and then she tugs two of the chairs to the water's edge, rolls up her dusty overalls, sits, and dips her feet in the water.
"It's very cold!" she calls to Mimi, who sprints off the pier without hesitation and flings herself into the water.

"She doesn't care," laughs Wolfgang, sitting next to her and accepting a mimosa from Lito.

Mimi surfaces and quickly swims back to shore. She gets to her feet and wipes her face, panting.

"It's freezing," she tells Jalesh as he sets his towel aside. "Come jump with me."

He grins. "Okay." Then he glances at the end of the pier, where Kiani is sitting in a yellow bikini, swishing her feet in the water. He breathes out. "Oh, Meems."

Mimi snorts and advises, "Don't think about what you're thinking about, Jali..."

"She's perfect," he mumbles.

Mimi rolls her eyes. "You've known her for a day, calm down." She nudges him. "C'mon, let's cannonball."

He nods, running after Mimi off the pier, sinking in the clear, cold water so his feet just skim the kelp at the bottom. He surfaces and takes a huge breath, then splashes Mimi, who squirts water out of her mouth at him.

"Aren't you cold?" asks Kiani.

Jalesh looks at her, tightens his jaw, and forces his eyes to stay on her face instead of wandering lower.

"It's not that bad," he says.

Mimi splashes a huge wave over him. "Focus, dummy!"

"It's not that bad?" asks Kiani in disbelief, poking her toe cautiously into the water again.

He shakes his head, then nods his head in the direction of the floating pier about thirty feet out.

"We could swim over there, it's sunny," he suggests.

She bites her bottom lip, then takes a deep breath and slides into the water. She comes up and squeals.

"Ala!* Oh my God! It absolutely is that bad, Jali..."

He laughs, then cautiously reaches his hand out. "C'mon, it'll be warmer out there, we can just...lay in the sun."

Mimi rolls her eyes and lifts herself onto the pier, knowing she's not invited. Jalesh and Kiani look at each other, and then she grins brightly, kicks off the pier, and starts to swim towards the floating dock. He grins too and follows her, and they reach the dock a few minutes later, panting and laughing. She pops up onto the sunny wood and immediately leans back in the sun.

"I am...how do you call it? A popsicle?"

He laughs. "Yeah. In German it's eis am stiel, like...ice stick."

"That's so literal," she says, laughing too. Then she holds up a finger and says, "Hold on. I am going
to visit my dad and ask him for towels and sunglasses. He can bring them out on a kayak."

"Good idea," agrees Jalesh.

She converses with Capheus for a moment, who rolls his eyes but agrees to bring them some towels, and he arrives a moment later on a kayak.

He tosses them sunscreen, towels, sunglasses, their phones, and then hands over two mimosas.

"Ooh," says Kiani. "Thank you, these are delicious."

Capheus chuckles and rolls his eyes. "Be responsible."

"Always," says Kiani calmly. "Thanks, dad."

He nods, paddling away from them, and calls, "Don't let the sharks get you!"

Kiani looks at Jalesh in concern. "Are there sharks?"

"I thought you would know," he says in alarm.

"I'll look it up," she says, picking up her phone and typing in the search bar.

She waves Jalesh closer with a twitch of her fingers, and he hesitates, glancing at her, watching a bead of water travel down her arm. He's not sure if she's innocently offering him a better view of her phone, or if there's something beyond this.

He inches closer, leaning to look at her phone, glancing briefly at her profile, the sun reflecting on her glossy lips. He inhales sharply.

"You okay?" she asks.

He nods hard. "Yeah, yeah. So, sharks."

"Sharks," she agrees, typing in are there sharks around San Francisco? "Oh. Oh my. Okay." She scrolls down a large list of shark species. "This is not comforting."

"Well, I guess we live here now," jokes Jalesh. "We can never leave this pier."

She laughs loudly. "No. We're stranded." She glances at him. "At least I don't mind who I'm stranded with."

He looks down, flushing, and grins. "Yeah. I don't mind, either."

She hands him one of the mimosas and they glance at each other, then they look away and chuckle.

Jalesh takes a sip and puts his feet in the water. "Pull me out if a shark grabs me, okay?"

She nods. "I'll try." She flips onto her tummy and kicks her feet lightly, sipping her mimosa. "Ooh, hey. I have an idea."

"Okay..." he says cautiously.

"There is this game, two truths and a lie," she says. "So, I say three things, and you have to guess which thing is the lie."

He grins. "Okay."
"Hm...my favorite fruit is pineapple, I'm terrified of mice, and I hate my nickname."

He leans back in the sun. "Um...okay the lie is the nickname one."

She laughs. "No. The lie is the fruit. My favorite fruit is pears."

"You don't like your nickname?" wonders Jalesh.

She shakes her head.

"Well, I'll call you Kiani then," he says.

She smiles. "No, no, I don't hate it that much. And Kiani is a mouthful."

"I like it," he says with a shrug, adding, "what about Kiki?"

She hums in thought and takes a sip of mimosa. "That's sweet, I like it." She nudges him. "Your turn."

"I've broken my nose before, I've never been drunk, my handwriting is terrible," he says.

She grins. "Oh, you've been drunk before!"

He laughs. "How did you know?"

"Mimi," she says simply. "She visited last year. She may have told me about the incident with Felix."

"I thought mama was going to murder him," reflects Jalesh. "He told me it was traditional to get drunk on your sixteenth birthday so he took me to a bierhaus and..."

Kiani giggles. "Yes, I imagine your mother was not happy."

"No, I thought Felix was going to faint," laughs Jalesh. "She's scary when she yells." He shakes his head. "He told me so many stories I never wanted to hear that day."

"Oh, family friends are the worst!" agrees Kiani. "I can never talk to Uncle Jela because he shares all these embarrassing stories."

"I'm sure Felix has worse ones," says Jalesh. "My parents were both insane when they were younger."

"Your mother? I don't believe it."

"She blew up a kitchen once."

"Oh," says Kiani in surprise, and then she laughs loudly. "Should I be scared of you?"

"No," he laughs. "Aria maybe, but not me."

"Yes, she seems quite feisty," agrees Kiani, adding, "Alright, I have a birthmark that looks like a cat, I love classical music, I've read every Harry Potter book."

He frowns. "The lie is the...birthmark?"

"No," she says. "The lie is Harry Potter. I haven't read a single one."

"How can a bookmark look like a cat?" he asks.
She turns over and sits next to him, shaping her legs like a pretzel and leaning forward. She sticks her arm out. "Look."

He looks at the blue-brown splotch on her forearm and raises his eyebrows. "That does look like a cat."

"I told you," she says.

She swings her legs over the side of the pier again, adjusting her sunglasses, and sips the rest of her mimosa. He sits up next to her and they look at each other, smiling.

"It's too bad we haven't hung out before," she says softly.

He nods in agreement. "Yeah."

They glance down at their hands, which are about an inch apart on the dock. Her fingers twitch slightly closer to his, but then they catch a flash of brown in their periphery and look up. There’s a large fin skimming through the water. Kiani screams. They both jump to their feet on the unstable pier, and she clings to him, eyes wide.

"Was that a shark?" she whispers.

He shakes his head, unsure, and pulls her a little closer.

Then a large seal surfaces, blowing air out of its nose. It looks at them innocently, then dives out of sight.

"A seal!" she says indignantly. "A fat seal!"

He starts to laugh, and so does she, and suddenly they can't stop. Their shoulders shake and their laughter echoes over the expanse of water between them and the shore. Finally, she covers her mouth and forces herself to take a breath.

"Oh, my heart is racing," she says breathily.

They look at each other for a moment, and when they realize how close they are, they hastily step apart.

"So," she murmurs.

"So," he says. "Swim back?"

She hesitates. "Kayak?"

He nods fervently. "Kayak. Definitely."

Ten minutes later, having asked Capheus to kayak out and rescue them, they hang behind the rest while they ascend the stairs back to the house, carrying bundled towels and empty glasses.

"Hey Jali," says Kiani, and he glances over his shoulder to look at her. "Maybe sometime this week after we're done painting and everything, we could...walk downtown and get ice cream."

"Just...you and me?" he checks.

She nods, and quickly says, "Only if you want--"
"Yes, yeah," he says immediately.

She grins. "Okay."

When they get back to the house, the others are arriving from the hardware store. Kala takes in the expression on her youngest daughter's face and glances at Amanita.

"What happened?" she asks.

Elsa's eyes widen and she goes into the house to avoid a conversation.

Amanita sets down a large load of paint rollers and starts to laughs. "She, uh, she got into a small confrontation with an employee."

"She sprayed the greenhouse manager with a hose because the plants hadn't been watered to her satisfaction," explains Hernando.

"We're no longer welcome at any Bay Area Home Depot," adds Amanita, laughing into her hands.

Kala stares, then glances over her shoulder at Wolfgang with wide, confused eyes. He shakes his head and laughs hard, closing the space between them and putting an arm around her waist.

"We're sorry," says Kala.

"No we're not, she did the right thing," says Wolfgang.

Kala starts to laugh. "She sprayed someone with a hose!"

"It was hilarious," Hernando reassures them.

"It was," adds Sani. "And it's true, the plants were dying, she's sensitive about that stuff."

"What did you do wrong?" Wolfgang jokes to Aria, who's hanging back behind Amanita.

"Nothing," she says tersely, walking into the house and letting the door click shut behind her.

Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other in concern, and Amanita looks at the door Aria just disappeared through, unsure what to say.

"Maybe she's moody," Kala says, squeezing Wolfgang's arm and going toward the door.

But Aria comes back before she reaches it, now wearing a paint smock, and darts around the side of the house to join Jalesh, Mimi, and Kiani.

"You guys worry too much," says Dani as she passes them, carrying a bag of paint scrapings towards the trash at the end of the drive. "She's a teenager, this is what happens."

Kala exhales, tucking her silvery hair behind her ear. She seeks Wolfgang's eyes. "Do you think she's alright?"

He shrugs and nods.

She nods too. "Well, whatever it is, she can work her frustration out by scraping paint."

Everyone spends the rest of the afternoon and evening working on the exterior of the house, sipping lemonade and iced tea and taking breaks to groan about the heat.
They spend the next several days in a similar manner, rising early to work on the house, going to bed late after spectacular sunsets, dinners, and drinks on the porch. By Saturday, the paint job is finished, and Lito and Nomi have installed all the light fixtures and moved plants to their appropriate spots in the gardens.

It's the first time on the trip that they don't have any work to accomplish, a warm June day without a cloud in the sky. Despite everyone being sore and tired, Amanita insists on showing them around the city.

She directs everyone to put on hiking shoes, and they all exchange a wary glance.

"Why do we need hiking shoes?" asks Aria.

"You'll see!" chirps Amanita.

The hiking shoes prove useful for the endless climb up Telegraph Hill.

Everyone huffs exhaustedly in the San Francisco sun, clinging to handrails for balance. Kala glances at Wolfgang next to her with raised eyebrows.

"This is the longest staircase on the planet," she murmurs.

He shakes his head, sweating, and they glance ahead of them at Jalesh, Kiani, Aria, and Sani, who are unbothered by the length of the steps up Telegraph Hill. Amanita, Capheus, and Zakia trudge behind them, panting.

"Amanita," says Capheus breathily, "I appreciate how authentic this tour is...but couldn't we have driven up?"

"Oh, stop complaining," teases Zakia. "The views are beautiful."

"The views would be beautiful from a car," sighs Kala, checking for Elsa, who is twenty feet behind, pausing every few minutes to examine flowers and bugs.

Wolfgang shakes his head and wipes his face. "The faster it's over the better."

He picks up his pace, stopping a few feet shy of Jalesh and Kiani, who are chatting rapidly.

"Did you know there are parrots here?" Kiani is saying.

"Parrots?" asks Jalesh.

"Yes! It's incredible. It all started with escaped pet parrots, primarily cherry-headed conures...somehow, many of the escaped parrots in the city found each other and started a whole colony. It was all against the odds. And there are over two-hundred of them now. They're not exactly wild, but they've found what is called a niche--""
Wolfgang frowns slightly. If Jalesh paid this much attention to his classes, he might not be struggling in half of them.

"They can mimick, yes, but they develop new vocalizations in their own right. And what is even more incredible? They can live more than 50 years in the wild. They scream quite often and people get tired of them which I suspect is why they're let loose."

"Scream?" laughs Jalesh.

"Yes! They scream, they're very obnoxious apparently. I hope we see one."

"What do they look like?"

"They're green and they have red feathers on their heads," she says.

Jalesh shakes his head. "How do you...know all this?"

"I watched a documentary," she says with a shrug. "Do you like documentaries?"

"I -- yeah, totally."

Wolfgang snorts.

"What do you like?"

"Do...sports documentaries count?"

"Anything counts as long as it teaches you something," she says cheerfully, touching his shoulder and pointing at something. "Oh look, a kitty..."

Jalesh is looking at her hand on his shoulder instead. Wolfgang resists the urge to make an embarrassing comment.

"They probably eat parrots sometimes," Jalesh muses.

"Cats kill millions of birds every year, it's unbelievable how effective they are," replies Kiani. "Some people get so touchy about that but what do you expect cats to do?"

"People are touchy about everything," says Jalesh.

"So touchy," she agrees, laughing. "I think most people just act that way on purpose."

"For attention..." he agrees, adding pointedly, "right, Aria?"

"Want to tell Kiani how you missed that winning goal last year and cried?" retorts Aria.

"She's such a shithead, I'm sorry," says Jalesh.

Kiani shrugs. "Being a middle child is hard."

"Don't doubt it, but really, she's just a shithead," he says.

"I don't doubt it," she answers with a smirk, adding, "but her hair is cute. I want to try that, do you think that would look good?"

She takes her hair in her hands and forms two buns with it. She laughs and lets it go. "My hair has a mind of its own."
"I like it," says Jalesh.

"I didn't say I didn't like it," she replies, adding, "And you only say that because you don't have to deal with it."

"What does this look like?" asks Jalesh, tugging on one of his own wild curls.

"Are you kidding?" she laughs. "It's not the same. Look."

She grabs his hand and puts it in her hair. His eyes widen and he stares at her.

"See?" she says. "This hair has more power than most world leaders."

He laughs at this, then relaxes and puts her hair up in a bun for her. "What about that?"

She nods. "Better for a hot day." She secures the bun with an elastic band on her wrist, then glances down, smiling. She kicks him lightly. "Let's go."

Wolfgang hangs back for a moment, waiting for Kala and watching his son and Kiani ascend the stairs. Kala reaches him and they glance at each other with a delicate smile before continuing.

"They're too young," she murmurs.

"He's seventeen," says Wolfgang.

Kala sighs quietly. "I know, but he's still my baby." Then she smiles. "I like her. Kiani. She's sweet."

He nods in agreement. "She'd be good for him."

Kala grins. "I was worried he would like girls like Mimi."

"Hey," says Dani, laughing.

"I say that with all the love in the world," says Kala warmly. "But Jali needs someone who..."

"Doesn't convince him to do reckless shit?" suggests Felix. "Yeah."

They continue up the stairs, through the jungle-like gardens and over narrow streets, to the very top of the hill, where they stand in the shade of Coit Tower and drink water. Aria lays down on the concrete and fans herself with a map of the city, while Jalesh and Kiani circumnavigate the tower, glancing in the windows. Elsa and Sani wander through the grass, taking in a view of the city and the bay, and the adults all take a breather.

"It's really quite incredible," pants Capheus, looking at his daughter. "Children have so much energy. It is difficult to keep up."

"You only have one," says Kala, splashing water on her face. "Count your blessings."

Zakia smiles. "Maybe it's her Cluster helping her. She isn't usually this athletic. And that's true, we shouldn't complain." She nudges Kala and adds, "Make sure your son doesn't sweep my daughter off her feet too quickly."

Kala grins. "I think the opposite is happening."

Capheus laughs loudly. "I agree."
Wolfgang laughs too. "Maybe she could tutor him."

"I don't think he'd pay attention to the lessons," murmurs Kala.

They glance up at the arrival of Lito and Hernando in their large convertible -- they elected to drive up the hill rather than walk, along with Nomi, Grace, and Zena.

Lito waves graciously from the driver's seat and parks, then gets out, rubs his hands together in excitement, and grins at them all. Hernando follows him, smiling, and folds his arms.

"Beautiful day!" says Lito, adding, "How was the hike?"

The adults collectively sigh and wave off the question.

Nomi hops out of the back and takes Zena out of her car seat, then hurries to Amanita, kisses her quickly, and hands the toddler over.


Amanita grins and kisses Zena's head. "Is that right?"

"She's quite exuberant today," Grace says cheerfully, joining them.

Elsa trots up to them, beaming. The other children notice the new arrivals and also come over, except for Jalesh and Kiani, who are climbing the stairs inside the tower.

"Where's Jali?" Amanita wonders. "I was remembering how I always used to squeeze his nose when he was little, wanted to do it again to annoy the bejeezus out of him."

Aria grins at the prospect of this, but then she rolls her eyes. "He's in the tower with his girlfriend."

Amanita laughs. "Ah."

They walk with the others towards the tower. Elsa chatters at Hernando about her latest dance recital, while Kala and Wolfgang take hands and lean on each other, tired. They climb the staircase, glancing at each other halfway up to express a shared desire never to walk up stairs again, and come out at a large viewing platform, where they see Jalesh and Kiani taking turns at one of the binocular stands.

"You have to use two convex lenses," Kiani is saying, "but the trouble is, when you magnify things with lenses like that, they often appear upside down because of light refraction, so the best way to fix that is to add a prism to the telescope -- binoculars are just two telescopes side by side, of course -- and that flips the image."

"Don't we see everything upside-down anyway?" asks Jalesh.

She nods. "Our eyes flip the image for us which is really quite incredible."

"Gonna start calling you Professor Kiani--"

"You are not," she says flatly, but she laughs. Then she sighs and smiles. "This city is so beautiful. It's magical."

He glances at her. "Do you want to get that ice cream now?"

She brightens, glancing around at the others with raised eyebrows. "Do you think we can sneak
"Definitely," he says. "But my parents will kill me if we disappear in a city, I'll tell them we'll come back later."

She clicks her tongue. "You're no fun."

He rolls his eyes and walks up to Wolfgang and Kala, who are hugging each other loosely and taking in the view. They glance up at his arrival.

"We are -- uh, Kiani and I -- we're going to get some ice cream, we'll be back tonight."

Kala smirks, savoring the opportunity to tease him. "Is get some ice cream slang nowadays? Are you sneaking off to make out?"

"Mama--"

Wolfgang grins. "Good one, babe."

They high five and Jalesh shakes his head hopelessly.

"You're so embarrassing," he mutters, adding, "Nowadays? Really?"

Kala laughs at herself. "I'm an old lady, I'm allowed to say that."

Jalesh shakes his head again and turns around. He rejoins Kiani, somewhat flushed, and she smirks.

"Are they teasing you?" she asks.

He laughs. "Yeah." Then he looks at her, stuck for a moment on her sea of alluring hair, twinkling eyes, and bright fuschia sundress. "Um. Ice cream? Right?"

She laughs. "Oh my God. You're so obvious."

He shakes his head, laughing with her, and rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah. Sorry."

"C'mon," she says fondly, nudging him.

He inhales to steady himself, then sets his mind and takes her hand. She smiles and they disappear down the stairs together.

The others disperse in groups too -- Aria with Amanita, Dani and Grace; Sani and Mimi with Lito, Hernando, Nomi and Zakia; and Elsa and Leo with Felix, Kala, Wolfgang and Capheus. The groups spend the rest of the day exploring the city, trying new foods, and taking in the sun, before returning to Sausalito, exhausted.

Aria, Amanita, Dani, and Grace are the last to return -- other than Jalesh and Kiani, who Wolfgang suspects will be out well into the night and creep inside with very guilty expressions.

Everyone is settled around the fireplaces on the porch, talking sleepily and sipping margaritas. Amanita appears, hauling several bags from Old Navy and several more from DSW. Dani follows her, carrying a clothing box, stacked below several trays of truffles from Ghiradelli.

"We did makeovers," Amanita explains cheerfully, huffing as she sets the bags down.

"And ate a lot of chocolate," adds Dani.
Amanita sits next to Nomi and kisses her hello, then props her feet up on the table and groans. She glances at Kala and Wolfgang.

"Your daughter," she says, "has so much energy...I think we walked twenty miles today, it was absurd."

"It was," agrees Grace feebly, entering the porch with a glass of wine and sitting by her daughter.

"Where is she?" queries Kala.

"She's coming," says Amanita with a small smirk.

Nomi glances at her wife and whispers, "What did you do?"

But before she can answer, Aria walks onto the porch, expressionless, sipping some orange juice. Kala stares at her -- not only is her hair chin-length, it's now streaked with mint green and lilac highlights.

"Oh, Ganesha," murmurs Kala.

Aria sits next to Lito and glances out at the bay, still silent.

"That looks amazing," Nomi says enthusiastically.

"I love it," adds Hernando.

"Very brave of you, it's gorgeous," says Lito.

"Pretty colors," agrees Elsa.

"I wanna do that!" chirps Mimi.

"It suits you," Wolfgang says warmly.

She smiles for the first time, then looks at Kala.

"Mama?" she asks.

Kala smiles. "He's right, sweetheart, it fits you. It's beautiful."

She beams, then simply drinks her orange juice and watches the sunset. The adults all share a sentimental glance, then finish up dinner and drinks.

Everyone but Kala and Wolfgang go to bed, worn out by the day of walking up steep hills. Kala pours the last of the margaritas into their glasses and settles closer to Wolfgang than she was sitting earlier, resting her legs on his lap and her head on his shoulder.

"What do you think our son is doing?" she asks with a smile, sipping her drink and staring at the foggy lights on the bay.

Wolfgang chuckles and shakes his head.

"I'm sad that they can't see each other more often," she says. "Maybe we should invite her to Berlin for the rest of the summer, or...ask if she wants to stay with us for Christmas."

"Are you trying to set our son up?"
She grins and laughs. "Yes. She's good for him."

"She reminds me of you, actually," says Wolfgang.

Kala nods. "She's not nearly as shy, though. And she's smarter than I was when I was her age, my God, I can't believe how intelligent she is. I'm surprised Jali isn't intimidated."

Wolfgang laughs. "He is. But he really likes her."

Kala smiles and meets his eyes. "I don't think he's ever felt quite like this. It's sweet."

"We never needed to worry about him acting like me," says Wolfgang.

She chuckles. "No." Then she reaches for his hand and squeezes it. "You did a good job."

"We did," he says with a shrug.

She shakes her head. "I know, but you..." She pauses, smiles warmly at him, and presses a quick kiss to his mouth. "I'm so blessed to have you and all of them." She sniffles suddenly. "It's beyond words."

"Kala," he says in surprise, moved.

Her smile trembles and she quickly runs her fingers under her eyes. "I can't believe he's an adult."

He shakes his head in solemn agreement. "Me neither."

Meanwhile at the beach at Kirby Cove, Jalesh and Kiani walk along the foamy surf and listen to music through a pair of shared headphones; they glance at each other occasionally and smile, and Jalesh knows he should kiss her but he wants the right moment. He's done it before, but she's more important than other girls, and it doesn't help that the simple idea of kissing her has sent his heart into a distracting frenzy of off-beat pulses.

He focuses on the music, which changes to an upbeat Swahili tune. Kiani grins and tilts her head back.

"I love this song," she says brightly as they walk along an old wood dock.

"It's nice," he agrees.

She glances at him, then pulls him by the hand onto the dock.

"Dance with me," she says.

"Uh, okay," he says.

She smiles and puts her arms around his neck, then nudges her nose against his and meets his eyes. He grins and squeezes her waist, and they dance together for a few minutes, listening to the music and the waves. He tucks her hair behind her ear and she smiles, then hugs him while they dance and he laughs.

"I like you," she mumbles.

"Yeah, I like you too," he says.

He rests his chin on the top of her head and they stay like this for a moment; he decides he'll kiss her
as soon as she pulls away, but then he notices a dull ache behind his eyes. He blinks, hoping it's a mild headache, but the ache suddenly transforms into an intense, hot throb. He grits his teeth.

"You okay?" asks Kiani, pulling back.

"I have...a headache," he explains, "out of nowhere..."

She frowns, thumbing over his temples. "That's weird..."

"Yeah," he agrees, closing his eyes against the pain and adding, "Wow. I'm really sorry, I think I should go home."

"It's that bad?" she asks in concern.

He nods. "Yeah, it's like a migraine."

She breathes in softly, contemplating a hunch, and then nods. They step off the dock onto the sand, heading towards the trail back to the bus stop.

Back at the cottage in Sausalito, Kala and Wolfgang are still on the porch, sipping the last of their margaritas and talking. It's nearly eleven p.m., and they expected their children to be long asleep, but Aria pads out to the deck and sits across from them without explanation.

They look at her expectantly, and she glances at her lap, playing with the hem of her pajamas.

"Aria?" Kala asks cautiously.

She sniffles and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. Wolfgang and Kala look at each other, unsettled.

"I can't sleep," says Aria, crying more openly.

She rarely cries in earnest -- it's almost always to get out of trouble or to get something she wants.

"What's going on?" asks Wolfgang.

She shakes her head and tucks her hair carefully behind her ears. She swallows and glances at them.

"I..." She pauses, takes a breath, and says quickly, "I like girls, I wanted you to know."

Then she sniffles and cries into her hands. Wolfgang quickly gets to his feet and pulls her into a hug. Kala rises too and hugs her other side, stroking her hair.

"Why are you crying?" Wolfgang asks gently. "Aria, it's okay."

"We love you no matter what, honey," murmurs Kala.

"Of course we do," says Wolfgang.

Aria cries harder. Kala and Wolfgang frown at each other, slightly confused, and hug her tighter.

"I - j-just, I--"

"Ari, take a breath, it's okay," says Wolfgang calmly.

"I didn't know what you would say," she gets out.
"Aria," murmurs Kala, rubbing her back, "honey we're your parents, if we judged you for things we didn't expect or for things you're insecure about, we wouldn't deserve you..."

"We love you, that isn't conditional," adds Wolfgang.

Aria nods, sniffling hard. They hug her for another moment, then sit on the sofa with her in between them. She snuggles into Kala, who looks at Wolfgang and asks through their connection why would she be so scared? He shrugs and rubs Aria's shoulders.

"Did you talk to your aunties about this?" asks Kala.

Aria nods. "Amanita talked to me."

"Good," says Kala.

They spend another moment comforting her, and then they glance up when Jalesh walks out on the porch, rubbing the back of his head.

He stops at the sight of his tearful sister.

"She okay?" he asks.

"She's okay," says Wolfgang. "What's up?"

"I have, like, a really bad headache," he admits. "Really bad, I think I should maybe go to the hospital."

Kala jumps to her feet and puts her hands on his shoulders, searching his expression worriedly.

"What? When did it start?"

"Suddenly," he explains. "Like out of nowhere, it's like a migraine but--"

Kiani sticks her head out of the sliding door and calls gently, "Not to interrupt but, um, Jali? I think you're a Sensate. That's what it feels like. A sudden horrible headache. Is it going down your spine?"

He looks at her with wide, frightened eyes and nods.

Kala and Wolfgang look at each other in alarm. Wolfgang glances at Kiani, then at Jalesh.

"Jali, she's probably right," he says carefully.

"But, but I'm not...seeing anything, or..."

"It takes a little while," explains Kiani.

Kala and Wolfgang nod in agreement. Jalesh breathes out and sits on the sofa with a huff.

"Well shit," he murmurs. He rubs his head again. "Is there anything I can do about the headache?"

"You can try some aspirin," suggests Kala. "But I doubt that will help."

"It won't, I took oxy when this happened to me, didn't touch it," says Wolfgang.

Kala sighs. "Wolfgang, why would you take oxy--" She shakes her head. "It doesn't matter. You were dumb when you were younger."
Aria sniffs and looks at Jalesh. "So you're one of them?"

He laughs. "You say that like I'm an alien."

She shrugs. "I always knew you were different. You're such a weirdo."

He nudges her. "Why are you crying?"

"No reason," she says evasively, getting to her feet.

She hugs Wolfgang and Kala and says she's going to bed. They smile at her to show they haven't disregarded her, despite the circumstance with Jalesh.

He looks at them for guidance once Aria is gone.

"You should try to sleep," suggests Kala.

"What if it's not that, what if my brain is bleeding or something?" he asks.

"We'll sit by you," she assures him. "We'll make sure you're okay."

He shakes his head. "I'm never going to be able to sleep, mama."

"It hurts too much?" she guesses.

He nods. She rubs his arms and sighs.

"Oh Jali, okay," she murmurs, glancing at Wolfgang. "What do you think?"

He steps over to them and cups the side of Jalesh's head.

"Not how you wanted to spend the night, is it?" he says.

Jalesh laughs weakly. "Uh, no."

Wolfgang pats his shoulder. "It came on suddenly? It's behind your eyes, yeah?"

Jalesh nods. Wolfgang looks at Kala.

"What else could it be?"

She shakes her head and chews on her thumb. "A subarachnoid hemorrhage has similar symptoms but he would be nauseous and his neck would be stiff."

"Do you have that?" asks Wolfgang.

Jalesh shakes his head.

"Are you being completely honest?" checks Wolfgang.

He nods.

"Okay," says Kala in a small voice, putting her hand through Jalesh's hair and watching him. "Do you want us to stay with you?"

"Actually I want to be alone," he says quietly.
"Okay," she says, nodding.

She squeezes his arm and then she and Wolfgang go inside, checking over their shoulders as he sits by one of the fires and stares into it with a disconcerted expression.

"Do you think it's something else?" Wolfgang asks seriously.

Kala shakes her head. "I don't. But I want to keep an eye on him."

"Will he be okay?" asks Kiani as they come inside -- she's been waiting anxiously by the door.

"Maybe you should sit with him," Kala says cautiously.

"He said he wanted to be alone," says Wolfgang.

"I think he meant us," replies Kala.

He hesitates, then nods and looks at Kiani. "Do you mind?"

She smiles and shakes her head, then goes out on the porch and sits on the couch next to Jalesh. They talk for a moment, and then Kiana gestures for him to come closer; she puts her arms around him and thumbs over his temples. Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other and smile, then go inside and try to sleep.

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The next morning, they find Jalesh walking around the porch, animatedly gesturing at someone they can't see. They glance at Kiani, who's watching him with a faint smile.

"He's been at it for hours," she explains.

"Oh my God," murmurs Kala, tying her robe and watching. She puts a hand on her heart and looks at Wolfgang. "Wolfgang, he's..."

Wolfgang nods, also watching, and he smiles quickly at her.

"I thought at least one of our kids would be," he says.

She nods. "Me too! Ah, I can't wait to meet them all, has he said how many there are?"

Kiani shakes her head. "No, but I think there are several." She grins. "It's like I'm not even here. I don't blame him, it is a weird experience."

"That's an understatement," murmurs Wolfgang.

Jalesh notices his parents have arrived, and he communicates to whoever he's talking to that he needs a moment. He walks over to them, shaking his head.

"Freaking out?" asks Wolfgang with a laugh.

"What the fuck?" he says fervently. "It's so...real."

Kala smiles and nods, then throws her arms around him and squeezes him tightly. He laughs and hugs her back, and then he hums in surprise.

"You feel... different."
She pulls away, nodding and sniffling, and stretches to kiss his forehead.

"Ew, Mama," he complains halfheartedly.

"This is so exciting," she says, squeezing his shoulders. "Tell us about them! Can you talk to us for a while? I know you want to meet them all but..."

He shakes his head to show he doesn't mind, then glances at Kiani, who smiles.

"Want to have coffee with us?" he asks her.

"Yes!" says Kala enthusiastically. "Yes, come have coffee with us."

Wolfgang chuckles and puts an arm around his wife. "Kala, babe, calm down."

"No, this is wonderful, I can't wait to tell everyone," she says, pulling Jalesh towards the kitchen.

Kiani follows them, yawning. It's barely five a.m. and everyone else is asleep. Kala makes a fresh pot of coffee and puts a pitcher of cream and a dish of sugar on the table.

She grins encouragingly at Jalesh, who laughs at her energy.

"Um, there's six of us...I think, some of them are shy," he explains quietly, sipping his coffee. "I only know one of their names so far, he's from Turkey, his name is Vedat...there's a girl from I'm guessing the States but she keeps disappearing...a girl from Thailand, um, a guy from Peru...and another girl from Germany actually."

"This is so exciting, your whole life will change," says Kiani, adding with a gasp, "Oh my God, Jali! We'll be able to visit! When you're in Berlin, I mean!"

He brightens and grins. "Yeah, shit!"

She takes both of his hands. "And you should meet my Cluster, too! Oh my God, we can all visit--"

She stops and lets go of his hands, glancing cautiously at Kala, who's visibly melting, squeezing Wolfgang's forearm with a vicelike grip.

"I'm so happy," squeaks Kala.

Jalesh laughs, then smiles quickly at Kiani. He wants to hold her hands again, because the brief touch was more intense than he knew was possible.

"Is the headache gone?" asks Wolfgang.

Jalesh nods. "Yeah, finally. It's crazy...I can see everything and smell everything and...it's like being there, where they are."

"For me, it was just flashes at first," says Kiani.

"It's like that, yeah," he agrees, adding, "I think Vedat and I figured it out but the others are scared so I'm just getting...glimpses."

"Yeah, we're lucky that we're Sensates' children," says Kiani. "Can you imagine if we had no prior experience?"

"Yes, it's terrifying," says Kala seriously.
Wolfgang chuckles. "It is."

"Helps that there's no evil organization who wants to kill us," mentions Jalesh.

Kiani grins. "That does help."

Kala refreshes her coffee and takes a large sip, smiling to herself, and then she glances at Wolfgang before addressing Kiani.

"Well, Kiani, we were going to invite you to Berlin," she says. "But I suppose you can visit now." She smirks. "And maybe tutor Jali for his exams..."

"Mama," groans Jalesh.

Kiani smiles. "I'd like that."

He glances at her, unsure. "I don't think you would..."

"I would," she insists.

They talk the rest of the morning, and share the news with the Cluster and their friends over breakfast, and finally all decide to go on a leisurely hike. Jalesh spends most of the time distracted, jumping at things thousands of miles away, and Kiani watches him with a soft, slightly-calculating smile. Aria's seen this look in her mama's eyes before she gives her papa a particularly cringe-worthy kiss. It gives her the creeps, so she makes a point to walk apart from Jalesh and Kiani, who are hand-in-hand.

"They're grossing me out," she informs Amanita.

Amanita grins. "Yeah, wait until they start dating."

Aria groans and latches arms with her while they walk. The group finishes the hike by the time the sun is setting, and everyone takes time to shower, help with dinner, and pack their bags for their flights the next morning. After dinner on the patio and drinks during a movie, everyone goes to bed except for Jalesh and Kiani, who sneak outside to sit by the fire.

He's half-asleep due to his all-nighter, and she's listless too, but after being surrounded by friends and parents all day, they couldn't resist the urge to be alone for a few minutes before they leave tomorrow morning.

She stretches her legs out on the wicker hassock and leans her head back, looking up at the sky. He watches her, eyes traveling from her toes to the top of her head, and exhales slowly. The last two days have been too hectic to reflect, and now alone with her, he's overwhelmed by the intensity of his feelings -- he knows the Sensate connection enhances shared emotions, but since the moment he saw her this week he couldn't look away, and the same is true tonight.

She turns her head and smiles invitingly at him, and he sits slightly closer. She smiles more widely and reaches her hand out for him to take.

"I don't remember you at all from when we met as kids," she says, "so I never expected..." She trails off and shrugs, laughing gently. "Well, I don't like very many people, even as friends. But I like you."

He grins. "Yeah, I...I've never really felt like this about a girl."
She bites her bottom lip and looks at him playfully. "Same. It's a good sign we're both Sensates now, yes? It's the universe saying something."

He nods, then says quietly, "Uh, since we can visit...I know it won't be the same but would you want to...uh, you know, be my girlfriend?"

She grins and kisses him softly, quickly. He breathes in, jumpy and exhilarated.

"Yeah, boyfriend and girlfriend," she agrees as she pulls away, adding, "Will you kiss me now? It's been a week."

He nods and kisses her hard.

The next morning, Kala rushes around, tugging on a cardigan, putting on earrings, stuffing breakfast into her mouth while she gets all the children ready to go to their airport. She can't find Jalesh, so she goes outside, about to call his name, but she stops because he's asleep with Kiani on one of the sofas. She puts a hand over her mouth, grinning, and watches for a moment -- Jalesh has his arms loosely around Kiani and she has her nose snuggled into his chest.

Kala creeps back into the house, unconcerned that Jalesh isn't ready and will delay their departure to the airport. She motions at Wolfgang and pulls him to the door, then points at their son and Kiani.

He laughs and folds his arms. "Aw."

"I'm so happy, she's so intelligent and level-headed," says Kala earnestly.

He nods in agreement, then raps hard on the window. Jalesh jumps, looking around in confusion, and then stares at his parents through the glass. They wave at him and his eyes widen. He hastily lets go of Kiani and sits up, and Kala and Wolfgang lean on each other and chuckle.

"What are you two laughing about?" asks Capheus, lugging his suitcase out from one of the guest rooms.

Kala points. "Look at them."

He looks at his daughter, who's getting to her feet, clearly laughing, brushing the dew off her jeans.

He grins and clasps his hands happily. "Aren't they sweet?"

Kiani comes inside, looks at Kala, Wolfgang, and Capheus and smiles, then goes into her room to get ready for the airport. Wolfgang kisses the side of Kala's head, then leaves and continues to pack. She goes outside once more and sits next to Jalesh with a playful smile.

"So," she wheedles. "How was your night?"

"Mama..."

"Did you tell her you want to be her boyfriend? Tell me you told her that."

Jalesh rolls his eyes. "Yeah."

"And?" asks Kala excitedly. "What did she say?"

He looks away, playing with his hair. "Well she...didn't say anything."

Kala frowns. "Really?" Then she inhales in understanding and shakes him. "Oh my God, did she
"kiss you?"

"Mama," he groans.

Kala gasps and leans closer. "She did. Oh my God, she did."

Jalesh pushes her gently away, laughing, and then he flushes a deep peach color. *Make out* is probably a more appropriate word, but his mother doesn't need to know that.

"Yeah," he mumbles. "She said I was talking too much."

Kala beams. "Oh that's wonderful, was that your first kiss?"

He laughs and says, too quickly, "No." Then his eyes widen and he adds, "Not...not that I've kissed a lot of girls."

Kala rolls her eyes fondly, then squeezes his hands and says firmly, "Don't screw up. She's perfect for you."

"I'll try not to," he says, laughing again.

Then Capheus comes out with two smoothies, handing them to Kala and Jalesh. Kala gets to her feet, takes both of Capheus's hands, and leans close.

"Your daughter, and my son, are going to go out together," she whispers, adding, "and they kissed."

"Mama!" says Jalesh in exasperation.

Capheus seizes Kala's head and kisses her forehead, and then they laugh together and jump up and down. Jalesh shakes his head hopelessly and gets up, intending to go inside, but Wolfgang comes out and smirks at him.

"Will you tell them to stop?" implores Jalesh.

"Why are you acting like idiots?" asks Wolfgang.

Kala grins. "They kissed!"

Jalesh holds his hands up and goes inside. "You guys don't know where the line is."

Twenty minutes later, everyone travels to the airport to return home, except for the Berners, Lito, and Hernando, who are traveling to Los Angeles. Kiani and Jalesh dart behind a coffee stand to kiss goodbye, and then he rushes to the gate to board a plane to Berlin.

When they walk into their apartment in Mitte the next morning, Kala stops Jalesh in the entrance and squeezes his shoulders.

She smiles proudly at him. "You're very lucky, she's wonderful."

He glances down and chuckles. "Yeah, I like her too."

She grins and pats his arm, then follows the rest of the family up the stairs. Jalesh hangs back for a moment, smiling gently to himself; then he laughs, overwhelmed, and grins as he jogs up the stairs after them.
Credit to the amazing Nightjar_Patronus who inspired deaf!Zena. (Go read her fic!)

Speaking as someone who's walked up all the steps on Telegraph Hill...it IS the longest staircase in the world. Yikes.

Translation:

Ala! = Swahili exclamation of surprise.
Eighteen Steps

Chapter Summary

Elsa basks in the limelight, Sani and Aria grow closer with their grandparents, Jalesh graduates, and Kala and Wolfgang reflect on the last eighteen years.

Chapter Notes

This is ridiculously long. Too long. I'm sorry.

Nānā = grandfather
Schnecke = term of endearment meaning "snail"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

May 17, 2039

Kala adjusts Elsa's shiny, lilac-colored sari and checks that her braid has stayed nicely in place through her pre-show warm-up. She smiles and gently pinches her youngest daughter's cheek.

"You'll be wonderful," says Kala warmly.

Elsa grins, but as usual, seeks Wolfgang's eyes. He chuckles and kneels in front of her.

"You will, schnecke," he says, touching a finger lightly to her nose.

She smiles. "Thanks, Papa."

"It's a very pretty song," continues Kala, adding in a thick voice, "your Nānā will love it."

Wolfgang stands to put a comforting arm around her waist. She exhales slowly, throat tight, and he pats her side.

"Do you want to call him?" he suggests, glancing at Elsa.

Elsa nods brightly and the other children gather closer in the small, dimly-lit backstage of the Royal Theatre Carré. They listen to Israel's performance fade onstage, transitioning to Norway's.

"I'm after this one," says Elsa.

Kala nods and hastily unlocks her phone.

How she came to be standing backstage with her ten-year-old daughter at the Junior Eurovision semi-finals is a blur. A little over a month ago, Elsa climbed into bed with her and Wolfgang with a shifty expression on her face. She silently presented them with a letter that told her she had been chosen to represent Germany and they stared at her in bewilderment.
She bumbled through a story about convincing Auntie Dani to drive her to tryouts, explaining she didn’t tell them in case she wasn't chosen. She wanted to prevent them from being disappointed in her if they didn't have to be, which they found equally touching and concerning about their youngest daughter’s personality.

The process of writing an original song and performing it in front of a large panel of judges went unrevealed until this moment, except to Dani, Felix, and Leo.

They stared at her before Wolfgang finally asked for clarification.

"Junior Eurovision? On television?"

Elsa just nodded.

The next month was a daze of flights and rehearsals, which was inconvenient considering Jalesh was in the midst of studying for his Arbitur and needed their constant support too. It didn’t help matters that Sanyam was admitted to the hospital after chemotherapy complications, and Kala and Wolfgang found themselves flitting like hummingbirds to Mumbai, back to Berlin, and repeatedly to Amsterdam for the competition.

They also found themselves managing their youngest daughter's safety and security in a way they never had before, shielding her from -- Kala hates the word -- fans.

Being ten, adorable, talented, and the daughter of a well-known mobster made her quite popular with the audience. Wolfgang insisted to Kala that if an interviewer asked one more question about his past in Berlin and how it was possible that he produced such a "ray of sunshine" he would murder someone. She gently reminded him that this attitude wouldn't improve anyone's perception of him.

Tonight, the last night before the final performances, Kala pulls Elsa close backstage and FaceTimes her father. She hands the phone to Elsa and the other children all gather. Sanyam answers, grinning at them all despite the oxygen tubes and a pale complexion.

"Hello," he says sleepily.

"Hi, Nānā!" they chorus.

Kala smiles. "Do you have the television on?"

He chuckles. "What do you think?" he turns the phone to show the TV affixed to the wall.

Priya -- sitting tiredly in a chair nearby -- waves as the camera pans over her. Sanyam appears on the screen again and smiles.

"Good luck tonight, my dear," says Sanyam.

Elsa grins and shouts thank you in Hindi.

"I like your sari," adds Sanyam.

She twirls in it. "Thank you!"

"I'll be watching every moment," Sanyam assures her.

She nods, then glances over her shoulder at the arrival of a stage attendant, who beckons her to prepare for her performance. She looks hastily back at the phone and smiles.
"Bye, Nānā!" she chirps.

He smiles and waves goodbye, and then Elsa hands the phone to Kala, who pockets it and rubs her shoulder. Elsa looks up at her brightly.

"He's going to be okay, mama," she says, and then she hugs Kala and disappears with her attendant.

Kala looks listlessly at Wolfgang, who squeezes one of her hands and replies with a small smile that doesn't reach his eyes. They glance cautiously at Sani, who's watching them, waiting for an assurance that Elsa is right. Kala pats his arm and turns away before he can see how glassy her eyes are, and Jalesh and Wolfgang meet eyes in concern.

"Kala, it's alright," says Wolfgang. "Elsa's about to sing, we need to be there for her."

Kala nods hard. "I know, I know." She smiles genuinely. "Let's go to our seats."

He nods too, turning with their other children to go down a small staircase and take their seats in the front. Jalesh puts his arm around Kala and rubs her arm, and she rests her head briefly on his shoulder, smiling. Then the lights change and Elsa walks on stage, alone.

"Now, only ten years old, representing Germany, Elsa Felicity Dandekar!" the speakers announce and a backdrop of pink and purple leaves lights up the stage; the leaves slowly fall, gradually turning gold.

Elsa steps in front of the short mic and smiles.

Wolfgang is unsure where she got this spirit from. He and Kala are both confident, but they detest the spotlight, while Elsa positively radiates in it. He smiles and chuckles gently, then reaches for Kala's hand. She beams and they both watch their tiny daughter as she starts to sing.

She wrote a song in Hindi with Kala and Sanyam's help and insisted on performing it despite the fact that she's representing Germany. Kiani mentioned to Jalesh that this might cost her the competition, considering the audience seems unaware that she's biracial despite her last name. Elsa shrugged when Jalesh relayed this and said, "Then I lose." Aria, surprising everyone, softened on her little sister after this and began to treat her with respect she shows no one else.

Kala bites her bottom lip, overwhelmed, and leans to whisper to Wolfgang.

"How does a sound that big come out of someone that tiny?"

He chuckles and squeezes her hand in response. Aria leans forward, spellbound, and Jalesh and Sani both grin, smug that their ten-year-old sister beat out the older competitors without breaking a sweat.

The song is a sweet ballad similar to traditional Bollywood melodies, and Elsa's voice intones just the right way from years of practice in front of the television. Kala notices murmurs of surprise from the audience around her and smirks slightly, satisfied.

Elsa sings the song effortlessly and finishes with a bow, breathing hard. Everyone claps and the family gets up and cheers, delighting Elsa, who waves. They laugh and wave back, and then she trots off stage, grinning.

Wolfgang and Kala smile fiercely at each other and squeeze each other's hands before sitting down. Wolfgang laughs gently, looking down, shaking his head. Kala grins and bumps her arm against his.

"You should see how proud you look right now," she murmurs.
He laughs again, overwhelmed. "She's fearless." He glances at Kala with a smirk. "And fucking talented, did you hear that?"

Kala wipes her eyes and laughs. "I did. Oh, little thing, she's going to be famous..."

Aria grins. "She is."

Wolfgang smiles at this and puts an arm around his older daughter. Then he shakes his head in astonishment and looks a final time at Kala, who sniffs and puts a hand on her heart.

They wait through the rest of the performance until the vote at the end, at which point Kala and Wolfgang grip hands. They watch the countries jostle positions on the large blue scoreboard while the announcer chatters about Sweden's impressive performance and Germany's unusual choice. They watch Germany's position drop and glance at each other; it remains in the fifth position as voting ends.

Kala breathes out. "We knew it was a risk."

"She'll be okay," says Aria. "It was more important to her to do this for Nānā."

Kala smiles and nods. After closing remarks, they join Elsa backstage, where she's sipping a cup of tea with honey and wearing her street clothes.

She quickly sets her mug on an amp nearby and rushes up to them, eyes wide, searching their expressions. Before she can speak, however, Wolfgang picks her up and hugs her tightly.

He smiles. "We loved it."

She laughs. "So did I."

He sets her down and Kala hugs her too, and then Aria rolls her eyes and follows suit; her brothers do too, and by the time they all let her go, she's breathless and bright pink.

"Okay already," she murmurs, blushing and looking at her shoes.

Then she yawns hugely and leans against Wolfgang.

"Can we go to the hotel now?"

"Yeah, schnecke, c'mon," he says, picking her up again.

She rests against him sleepily and they walk down one of the halls to a stage door -- one that the security guards reassure them is free from crowding fans. A black van picks them up to take them to their hotel, and they've just sat down when Kala's phone rings.

She grins and hands it to Elsa. "I think your Nānā wants to congratulate you..."

She listens to her youngest daughter chatter at Sanyam about the performance and how she nearly forgot a word. She smiles, impressed that Elsa felt the performance was a struggle considering how effortless it appeared. She looks at Wolfgang, aware he's listening too, and they both smile -- Elsa is growing up faster than they remember with any of their other children and lately they stick to her like honey, unwilling to let go.

Kala reaches for Wolfgang's hand and he takes it. They kiss quickly, then look up at the arrival of Kiani, who sits next to Jalesh in the van and worriedly scrolls on her phone. She leans against Jalesh
and whispers, pointing at her screen. They notice Jalesh's eyes darken and see him take Kiani's phone into his own hand. His nose wrinkles slightly in rage.

"Twitter should have been shut down decades ago," grumbles Kiani. “Assholes.”

"Oh, fuck these people," mumbles Jalesh.

If the last year and half has taught Wolfgang anything, it’s that Jalesh and Kiani are a force of nature together and the younger children are lucky to have them on their side. Kiani is especially protective and regularly defends them and reassures them. As far as Wolfgang is concerned, this is the only qualification any girlfriend of Jalesh’s needs.

Wolfgang watches them as they continue to look at her phone, then leans closer. "What's going on?"

Kiani huffs. "Some people feel that Elsa shouldn't have sung a song in a language that only...immigrants speak."

"It's worse than that," says Jalesh, adding with a shake of his head, "yeah, nationalism worked out so well before..."

Kiani snorts angrily. "Assholes. Don't tell Elsa."

"Can I see?" asks Wolfgang.

Kiani nods and hands him her phone. He scrolls over the Twitter feed and glances at Kala, debating if he should show her. He sees that she's still watching Elsa with a tender expression and silently hands the phone back.

"It's nothing she hasn't heard," he tells Jalesh and Kiani, though the brusque tone of his voice betrays how angry he is.

"They're jealous," says Kiani assuredly. "She's brilliant and they're all jealous."

Jalesh looks at her in appreciation, then puts an arm around her and rubs her shoulder. Her brow twitches in determination and she continues to scroll.

"This isn't over so easily," she whispers. "I'm going to write about this and prove them all wrong."

Jalesh grins and glances at her, and she raises her eyebrows with a sharp smirk. He briefly presses his thumb to the center of her lips -- a gesture to replace a real kiss when they're not alone -- and she laughs and looks down.

Wolfgang looks away, shaking his head; he caught onto this gesture several months ago, though he's sure they don't know. He looks at Kala as she strokes Elsa's hair -- Elsa is drowsing, long lashes flickering, and Kala is watching her, hugging her from the side. He reaches to touch Kala's knee, and then he looks back at Jalesh and Kiani, who has pulled out her laptop and is typing rapidly, pushing newly-donned glasses up her broad nose while Jalesh looks on in affectionate astonishment.

Then Sani's voice startles him.

"Dad?" says Sani, who switched from "papa" to "dad" late last year.

Wolfgang looks at him to show he has his full attention.

Sani lowers his voice. "Dad, is Nānā going to die?"
Wolfgang glances again at Kala, but her eyes are closed and she's resting her head on Elsa's. He looks back at Sani.

"He's very sick," says Wolfgang quietly.

Sani nods. "But you don't...you don't know, right? You'd tell me if you knew?"

Wolfgang nods in response. "We'd tell you."

Sani breathes out. "Okay." Then he runs a hand through his wiry hair and meets his father's eyes. "Can I fly to Mumbai instead of Berlin? I'd...like to see him."

Wolfgang watches him for a moment, reflecting on his son's friendship with Sanyam, forged over long hours in the kitchen over holidays. He nods.

Sani relaxes and soothes himself by looking out the window. "Okay."

Wolfgang watches him for a moment longer before looking at Aria, who is amusing Jalesh and Kiani by roasting various users on Twitter. The three of them snigger and shake their heads the rest of the way to the hotel.

Once there, Jalesh carries Elsa inside while she sleeps, and Kala leans on Wolfgang, nearly asleep too. There's a small group of Eurovision supporters in the lobby, waving, but they respectfully quiet down at the sight of a sleeping Elsa. Kala and Wolfgang both smile warily at the fans, and then they escape into the elevator with a grateful sigh.

Jalesh shakes his head at Kiani while he lifts Elsa more comfortably on his shoulder. Aria rolls her eyes.

"Could you, like, pay attention to the people who are actually here, Jali?"

Jalesh raises his eyebrows at her. She sighs dispiritedly and looks at her phone.

"You'll understand when you've got a girlfriend," mutters Jalesh.

"I've got one," replies Aria, and Jalesh knows she's either lying through her teeth or telling the complete truth, but he's never been good at recognizing the difference.

Jalesh glances at Kiani. "Is she lying?"

"I have no idea, she would make an excellent spy..."

Wolfgang snorts. "Don't encourage her."

"Don't encourage me?" asks Aria, unsure what the Sensates are talking about.

"Kiki thinks you'd be a good spy," says Jalesh, ignoring his father.

Aria grins. "Tell her thanks."

Wolfgang exhales, giving up, and focuses on Kala next to him; she's so exhausted from traveling from Mumbai to Berlin to Amsterdam that her knees are nearly buckling. He gives her a bracing squeeze and kisses the top of her head, and her lips twitch happily at the feeling.

The elevators open and the family -- plus Kiani, visiting -- walk down the hall to the suite where they're staying. Kala takes Elsa from Jalesh as they go inside and helps her wash up and change into
pajamas. Jalesh flops down on the sofa bed with Kiani perched at the edge, still typing on her laptop. Sani and Aria sleepily get ready for bed, and finally, at nearly midnight, Kala and Wolfgang shut the door to their separate room.

Kala shakes her head gently as she presses close to Wolfgang under the covers.

"One more performance," she mumbles. "Then I can go home and sleep." She sighs. "Actually, then I can fly to Mumbai and emotionally support my mother. Goodie."

He thumbs over her temple. "I'm sorry."

She breathes out slowly.

"Sani wants to go with you," adds Wolfgang, shifting to rub her back.

She nods. "He can. I'd like him there, actually."

He's about to reply, but he glances up as the door cracks open. Elsa comes in and, without explaining herself, shuts the door, climbs onto the bed, and sandwiches herself between them.

Wolfgang chuckles tiredly. "Aren't you getting old for this?"

"My bed has ouchies in it," she explains.

"What?" murmurs Kala.

"Springs. Uncomfy. Like this better. You can't say no, I'm on Eurovision."

Wolfgang laughs loudly at this and elbows her. She grins and settles down between them, closing her eyes. Her parents look at each other with small, affectionate smiles, and go to sleep without another word.

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May 20, 2039

Kala guides Sani through the revolving doors at the airport, keeping a watch on Aria, who hasn’t spoken a word since breakfast. She assumes this is due to her disappointment that her little sister ultimately placed seventh in the competition, though she’s confused why Aria would be upset considering Elsa is chipper and unfazed. She places a hand on her middle daughter's shoulder as she passes and Aria meets her eyes briefly, but doesn’t speak.

Kala sighs gently. Over the years, Wolfgang became somewhat more talkative, but Aria seems to have the opposite arc -- by the time she’s an adult, Kala is sure she’ll be as taciturn as Wolfgang used to be.

They make their way along the counters at the airport, and reach the point where they’ll diverge -- Wolfgang, Aria, Elsa, and Jalesh to Berlin, and Kala and Sani to Mumbai. Kala has just kissed Wolfgang goodbye when Aria clears her throat.

"Mama, can I go with you?" she asks quietly.

Kala blinks. "What?"

"I want to see Nānā," Aria explains.
Everyone pauses, taking a collective breath in the coffee-infused air of the hall. Kala shifts, her heels clicking on the glossy floor, and she takes in her daughter’s expression. Aria’s features have taken on a slightly stronger structure; at moments like these, when she’s insistent, her eyes blaze and her mouth forms a firm line. She looks distinctly like her father despite her dark unruly hair.

Kala and Wolfgang look at each other for a moment.

“I’m sure we can exchange your ticket,” Kala says.

Aria nods, then hugs her siblings and Wolfgang goodbye and follows Kala and Sani. Kala swaps the tickets at the counter, then walks through customs with her arms around the twins. She watches as they communicate through glances and quirked eyebrows -- being twins seems the closest Sapien equivalent of visiting. Kala’s dark lashes flash and her lips twitch, perturbed that she can’t understand their silent conversation.

“Are you two okay?” she eventually murmurs.

“I didn’t want you two to be alone,” admits Aria with a shrug. “Papa and Jali won’t be there and you both kind of...get worked up without one of them around.”

Kala raises her eyebrows as she takes her passport from her purse. She isn’t surprised that her children all have a protective streak, but she wishes it wouldn’t manifest in such selfless ways -- Jalesh, she’s sure, has carried the weight of his siblings’ issues for years, and it appears now that Aria has too, though more quietly.

“You don’t have to worry about me,” says Kala, smiling at her.

“I don’t know, mama…” says Aria, unconvinced.

Kala frowns and looks at Sani, who makes a face and shrugs.

“We’re kind of sensitive, mama,” he begins and Kala sighs sharply.

“Honey, you’re too young to be taking care of me,” she says to Aria. “Or your brother. Or anyone. You’re fifteen.”

Aria rolls her eyes as they move along in the customs line. “You know papa would have gone on a murder spree by now without Jali around to talk him down. So what we’re your kids? We can still help you…”

Kala reflects on the fact that Wolfgang once called Aria’s secondary school teacher a “corrupt, vindictive bitch” for failing Aria on a project about colonialism. She recalls that Jalesh was the only one who could calm him down. She stops her train of thought before she remembers any more of her love’s troublesome temper, and then she glances at Aria, softening.

“You know I’m right,” says Aria.

Kala sighs and nods. Jalesh often is the only one who convinces Wolfgang to calm down, usually with promises of protecting his little siblings from anyone who so much as looks at them the wrong way.

“I know,” she admits. She huffs and tucks Aria’s hair behind her ear -- this year, it’s shoulder-length with teal and silver highlights. “But don’t burden yourself, alright?”

“It’s not like I’m Jali, mama, I’m not trying to protect the whole freaking city of Berlin.”
Sani snorts at this as he lugs his bag along in line. “Yeah, you’re not Kiani either, trying to undermine capitalism through blogging…”

“They’re so extra,” sighs Aria. “ Seriously, I can’t deal with them anymore, Jali and his stupid hearteyes all the time, I mean...control yourself, okay? She’s pretty, she’s smart, we get it.”

Sani shakes his head. “You do not want to know what I walked in on last Christmas…”

Aria makes a retching sound and Sani laughs. Kala rolls her eyes affectionately and guides them through the security line, and then stops to buy coffees for everyone. Once on the plane, Aria delves into *The Birth of the Clinic* by Michel Foucault (a gift from Hernando, who knows she likes to read) and Sani opens his laptop to watch an architecture documentary. Kala smiles to herself, reflecting on the fact that her other two children can’t sit still for more than five minutes without throwing a fit.

Then she pulls her eyemask from her bag, toes her shoes off, and tucks her legs into a pretzel shape; she leans on the window, pulls the eyemask down, and falls asleep without another word to her children.

Ten hours later, a cab drops the three of them off at the Hinduja National Hospital along Mahim beach. It’s nearly 33° and the typical oceanside breeze is stagnant today. Aria groans faintly as they step out of the cab, breathing in the scent of salt and gasoline, and hastens towards the hospital entrance. Kala and Sani follow her, weighed down with bags, and then they all wait in the elevator as it wooshes them to the 16th floor.

Sanyam’s room overlooks the ocean, is painted a soft cream color, and is decorated lavishly with live plants (at Kala’s insistence.) When they go inside, they find him sitting up in bed, sipping a cup of tea while Priya sits nearby, reading. They both look up and brighten at the sight of Kala, Sani, and Aria. Sanyam’s complexion is ashy and his eyes are tired, but he smiles. Priya does too, setting her book aside.

Kala and the twins smile back and hurry to hug them hello.

“How are you, dad?” asks Kala carefully, squeezing Sanyam’s shoulder.

“About the same,” he admits with a smile, adding, “I didn’t realize you’d bring the twins along, what a nice surprise.”

She grins gently. “They insisted.”

“How is Elsa holding up?” asks Sanyam as he sets his tea aside.

Aria smiles. “She’s fine, she expected this.”

“She’s just happy she got to compete,” adds Sani.

Kala nods in agreement as she pulls three chairs from the side of the room. She and the twins sit down and Sanyam drinks his tea for a moment, smiling distantly. Aria notices that her grandfather's eyes are milkier than they used to be, his wrinkles more pronounced; lately she's become aware of a slight tremor in his hands and a tendency to forget stories she's told him. She moves her chair slightly closer and smiles at him, and he reaches to take her hand and give it a squeeze.

Priya smiles warmly at this, and then the corner of her mouth twitches in amusement and she looks at Kala.

"I hear Elsa created quite a stir," she murmurs.
Kala's cheeks flush and she tips her head down, pressing her fingertips to her brow. "Oh yes. The audience was not thrilled that she sang something they couldn't understand." She starts to laugh. "But she didn't care what anyone had to say about it." She pauses, glancing up, and smiles at her father. "She sang it for you, you know."

Sanyam nods. "I know. I'll never forget it. She reminds me very much of you when you were that age although she's..."

"Bolder," says Kala with a laugh.

Sani grins and nudges his mother, then looks at Sanyam. "What was she like when she was ten?"

Kala rolls her eyes and sits back in her seat, resigning herself to a few embarrassing stories. Sanyam chuckles and sits up, setting his tea on the table beside him.

"Well," he begins, "she was coming into her own as a scientist. Everything fascinated her and I couldn't keep her out of the kitchen." He shakes his head. "Once, after I changed the spices I put in the palak paneer, she brought home a clipboard and went around the restaurant, interrupting every table and asking if they preferred the old palak paneer or the new palak paneer, and then she presented me with the results and said..." He trails off laughing. "She said, 'Dad, no one can tell the difference, next time don't be afraid to add more coriander.'"

Sani grins and shakes his head at Kala. "Good for you, he's way too cautious."

"Oh, nonsense," says Sanyam good-naturedly. "Recipes are very delicate, Sani. You have to change them incrementally."

"Imperceptibly, you mean," murmurs Kala and everyone laughs.

Then Sanyam groans. "We can't talk about food. I have had boiled chicken and unseasoned rice for two weeks now."

Sani wrinkles his nose. "What?"

Sanyam nods seriously and pats his belly. "The hospital is not very inventive."

He's about to speak again, but a nurse comes in to adjust his medication. She looks at Kala -- everyone here knows her as Dr. Dandekar, and they always increase their pace as they pass her, intimidated. The nurse squeaks quietly, then inhales.

"Dr. Dandekar, ah, hello, would you like to see your father's chart?"

Kala nods and extends her hand.

"You're not a doctor," says Aria quietly.

"I have my doctorate," murmurs Kala as she goes over the chart.

"But you're not a doctor," repeats Aria.

"I'm not a doctor the same way you're not an obnoxious fifteen-year-old..."

"Oh, very funny," says Aria, folding her arms.

Kala rolls her eyes, but then her gaze darkens and she looks at the nurse. "Why are you giving him cisplatin and paclitaxel when you could be giving him cisplatin and docetaxil?"
Aria looks at her mother with a flicker of appreciation.

"You -- you would have to ask our specialist," says the nurse.

"Yes, bring him here please," says Kala sharply, handing the chart back.

"Be nice, Kala," says Sanyam as the nurse leaves.

"Docetaxil has been shown in numerous studies to be more effective," says Kala, flustered, inching closer with a questioning gaze. "Are you sure you're being given the best care? I can move you to another hospital, you can come to Berlin, we have a private doctor who--"

Sanyam holds up his hands. "Kala, my dear, my daughter, no. No. I am perfectly comfortable here and they said I am doing well." He smiles measuredly. "I will tell you if I want something different." He shakes his head after a moment of sipping tea and adds, "I was born here. And if it all goes wrong, I want to be here when I die, too."

"Sanyam, please don't say things like that," whispers Priya.

But Kala nods. "I understand." She sniffs hard and continues to nod. "I do. I understand." Then she shakes her head and says peevishly, "Paclitaxil."

Sanyam starts to laugh, addressing his grandchildren. "Does she give you a hard time like this?"

"Constantly," says Aria.

"Not me," says Sani.

Kala cracks a small smile. "I'm not any harder on you, Ari..."

"Yeah, you know who's harder on you?" says Sani. "Dad. It's totally unfair, you should call him out."

"He's harder on me because he thinks I'm going to get myself killed," says Aria with a huff, tossing her hair over one shoulder. Then she puffs her lips out and tilts her head. "I can't really blame him."

"Yeah," snorts Sani. "Miracle you lasted this long."

"I'll kick it skydiving or something," says Aria.

Kala sighs and strokes her daughter's hair. "You are Wolfgang's child..."

Then the specialist arrives, and Kala gets up to talk with him privately in the hall. Aria cranes her head towards the door to listen in on the conversation while Sani sits closer to Sanyam and narrows his eyes.

"Only plain chicken? Really? We're going to have to do something about that..."

Sanyam grins. "Don't worry, child. Plain chicken is the least of our concerns."

They pause as Kala hisses "you incompetent amateur" in the hallway and everyone exchanges a glance. Sanyam shakes his head, adjusting the blankets around him and coughing. Aria grimaces slightly and flashes her dark eyes at her twin, who mouths the words, "uh oh." Priya smiles tiredly and pats Sanyam's arm as he coughs.

Aria looks at her grandparents in apology. "She's very tired, she's been so worried, you know..."
"You don't have to explain, sweetheart," says Sanyam after he dabs at his mouth with a kleenex.

Aria nods unsurely and seeks Sani's gaze again. Then Kala comes back, agitated, and looks blankly at her father as he starts to cough once more. Aria watches her mother's face -- brows soft, eyes glassy, pronounced wrinkles around her mouth which indicate she's grinding her teeth. Aria holds her breath as Kala's chin quivers, and seconds later, Kala is sobbing into her hands.

Aria quickly gets to her feet and puts her arms around Kala, hugging her tightly. She glances at Sanyam and Priya and tries to smile, then tucks her face into Kala's hair.

"Mama, it's okay, it's okay," she murmurs.

Kala shakes her head. "No it isn't." She adds rapidly in German so her parents don't understand, "They're giving him the wrong medication and what if that's why he isn't improving? I should have noticed this weeks ago but I was so distracted by everything and..." She gasps a breath. "This is my fault!"

Aria rubs her back patiently. "No it's not. At least he's not getting worse. And it's good he has someone like you paying attention at all. Don't be so hard on yourself."

Kala cries for another moment before forcing herself to nod. Then she pulls away, grips Aria's arms, and squeezes gently as she meets her eyes.

She cups Aria's face in her hands after a moment and kisses her forehead. Sani gets up and rubs Kala's shoulders, looking gratefully at Aria, and the three of them stay like this for a moment. Priya watches, wiping her eyes, and Sanyam finally extends a hand to touch Kala's side.

Kala exhales and wipes her face, and then she sits on the bed by her father, leans against the pillows, and hugs him from the side.

"I'm staying right here," she says.

Sanyam chuckles and strokes her hair. "Alright, my dear."

Aria resists the urge to cry and sits back down, while Sani lingers on his feet, looking at them all unsurely. After a moment, he runs a hand through his wiry hair and nods at the door.

"I'll get you tea, Mom, does anyone want anything?"

They all shake their heads, and Sani wanders down the overbright hospital halls until he finds the elevators. He folds his arms as the elevator descends, pacing his breathing so his chest doesn't feel so tight. He's unsure why he offered to get tea. Tea doesn't fix anything.

He winds through an array of nurses and patients after getting off the elevator, keeping his eyes fixed on the cafeteria ahead. Then he walks into a patch of sunlight streaming in from the door to the street and he stops, stares outside, and makes an abrupt turn.

He walks outside into the tropical heat and is immediately swallowed in a crowd of people and motorbikes. He hurries along the street, dodging people and carts, and finally steps up to a street food vendor, wiping the sweat off his brow. He orders vada, bhel puri, aloo tikki and pakoda, and the vendor looks at his skinny build and squints. He flushes and quickly pays for the food, then hoists the massive bag full of food off the counter and rushes back towards the hospital.

Once inside, he avoids eye contact with everyone he passes, and when a nurse calls, "Is that food? No outside food!" at him, he blurts out, "It's art supplies!" and runs into the elevator before she can
stop him.

He makes a mental note to ask Aria and Jalesh how to become a better liar, and then he walks down the hall towards his grandfather's room and goes inside. He shuts the door behind him and looks warily at Kala, who blinks at him for a moment and then sniffs the air.

"Sani Savitri Dandekar, did you bring in food?"

He wipes away the sweat on his face, panting, and glances at the bag. "Yeah."

Sanyam laughs richly and shakes his head.

Kala starts to laugh too. "Oh my God..."

Aria grins. "Nice."

Sani breathes out and looks down to hide a gentle grin, rubbing the back of his head. Kala smiles at his diffidence and laughs again, and then she gets to her feet to help him distribute the food.

"Technically, this isn't allowed," murmurs Kala as she unties the top of the bag.

"Since when has anyone in our family cared about that?" mumbles Aria.

Kala dishes up some food for everyone on the paper plates that came in the bag, giving the biggest portion to her father. Sani sits close to him as they devour the food, and Sanyam stops several times to shake his head and laugh.

"Maybe plain chicken was the worst of my problems," he jokes to Sani, adding, "What do you think is in this aloo tikki? It's slightly different from mine..."

Sani chews carefully and thinks. Then he murmurs, "Corn flour not rice flour?"

Sanyam hums in thought. Then he murmurs, "Corn flour not rice flour?"

Sani nods. "It's good, it's crunchier..."

Kala watches as they talk about the food, noticing her father's face relax fully for the first time since they arrived. She discerns a profound warmth and respect in his eyes as he looks at Sani, and she smiles quickly at her mother, who is reflecting on the same image.

Sani dips a crispy pakoda into some mint chutney and grins. "How do you think anyone came up with this? How did we go from...gathering plants and eating whatever meat was around...to using a thousand different ingredients in a million different combinations?"

Sanyam chuckles and suggests, "Curiosity? Creativity? I'm not sure. Why do we want variety in anything? We could all live the same lives, but very few of us want a world like that, despite how much trouble differences cause..."

"We couldn't survive without diversity," Aria chips in. "It's dangerous for everyone to be alike, because then a single threat could wipe us all out."

"There's the cheerful girl I know," says Sanyam jokingly, adding, "but you're right, of course."

Aria grins and shakes her head, crunching on a pakoda. "Sorry. I'm always looking at things through a biology lens."
"Is that what you plan on going into?" asks Priya kindly.

Aria shrugs and glances at Kala, who smiles encouragingly. She finishes her bite of pakoda and looks at Priya.

"I think I want to be a doctor," she admits. "Medicine's really interesting. I love solving puzzles and the human body's just one big puzzle."

"She does very well in her science classes," says Kala with a small smirk.

Aria rolls her eyes and sets her plate aside, then hugs her knees to her chest. "I like the subjects, I don't mind doing the reading. Unlike some people."

Sani laughs. "Hey, I get good grades..."

Aria sticks her tongue out at him lovingly, and he snorts and looks away. Then Sanyam nudges him.

"What about you?" he asks.

A shrug. "Don't know yet."

Sanyam nods, glancing down for a moment as he shifts his empty plate to the table and drinks the last of his cold tea. He looks at Priya, who smiles quickly, and then he glances at his grandson.

"Only if you want...one day, maybe soon, someone will need to take over the restaurant. If you wanted to stay here this summer, I could go over all my recipes with you...even if I'm here, I could teach you some things, and you could try them out at the restaurant and stay with your grandmother. And eventually you could be the chef there...only if you want, of course."

Sani throws his gaze on Kala, eyes wide with excitement. She looks at her parents in surprise and they both smile, faces crinkling, and pat each other's hands.

"Can I stay this summer?" asks Sani breathlessly.

Kala searches his expression, caught off guard; the purity and depth of his excitement remind her of her own emotions when she discovered her love for chemistry. She chews gently on her cheek as she thinks, and then glances at a visiting Wolfgang, who merely nods.

"Yes, of course, as long as you come back this week for Jali's graduation," she tells Sani, reaching to cup his cheek and gently pinch his earlobe. "Don't be too much work for your grandmother. And make sure you offer to babysit for your aunt."

He nods and turns back to Sanyam. "I can bring your recipe book here and we can go over everything and I can make things and sneak them in."

Sanyam grins. "I like this idea."

Aria starts to laugh and she kicks her twin lightly. "Finally, one less person around this summer..."

Sani turns to meet her gaze. "Yeah. You're going to love living with just Elsa without me or Jali there to make her stop singing show tunes at you."

Aria pales. "Oh. I...didn't think of that." She grimaces and her eyes darken as she reflects. "I hope I don't kill her."

Kala rolls her eyes playfully, "I suppose I have to do all the cooking again now."
"At least you aren't cooking for four kids now," says Sani.

"Oh, as if your older brother isn't going to come home from police academy at every opportunity and eat everything in the kitchen," replies Kala.

Sani grins and nods in agreement. "True."

Then the nurse returns with some medicine and a glass of juice, and she looks around blankly at the trays and plates of food. She exhales, and Kala swears she hears the nurse murmur, "These Dandekars..."

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May 22, 2039

Jalesh rummages through his closet in search of dress shoes, which he's worn exactly once and didn't think to put in a memorable place.

"Aria!" he shouts. "Did you take my shoes?"

She's typically the culprit when it comes to missing items.

"Yeah, Jali, I took your shoes!" she yells from downstairs with undisguised sarcasm.

He huffs, hands finding purchase on everything but the shoes -- deflated soccer balls, old books, balled-up jackets. He extracts himself from the closet after a moment and looks around his room at his half-packed belongings, wondering if he inadvertently added the shoes to a moving box. Then he glances up at the arrival of Kala, who is holding his shoes, smiling calmly, looking elegant and glamorous in a black and white dress.

"You set them out last night," she reminds him.

He breathes out and runs a hand through his unruly hair. "Sorry. I'm distracted." He takes the shoes from her and gestures at himself. "Is this okay? I hate suits."

"You look very handsome," she says, a smile breaking over her face. "Although you tied your tie incorrectly. Here..." She takes a step towards him and fixes the dark blue tie. Then she looks up at him and her expression softens. She pulls her hands down his shoulders and squeezes. "Jali, breathe. You passed your tests. You're graduating."

He shrugs. "It feels different now."

"It always feels different when your life changes," she tells him softly. "But this is a good change. You know what you want to do and you have a wonderful girlfriend and you always have a home here. You know that, right?"

He nods and smiles.

"We're proud of you," she adds.

He smiles again and she hugs him. He groans halfheartedly at this, and then the doorbell rings and he quickly separates from her.

"That's Kiani," he explains as he rushes out of his room.

Kala rolls her eyes fondly and folds her arms, and then she glances up as Wolfgang, dressed in a
dark grey suit, appears in the door. He wraps a hand around the doorframe and searches the room, and seeing only Kala, steps inside to join her.

He takes her hands and she grins softly, tilting her head to the side and biting her bottom lip. She looks at him with warm eyes and shakes her head slightly, struggling to find the words, and then he pulls her close and squeezes her waist.

"We did it," she murmurs. "Eighteen years without any disasters."

Wolfgang grins. "A few close calls."

She grins too, wild with happiness. "A few," she agrees softly, adding, "I couldn't ask for anything more."

He shakes his head. "No."

They look at each other with tenderness for a moment, and then Kala glances down, eyes crinkling. She hugs him and they sway slightly; he sets his chin on the top of her head, looking around the disheveled room. Jalesh's desk is stacked with textbooks and binders, in disarray after many late-night tutoring sessions with Kiani; his bed is piled high with childhood belongings, waiting to be sorted; on his dresser, there is a heap of paperwork from years ago -- book reports, drawings, ancient yearbooks.

Wolfgang knows that his son struggles to remember the specific reason for keeping all these things. He doesn't -- he's sure if he went through each keepsake here, he would remember minute details about the circumstances when it was acquired; he would remember why he and Kala wanted to keep it.

He reaches out to take a small, handcrafted elephant off the bed. Shiro made it for Jalesh when he was an infant, and it still bears the fragile knitting on the side that spells his name.

He nudges Kala so she pulls away, then shows her the elephant. She brightens and laughs gleefully.

"Do you remember how small he was?" Wolfgang asks.

She grins and takes the elephant from him, smoothing over the ears with her thumb. "I do. I dream about it quite often, actually, the feeling of holding one of them when they were very little..." She clicks her teeth affectionately as she looks at the toy. "I think we knew even then how fast he would grow up, I think we made ourselves appreciate every moment, but it still doesn't feel like enough. I can't believe he's an adult, Wolfgang, it seems impossible..."

He nods, watching her expression as it softens, as her chin threatens to tremble.

"I wish we had more time," she finally murmurs. "I know that's silly."

"It's not silly," he says. "I wish that too."

She nods, tilting her face up, brows coming together. "I see so much of you in him."

He smiles and takes both of her hands again, glancing down. For a moment, the last eighteen years echo in his mind, and at last, he settles on an image of Kala: a chilly October night in Montmartre, a quiet conversation in their kitchen; Kala stood with one hand on her belly, one holding a fork that she used to gather a bite of pasta from a steaming pan. Her brow was wrinkled, her lips were pressed together in frantic thought; when she finally spoke, he perceived affection in her voice under the fear. *I'm pregnant.*
The shock and hope of that moment comes back to him now and he experiences a small chill. He looks at Kala, and based on her expression, she's just undergone a similar reverie.

"It's going to be different now," he admits as he tucks her hair behind her ear.

She smiles. "At least we have three more so the house won't feel empty."

They listen for a moment to Elsa singing downstairs while Aria snips at her, and then they rest their foreheads together and chuckle.

"No," says Wolfgang.

"We still won't get any peace," laughs Kala.

"Peace is overrated," he murmurs.

She nods in agreement. He kisses the side of her mouth, and then they step away from each other and head downstairs.

They find Elsa at the piano, singing a jingle that makes Aria's skin crawl. Aria is sitting nearby with her head in her hands, Sani is watching this dynamic with a smirk, and Jalesh and Kiani are near the door, close together and talking rapidly. Mimi is also present, as is Leo, Dani, and Felix - -all four in the kitchen, browsing on some caramel cookies.

"Hi, Kiani!" Kala calls cheerfully. "I set up one of the spare bedrooms for you upstairs, just let me know if you need anything else!"

Kiani, Jalesh, and Wolfgang all exchange a glance. Kala narrows her eyes and looks at Wolfgang, who smiles to disguise his alarmed expression.

"What's going on?" murmurs Kala.

Wolfgang reflects on the incident last Christmas when he got up in the middle of the night for water and crossed paths with Kiani in the hallway as she was tiptoeing to Jalesh's room. They looked at each other for a moment, and finally Kiani said, "We're all adults here" and simply continued past him. It took everything in his power not to laugh at her matter-of-fact response.

"The spare bedroom's probably outlived its usefulness," says Wolfgang.

Kala's eyes widen slightly and Kiani clears her throat.

"I appreciate the thought, but I think I'll just stay with Jali," she stammers, and then she tugs Jalesh hard by the arm into the kitchen to avoid further discussion.

Kala puts a hand on her heart. "Oh." Then she looks at Wolfgang. "You knew about this?"

"Since Christmas," he admits, adding, "I didn't want to tell you without their permission. They were trying to hide it."

"Which they did such a good job of," says Aria with a roll of her dark eyes. "Seriously papa, you were the last one to figure it out..."

Wolfgang shakes his head at this and looks back at Kala, who can't hold back a laugh. She puts her hand on the back of Wolfgang's arm and guides him towards the kitchen, where the Velasquez-Berners all grin at them.
"Hey, proud parents," says Felix as he munches a cookie. He gestures at his azure blue suit. "Nice, right?"

"Yeah, for prom in the 80's," says Wolfgang, frowning as he pans his gaze over the others -- Mimi in a black pantsuit with a gold belt, Leo in inappropriately-casual jeans, and Dani, the only one dressed with some sense.

"Stop giving them shit," advises Kiani as she pours a cup of coffee. "They're visionaries."

"Visionaries of what?" mumbles Jalesh as he looks at his best friend's unusual pantsuit.

Kiani rolls her eyes and puts the coffee into Jalesh's hands, turning to pour another for herself. He tugs on the waistband of her sweats and lets the elastic snap against her hip.

He grins. "You wearing this?"

"Jali," sighs Kiani. "No. I just got off a plane..."

"I don't know how you put up with him," says Mimi with a shake of her long brunette hair. "I mean, I put up with him, but I'm his friend. Different commitment level."

Kiani glances sideways at Jalesh with a tiny smile. "I would have given up a while ago but I know how he feels about me. Damn connection."

Then Elsa comes in, in search of tea, and Kiani brightens at her.

"Ooh, Elsa, come here," she says as she extracts her phone from her purse. "I wrote an article about you on my blog and the Washington Post picked it up this morning as an op-ed."

She turns her phone so Elsa can look at it and Wolfgang and Kala watch in interest as Kiani bends her knees to be closer to Elsa's height.

"I talked about how the audience was unfair on you," says Kiani excitedly. "There's a lot of buzz about you and the experience of being biracial. No pressure, but you're such wonderful representation, you've been so brave to sing in Hindi..."

Elsa grins as she reads. "I don't really understand the words, but I believe you."

The adults all chuckle at this.

Jalesh gently tilts the phone and reads. Then he raises his eyebrows, impressed. "This is amazing, when did you write this?"

"Last night, in a rage, drinking coffee," she explains, adding, "if I fall asleep during your graduation, this is why."

He grins. "It's okay."

She looks at Elsa again and adds, "Did your Nānā like the song?"

Elsa beams and nods. "He did."

Kiani laughs and nods in response, then pinches Elsa's nose. "You're sweet."

"Is everyone ready?" interjects Kala, gaze lingering on Kiani. "Will you be ready soon? The ceremony is in an hour..."
Kiani nods, hurrying out of the kitchen. Jalesh hesitates, sipping his coffee as he looks at his parents. Then he gives a half-apologetic, half-playful shrug and follows his girlfriend. Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other with a laugh and step up to the kitchen island to join the others.

"I love graduations," says Dani as she selects another caramel cookie and pops it into her mouth. Then she grins and squeezes Kala's wrist, looking at her and Wolfgang. "You did such a wonderful job with him. He's a really sweet young man."

Kala beams. "Thanks, Dani."

Wolfgang smiles too. "Thanks."

"No, really," chips in Felix, brushing some cookie crumbs off his stubble. "I knew you'd be good parents but you two are some wild ass people and we assumed your kids would all be...Aria."

"Stick it up your ass, Fewick," says Aria from the living room. She's reclaimed her childhood term for him to annoy him.

Felix gestures as if this proves his point. Wolfgang shakes his head, but he has to look down to hide a smug grin -- his daughter may be a nuisance, but her comebacks are impressive.

"And hey," says Felix more softly, addressing Kala. "I'm sorry your parents can't be here for this. That's not fair."

Kala tries to smile and nods. "Thanks, Felix."

They all talk for a few more minutes before Jalesh and Kiani -- now dressed in a dark green dress with a sweetheart neckline -- return. Kiani takes some earrings out of her purse and affixes them on each lobe, then spritzes on some perfume, flustered.

"That was as quickly as I could get ready..." she assures them all as they move in a group towards the door.

Kala calls for her younger children to catch up. They step outside into the dusky sunlight and get into several cars to make the journey to Jalesh's school. A half hour later, everyone but Jalesh and Elsa is situated in the audience, flipping through programs and tapping their feet, waiting for the opening chords of the overture. Kiani clicks her heels anxiously next to Kala, searching the stage for signs of a start to the ceremony. Wolfgang lays an arm on the back of Aria's chair and they exchange a quick, satisfied glance, both unspokenly proud of Jalesh. Sani, meanwhile, Facetimes his grandparents and shows them the view of the auditorium.

Then the principal of the school steps out on the stage. Kala and Wolfgang glance at each other with a small smirk, recalling a multitude of phone calls that began with, "Your son is in my office again." The principal expressed her doubt about their children's intelligence and disposition on so many occasions that Kala and Wolfgang grew to detest her.

"We told you our son would graduate," murmurs Kala, adding softly, "bitch."

Wolfgang hastily covers his mouth so he doesn't laugh aloud. Kala grins placidly and stares at the principal with dark eyes.

The principal gives a short, predictable speech, followed by the school choir performing Kinderhymne -- they would have sung the national anthem, but Elsa petitioned the principal to change it, because she found the anthem to be overly nationalistic. The principal resisted her initial request, but had to give in after Elsa gathered a group of students and staged a sit-in at the
Then several professors from the school begin to read names of the graduating students. Kala and Wolfgang jostle excitedly against each other as the teachers get closer to reading last names that start with D, and one by one, their Cluster-mates appear around them, eyes bright and breath bated. Riley shakes her silvery hair and beams at Kala and Wolfgang, and Will puts an arm around her and chuckles proudly. Capheus puts his hands on Kiani's shoulders and they grin at each other. Nomi and Sun both smile steadily at the stage, and Lito, already weeping, rubs Kala and Wolfgang’s arms before dissolving into several choked-up coughs.

Kala sniffs and laughs, heart pounding as the ceremony continues, and Wolfgang squeezes her hand hard.

"Are you getting this?" Aria asks Sani as he holds his phone up.

He nods and zooms in slightly.

"I hope he doesn't fall," says Mimi with a laugh.

"Don't joke about that," sighs Kiani.

"He's probably going to trip over his clown feet," adds Aria and the two fifteen-year-olds grin and bump knuckles.

Kiani rolls her eyes and watches the stage. After a few more minutes, they see Jalesh cross the stage with a fierce grin. He's now wearing his graduation robes and an off-kilter cap.

One of the teachers announces, "Jalesh Sanyam Dandekar" and he takes his diploma from another teacher, pausing for a picture. His family gets to their feet and explodes with applause. Kala, Wolfgang, and Kiani cheer and clap emphatically while Dani, Felix, and Aria whoop. His soccer team shouts, claps, and calls out some profane words of congratulations. Jalesh waves quickly at them and then sits with his peers at the back of the stage, still grinning.

Kala sits down with a loud sniffle and wipes her face free of tears. Wolfgang puts an arm around her and they gaze each other for a moment. She notices a tiny glisten in one of his eyes and she smiles affectionately at him. Then they both chuckle, squeeze each other's hands, and gently bump noses.

The rest of the ceremony passes quickly, and all the graduates begin to exit the stage as the choir -- led by Elsa -- sings Bring On Tomorrow. There's an unexpected uproar in the audience at the sight of Elsa in the front, and Kala looks around to see dozens of girls Elsa's age waving German and Indian flags. Her eyes widen.

"Oh no," she breathes. "Wolfgang..."

"They found her," he says in a hollow tone, looking around.

A girl nearby shrieks "GO ELSA!" and the principal, on the side, looks directly at Kala and Wolfgang with a raptor-like scowl. Wolfgang starts to laugh, and soon, the whole group is wheezing.

The song becomes difficult to hear over the cheering for Elsa, and the others in the choir look unsure at her. She pauses in the chorus and starts laughing, and then the crowd begins to swallow the stage, all intent on meeting Elsa in person. Kala stands up, now alarmed, then breathes out in relief as Jalesh jumps to his feet on stage and quickly puts his little sister on his shoulders.

Kala looks at Wolfgang with a small shake of her head, silently communicating her desire for a
The moment of peace. Jalesh escapes the crowd and joins his family on the floor of the auditorium, and they hasten outside into the twilight and all hide along the side of the school.

Jalesh sets Elsa down and she dances in place for a moment, laughing loudly. "That was great!"

Kala groans halfheartedly at this, and then she pulls Jalesh into a tight hug.

"Congratulations," she says.

He grins and nods, and then hugs Wolfgang and the others, hesitating slightly at Aria. She rolls her eyes and launches onto him, hugging him fiercely.

"You did it, dummy," she says.

He grins and laughs, then releases her to quickly kiss Kiani, who takes a moment to stare at him with intense pride. His cheeks darken slightly at this and he rubs the back of his neck, glancing away. Then he looks up as his team rounds the corner.

"Hey, King Jali, want to go get super wasted?" calls one of them.

Kala turns around and looks at the young men with a waspish expression. Her son's team seems to exist in an alternate realm -- they visit this one only to play soccer, descend on her kitchen like winged gremlins, or say something inappropriate in front of the whole family.

The boy who shouted holds his hands up when he's hit with the full force of her glare.

"Sorry, Mrs. Dandekar..."

Kala sighs. "Do any of you think before you speak?"

The team shrugs collectively. Jali shakes his head.

"No, mama, they don't," he says, adding loudly to his team, "Later, get out of here!"

They depart with a few more jeers and congratulations, and then Jalesh laughs and exhales, looking around at everyone -- his Cluster, his parent's cluster, and his family.

"Can we get out of here now? I want to get out of this suit..."

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Later That Night

Wolfgang slides this thumb against the cork of a countless champagne bottle and listens to the unruly party in the living room -- Jalesh's soccer team recently showed up, and even Kala couldn't say no when they asked to come in and join the party.

Elsa is DJing with her sound mixer, blaring favorites and modifying them with piano riffs, eerie vocals, and violin; everyone is dancing and joshing, pausing occasionally to taunt Jalesh and push him around. The kitchen shakes slightly as Elsa turns up the volume and Wolfgang shakes his head, laughing, and pours a few glasses of champagne.

He's about to collect them on a tray and take them into the living room, but Kala slips into the
kitchen, panting, face shiny with sweat. Her careful updo has come partially undone, and a strand of hair is obscuring her left eye. Wolfgang stares at her for a moment, and then he smiles.

"You were dancing?" he asks.

She fans herself and grins. "Of course..." She steps closer, takes a glass of champagne off the counter, and drinks for a moment while she looks at him. Her lips form a small smile as she pulls the glass away, and she blinks flirtatiously at him. "Why aren't you dancing?"

He hesitates, then grins and laughs at himself. "My back. Don't tell anyone."

Kala tilts her head back and giggles indulgently.

"Hey," he scolds, pulling her closer by her waist. "Don't laugh at me."

She presses her face into his chest. "Your back..."

He feels her shoulders shake with renewed giggles and he rolls his eyes. Then he hugs her and she hums contentedly, laughter fading. She locks her fingers together behind his back, unwilling to let go, and he tips his face down and kisses her temple.

"Three more to go," she says sleepily.

He laughs and nods.

She laughs too, more softly, and then she sighs and relaxes in his arms. They reflect together on the images of the day, and then they look up at the sound of a crash in the living room.

"Oops!" calls Felix.

They both laugh, shaking their heads. Then Kala stretches on her toes and slides her nose against Wolfgang's.

"At least watch us dance," she murmurs.

"I'd rather stay here with you," he says.

"Too bad," she whispers.

She finds both of his hands and pulls him towards the living room, but she pauses in the doorway for a moment to observe -- rainbow lights dance in a circle around the room, which has been cleared of furniture; the soccer team is dancing as if in a club, and so is most of the Cluster, except Nomi, who is doing the robot to entertain Capheus. Aria is dancing with Mimi, making a point to spin her repeatedly while she laughs; Sani is doing a strange side-to-side dance with Leo, who is covered in glow-sticks from head to toe. Felix and Dani, both drunk, are doing what appears to be a middle-aged, cringe-inducing version of the hokey pokey, and Jalesh's Cluster is watching them and giggling amongst themselves. Jalesh and Kiani, in the center of it all, are locked in a dancing competition which Kiani is winning with her superior sense of timing. After a moment, both out of breath, they swing their arms playfully, laughing and pushing each other.

Kala smiles widely at this and glances at Wolfgang, and he nudges her so she looks at Jalesh as he goes up to Elsa to make a song request. Elsa grins and nods, and then What's Up begins to play.

The opening notes hit Wolfgang and Kala like icy raindrops. They look at each other with a look of soft astonishment and both inhale.
"How did he know about this song?" she murmurs.

Jalesh meets their eyes in the crowd and winks, and the answer comes to them through the connection -- he glimpsed the memory of the balmy night over twenty years ago when they sang together in Kala's room. Kala quickly presses the top of her index finger against nose to prevent an audible sniffle, and Wolfgang trails his touch down her spine, moved. Then they look at each other, and she gently pulls him back into the kitchen.

She puts her arms around his neck and looks at him with intense devotion; he returns the look, smiling, and then they start to dance.

"Do you know what Rajan said to me after I fainted?" Kala murmurs after a moment.

Wolfgang looks at her, surprised by the topic. "No."

Kala smiles and slowly blinks. "He told me... imagine telling our children how their beautiful mother took one look at their father and fainted straight away..."

Wolfgang doesn't speak for a moment, and then he glances down and chuckles for a long time. Kala grins and nuzzles him and then they laugh more loudly together. They dance for another moment, listening to the chorus of the song and smiling, and then Kala sniffs.

"I know it sounds silly," she whispers, "but even then, part of me knew I would have a family with you, and I knew it would be the most meaningful part of my life." She blinks away a few tears and laughs at herself. "I never told you, but after I found out I was pregnant with Jali, I...I walked home with my hands on my tummy the whole time and just talked to him. I was already so in love with him."

Wolfgang smiles gently and tucks his face into her hair. "I could tell. You fell asleep before me that night and I watched you, and I'll never forget the look on your face."

Kala presses closer as the song fades, then sleepily says, "I love you."

"I love you, Kala," he replies.

She smiles more widely and leans against him. He rubs her back as the song changes, and then he looks up as Jalesh comes into the kitchen.

Jalesh takes a step back. "Oh -- um. I can come back."

Kala steps away from Wolfgang and they both look welcomingly at their oldest son, who flushes darker, slightly embarrassed that he caught his parents in an intimate moment.

Kala shakes her head and smiles. "No, no. What is it?"

Jalesh breathes out and takes a tentative step closer.

"Is Kiani pregnant?" jokes Wolfgang.

Jalesh relaxes and laughs. "No." Then he leans on the counter and looks at them, smiling slightly.

"I, uh..." He grins and shakes his head. "Thank you, yeah, thank you. You guys were amazing parents. Seriously, you always made me feel safe and you didn't care that I wasn't perfect in school, and I could talk to you no matter what, and even when Ari and Sani and Elsa had something going on, you still cared about what was going on with me. I never felt like I couldn't tell you the truth." He
pauses and briefly meets their eyes. "Mama, I know you grew up with a lot of expectations and I'm so grateful you didn't put the same pressure on me. And papa, you went through more than most people would ever be able to move on from, and it would have been easy for you to take the past out on me but you never did. And neither of you ever lied to me about the hardest things in your lives and I won't lie to you, either." He glances down, sniffs, and shrugs. "I wanted to tell you all this."

Kala and Wolfgang stare and he laughs at himself, bringing both of his hands up to his face and quickly whisking away a few tears.

Kala begins to cry and she murmurs, "Oh...Jali. Come here, come here..."

He closes the space between them and Wolfgang hugs him, rubbing his back. He sniffs against his shoulder, and Kala puts her arms around both of them, tears falling openly.

Wolfgang breathes out slowly and touches his cuff to the corner of his eye, throat tight with emotion. Kala looks at him, and at the sight of his wet eyes, cries harder. She dries her eyes on her sleeve, and then she combs her fingers through her son's hair.

She inhales hard after a moment and holds Jalesh at arm's length so she can meet his gaze.

"We couldn't possibly be more proud of you," she says, eyes sparkling.

He nods and smiles.

"I never expected to have a son," says Wolfgang quietly. "And I worried when you were growing up that I would do everything wrong." He shrugs and quickly wipes his eyes again, going on gruffly, "Sorry. You don't know what it means to hear you say all that, Jali."

Kala and Jalesh meet eyes and furtively clutch hands, stunned that Wolfgang isn't hiding his feelings. Then Jalesh nods and squeezes his father's shoulder.

"I do know. That's why I said it."

Wolfgang nods and pulls him into another hug, patting his back bracingly. "Love you."

"Love you too," says Jalesh, adding to Kala, "love you, mama."

She grins and cries. "I love you."

He nods and sniffs a final time, and then he chuckles and steps away. "I'm, uh, I'm gonna go out with Kiki and the guys, I think."

"Hold on," says Wolfgang, hurrying out of the room and upstairs to get something.

He comes back with a small box, which he hands to Jalesh.

"It doesn't work anymore," prefaces Wolfgang, smiling, "but your grandfather gave this to me, and wanted me to give it to you eventually..."

Jalesh opens the box and sees an old, sturdy watch. He brightens and smiles at Wolfgang.

"This is the watch he gave you before you married Mama?"

Wolfgang nods and smiles.

Jalesh grins and takes it out of the box to study it. Then his expression softens and he hugs
"Thanks," he says quietly.

Wolfgang nods again, and then Jalesh carefully packages the watch and puts the box in his jacket pocket. Then he nods towards the door, indicating he's about to leave.

"Have fun," says Kala approvingly.

Jalesh nods in agreement, smiling quickly at both of them before he leaves the kitchen. They look at each other as they listen to the party disperse, both unable to find words; finally, the front door clicks shut, the music fades, and they're left alone in the sudden hush.

"I haven't seen you cry in a very long time," says Kala quietly.

"I think the last time was when he was born," admits Wolfgang with a slight flush on his cheeks.

Kala nods, smiles, and collects the tears under her eyes. Then she takes Wolfgang's hand, pulling him towards the stairs.

"Do you want to go to bed?" she asks.

He nods gratefully, and they begin to go upstairs. But Kala stops, looking at the series of pictures on the wall next to them. There are four rows of pictures, one for each of their children, one for each year of their lives. Jalesh's line has seventeen pictures, and since he's newly nineteen, there is one remaining place for the picture that represents his eighteenth year. Kala always assumed this picture would be of his graduation, but at the moment, the idea of putting up the final picture of his childhood weighs heavily. She stares at the picture of him as a one-year-old -- swaddled in a soft yellow blanket, asleep in his father's arms; Wolfgang, wearing boxers and a tired smile, is sitting on the couch in the picture, gazing down at Jalesh with undisguised tenderness.

Kala touches her fingertips to the frame and it's as if the touch awakens the memories of that day, as if the images play before her eyes as vivid as they were in the moment.

Kala sits up in bed, bleary, blinking in the darkness. Her shoulders soften in defeat at the sound of a frantic cry and she exhales all at once, looking at Wolfgang, who is lying next to her with one eye open.

"Again," she murmurs in disbelief. "I've fed him twice tonight..."

Wolfgang nods, half-sitting, screwing his eyes shut for a brief moment as the baby continues to cry. Kala notices his stubble is unusually long and unkempt, and she almost smiles at the toll this baby has taken on their lives. Then she squeezes his leg and gets up wearily, and he follows her; they feel their way through the dark hallway from the bedroom, going into the nursery to rescue Jalesh. She puts on a dim light and he reaches into the crib and pulls out the struggling, sobbing infant. He wraps his arms around his son and gently bounces him, and Kala sighs, worrying her bottom lip in her teeth as Jalesh's cries ricochet. She and Wolfgang meet eyes quickly, and then they walk into the living room and sit on the couch.

Kala thumbs over the wild hair on Jalesh's tiny head, leaning on Wolfgang's shoulder. Wolfgang cradles Jalesh carefully and grimaces at Kala, who shakes her head hopelessly as their son continues to cry.

He shifts Jalesh to her and she tugs her pajamas down and coaxes him to nurse, but he wails and kicks his feet.
"Maybe he doesn't want to be alone, that's all," suggests Kala, yawning.

Wolfgang nods, taking the baby back. He bounces him again, and then he begins a gentle chorus of Hallelujah. Kala looks at him with a laugh, and he laughs too, shrugging.

"My mother would sing this," he says in explanation.

She grins tiredly and nods, then nudges him to continue. He flushes and looks at her sideways.

"You know I can't sing--"

"You can, and he's a baby, he just wants the reassurance," says Kala soothingly.

Wolfgang nods and continues, mouth curling at the edges as he struggles not to laugh at the existential lyrics. Jalesh begins to quiet after a moment, his cheeks relaxing, his eyes slowly closing. Kala listens to the honey-tone of her husband's voice and closes her eyes as well, placing a gentle hand on Jalesh's tummy, smiling when his fingers close around her thumb.

Jalesh stops crying, and after a moment, snores. Kala, despite her fatigue, gets up and finds her phone to take a picture.

In Berlin, Kala and Wolfgang look at each other with glossy eyes, experiencing the memory together through their connection. Kala pulls her fingertips softly over the picture, and then she glances at the next one, an image of Jalesh, age two, floating unsurely in a pool with colorful inflatables on his arms.

Wolfgang hesitates at the side of the pool, watching Kala nuzzle Jalesh and lift him high above her head, laughing. Jalesh giggles adoringly and reaches his hands out for her and she grins, swooping him through the air, finally setting him on his unsteady feet. She guides him towards his father in the strong sunlight, then leans to kiss Wolfgang, smiling as she pulls away.

"He's going to love the water, I'm sure," she says confidently, leaning to take two inflatable armbands off a chair nearby.

Wolfgang eyes the water. "Be careful..."

Kala rolls her eyes as she affixes the armbands, and then she peppers Jalesh's face with kisses and loud "muahs!" She gives him a brief Eskimo kiss and pats his backside. "Hi you. Hello. You'll like the pool, yes you will..."

Jalesh blows a snot balloon out of his nose and giggles.

"Oh, terrible," says Kala with affection, wiping away the snot with a nearby towel. Then she pinches his sides gently and grins. "Are you ready?"

Wolfgang laughs at this interaction, then picks Jalesh up. Kala slips into the pool, her frizzy hair collecting dewdrops as she comes up, and then she outstretches her arms. Wolfgang carefully lowers Jalesh into her arms and his eyes widen at the sensation of the water. Then he kicks his feet and lets out a peal of delighted laughter.

Kala meets Wolfgang's eyes and they both soften slightly. Kala lets Jalesh drift a small distance from her, supported by the inflatables, and Wolfgang quietly reaches for the camera.

In Berlin, Kala wipes her eyes and takes another step with Wolfgang, taking in the picture of Jalesh's third year: Jalesh in a highchair, with a wary Kala behind him, holding scissors -- his first haircut.
"I'm...I'm not sure, Wolfgang, what if he moves and I snip him?" asks Kala worriedly as she maneuvers with the scissors, as Jalesh tilts his head this way and that.

"Just hold his head," says Wolfgang.

"Well..." sighs Kala, clamping her fingers on her son's soft cranium and tilting it forward. "Okay."

"Mama..." mumbles Jalesh.

"I know, sweetheart, just stay still," says Kala quietly, one side of her mouth drawn downwards as she looks at Wolfgang.

He laughs quietly, and she makes the first cut. The metal-on-metal swish of the scissors surprises Jalesh and he starts to softly cry, so Kala hastily clips the other unruly ends of his inky hair, finishing up as quickly as she can. Jalesh, a wide pink mouth and restless, teary eyes, looks at them both in betrayal.

"Oh dear," says Kala, ruffling his new, short hair. "It was a necessary evil..."

Wolfgang cracks up and steps up to join them, extending a hand for Jalesh to hold. Jalesh wraps his hand around Wolfgang's palm, looking up at him with cautious eyes; then he pulls Wolfgang's index finger into his mouth and bites hard.

"Shit!" exclaims Wolfgang in a whisper, withdrawing his hand.

"Revenge," says Kala, instantly laughing.

Wolfgang laughs too and shakes out his finger. Then he pulls his wife closer from the side and kisses her temple. "He looks good, süße."

She smiles. "He does. He looks sweet."

Jalesh pouts and a few more tears fall, but he calms after Kala offers him a dish of applesauce.

In Berlin, Kala and Wolfgang take another step, now determined to experience each year as they pass the picture that represents it. Wolfgang looks at Kala, and suddenly, the years between Jalesh's infancy and today seem to shorten. They pass in a colorful, rushed moment, and Wolfgang swears he can hear every word his son has ever spoken to him, jumbled in a single chime.

He glances at the fourth picture.

Jalesh kneels at the edge of a pond, banked by flowers and hedges. He releases a small paper boat on the water and watches it drift away. Kala, sitting in a chair nearby, puts her hand on her huge stomach, only a month away from delivering the twins. Her nose twitches in delight as Jalesh stumbles, as Wolfgang catches him around his middle and pulls him back from the edge. She watches the boat depart on the pond, an unspoken tradition in Paris. Then she grins as Wolfgang lifts up Jali, swinging him high in the air, only to pin him on the grass and tickle him. Jalesh bares his teeth in a wide grin and kicks at his father, who picks him up again and tosses him softly in the air.

Kala laughs as Wolfgang catches Jalesh, as Jalesh flutters his lips and giggles madly. Wolfgang presses a series of exuberant kisses to Jalesh's cheek, then sets him again on the bank and hands him another paper boat. He releases it on the surface of the pond, and Kala leans forward to snap a surreptitious picture.
Another step, another year, another small, precious glance.

Kala and Wolfgang walk with Jalesh in between them, each newborn twin on one of their chests, asleep. Jalesh skips and looks around his new school with wild excitement, shoes clattering on the tile. He laughs and looks at both of his parents, a gleam in his eyes, and then he breaks free, joining the other children at the door of the classroom.

Kala soothes herself by stroking Aria's hair. "He's never been alone without us, Wolfgang...never."

Wolfgang nods. "He'll be fine, Kala."

She sighs. Then she sees Jalesh push past the teacher and into the classroom, unwilling to wait any longer for his first day of school to start. She grins, reassured. The teacher laughs and plucks him out of the classroom, sending him back towards Wolfgang and Kala with a gentle push. When he reaches them, Kala kneels down to hug him goodbye.

"Be good," she murmurs.

Jalesh nods. Wolfgang chuckles and runs a hand through his son's hair.

"Be good," he repeats.

"I will," says Jalesh with a whiny groan.

Kala smiles quickly at him, and then she nudges him backward and takes out her phone for a picture. Jalesh rolls his eyes.

"Do I have to?" he asks.

"Smile," says Kala brightly.

Jalesh plasters on a smile, which appears crazed rather than cheerful. Kala looks down to disguise laughter, and then stands up to show the image to Wolfgang, who smirks and nods.

"We have to keep that," he says simply.

Kala laughs and nods, then leans to kiss Jalesh's cheek.

"Be good," she says one more time, and the she pushes him in the direction of the other children.

He grins and trots away. Kala looks at Wolfgang with a small, determined smile, and then they depart, hoping to sneak in a short nap once home.

Another step, another year which passed too quickly.

Wolfgang tilts his head, watching his small son kick his feet on the couch -- one leg is bandaged with lime-green gauze, the result of a fractured ankle. Kala stands nearby with a small saw, calculating.

"Off, off!" yells Jalesh joyfully, shaking his foot.

Kala hesitates for another moment, then kneels by Wolfgang and meets his eyes. Wolfgang lifts Jalesh's foot to make the cast accessible, and Kala gently presses the saw to the plaster of the cast.

"That's a funny noise!" yells Jalesh at the sound of the saw.

Kala pulls away as the cast falls, and then she puts gentle fingers on Jalesh's ankle.
"Does it feel okay?" she asks him.

He grins and flaps his foot in the air. "Yeah."

Wolfgang chuckles and pats his son's knee, smiling, and then Kala captures a picture of Jalesh holding up his discarded cast, beaming.

The seventh step, another shared smile, another bittersweet twang.

Jalesh puts up a broad foam sword, thrashing it at Felix as he dances backward, avoiding blows. Felix grins, wiggling his fingers threateningly at his godson. Dani giggles nearby with Kala, who rubs her hands over her belly, pregnant with her fourth (and hopefully last) child.

"You may be a ninja," says Felix dramatically, brandishing another foam sword. "But I...I am a pirate."

Jalesh sticks out his tongue and waves his sword. Wolfgang, an arm around Kala, murmurs that Halloween is a stupid holiday.

She huffs at him and watches her son and godfather fight it out with novelty swords. She knows the winner will acquire all the "good" candies -- those that are mostly chocolate, caramel, or nougat.

"I know you'll let me win," says Jalesh.

"You know nothing..."

"I know some things," mutters Jalesh, knocking the swords out of Felix's hand.

Felix seethes but passes his candy to Jalesh as Kala snaps a picture. "It's all yours, little Wolfie."

Jalesh grins and snatches the candy, then races upstairs to devour it.

The eighth step, a longer pause as they stare at the image of their oldest holding their youngest.

"Are you sure you're--"

The broken inquiry of a panicked father, the wave of a habituated mother.

"I'm fine, Wolfgang," says Kala, breathing out in a long stream, running her hands over her tummy. "The doula will get here soon..."

Wolfgang looks doubtfully at the growing drifts of snow, then at his panting wife, who is slumped on the couch, suffering contractions. Her water broke over an hour ago, and he's sure the doula won't make it in time. He hesitates, then puts both hands on her tummy.

"Kala, I've been with you when you're in labor, you aren't going to last that long," he says measuredly. "You're almost there."

Kala looks down at her stomach, and then another contraction overtakes her. She grits her teeth and hisses, then nods. She looks at her other children, who are watching with a blend of apprehension, confusion, and concern. She nods again, then lets Wolfgang help her to her feet; she vowed to have Elsa at home, but she expected the help of a doula.

Wolfgang guides her upstairs and towards the bathroom, where he begins to run a bath so she can give birth in the water. She cries out after a moment and sinks onto the toilet lid, shaking.
"Oh God, oh God, you're right," she whispers, wincing. "Why are you always right?"

He quickly helps her out of her dress and into the shallow water, and she leans her head against the porcelain; then she finds her breath and pushes, over and over as the blizzard rages outside; Wolfgang knocks the bathroom door shut with his foot, terrified that he's responsible for delivering this baby. Kala breathes rapidly, body shuddering; then she grins with adrenaline, opens her legs wider, and yells as she pushes.

"I'm here, just push, you've got this..."

She nods.

"I have you," he murmurs.

She nods again. Then she shouts and sobs at once, and their last child shoots into the water, surrounded by blood.

Wolfgang catches Elsa in his hands underwater, eyes wide, and he quickly dries her with the nearest towel. She's blue at first, but she gasps a breath, cries, and turns steadily pink. He touches his first two fingers to her tiny chest, finding her heartbeat, and then he melts into the tile, overwhelmed.

"You..." Kala falters. "You delivered her."

The snow thrashes against the windows. He stares at the struggling newborn in his arms and nods distantly.

Kala leans her head back in the tub, closing her eyes in exhaustion. Wolfgang pets the side of Elsa's face with his thumb, and then he carefully stands up with her. He assures Kala he'll be back, and quickly exits to wrap Elsa in a warm blanket. Then he returns, sets Elsa on the counter, and helps Kala stand. He puts a robe around her, and then she takes Elsa close in her arms.

"My Elsa," she says in astonishment. She laughs. "Oh, Wolfgang, she has your eyes. Look."

They look at the small, pink bundle in their arms, and then Kala's knees falter. Wolfgang helps her into the living room, where she sits on the couch, where her other children stare at their new, fussy sibling. Kala tilts her head on the cushions and nurses Elsa for a while, smiling as her newest daughter latches on, relaxes, and eventually burps. She pulls the robe up when Elsa is done nursing, and then she grins, patting her tiny daughter's side. She looks at Wolfgang, and he breathes out, touching a few fingers to Elsa's tummy, thankful.

The storm rages with renewed force, and Jalesh approaches. He stares at his mother and his baby sister, dark eye widening. Then his fingers twitch, wanting to hold her, and Kala presses her lips together with affection. She looks at Wolfgang, then hands Elsa to Jalesh.

He cradles her and sits down, enraptured. He looks at her with wide eyes and an open mouth for a moment. Then he grins, touches her nose with his finger, and laughs. He hugs her closer, and Kala and Wolfgang exchange an exhausted but exhilarated glance. Wolfgang stands up to take a picture, and Jalesh beams at the camera.

On the stairs, Kala touches her fingers to the image and swallows the urge to cry. She leans heavily on Wolfgang and shakes her head.

"I can't believe you delivered her," she mumbles.

Wolfgang shakes his head too. "I knew you would be alright."
Kala starts to laugh. "Oh...with Jali, of course we barely made it to the hospital, with Aria and Sani, Aria was breach -- of course -- and I've never been in pain like that, and Elsa...of course I underestimated how terrible the weather was and my doula never arrived..."

Wolfgang grins. "Wouldn't expect anything else with us."

She laughs more loudly, resting her head on his shoulder as she stares at the picture.

"Look at his expression," she murmurs. "He'll be a good father himself, one day."

Wolfgang nods in agreement, and then they take another step. This picture of Jalesh shows him standing next to a large snowman, with his arm around it and a mug of hot chocolate in his hand. It conveys a mountain-man feel, and Kala giggles, remembering the day.

"Aria, get back here," says Wolfgang, jostling around a corner in the mudroom, pulling her back from the door. "Little shit, c'mere, put your boots on..."

Kala rolls her eyes as she pulls a beanie onto Jalesh's head. "Don't let your sister be too mean to Sani."

She and Wolfgang exchange a dark gaze, and then Sun and Kwon-ho enter the room with their children, bundled up, followed by Felix, Dani, and their children as well. The group fills the tiny mudroom, waiting as Wolfgang ties Aria's boots.

"My other shoes were fine," she grumps.

"Go," sighs Wolfgang, nudging her towards the door.

They all proceed outside into the fresh snow. Jalesh runs through it and launches himself off one of the garden walls, falling into a drift. Aria copies him, and they immediately engage in a fierce snowball fight. Kala's eyes widen and she puts a hand protectively over Elsa's head as she cradles her close in a baby sling. The other children join the fight, except for Sun and Kwon-ho's baby girl, and the adults watch with apprehension.

Soon enough, Aria tackles Sani and rubs snow into his face, causing him to cough and sneeze. Jalesh pulls Aria off of her twin, but she turns around and pushes him off a ledge. Then she turns her sights on Mimi, and Dani quickly says, "Okay! Who wants to make snow sculptures, huh? Let's all calm down a little, shall we?"

Aria perks up at this, sparing Mimi a fate like Jalesh's, and trots over to join the adults. Jalesh gets up and dusts himself off, then rubs the back of his head and winces.

He joins Kala and Wolfgang and murmurs, "I'll get her one day."

Wolfgang shakes his head. "No, you won't. She's invincible and probably immortal."

Kala laughs, and then they guide Jalesh to where the others are building snowmen and other objects. Jalesh sits with Mimi and helps her shape a turtle out of the snow, and Kala watches the two of them for a moment, smiling. Then she turns to Wolfgang, kisses him quickly, and returns inside to make hot chocolate for everyone.

When she comes back with a large thermos of it, she sees that significant progress has been made with the sculptures -- Sun and her family have carved a chubby jindo in the snow -- though it looks more like a bear than a dog, Mimi and Jalesh have begun to decorate their turtles with stones and leaves, Aria and Sani have made several snow angels all over the yard, and Felix, Dani, and
Wolfgang are working on a pair of snowmen.

Kala squints as she approaches them. "Why is one of your snowmen pregnant?"

"He's not pregnant, he's fat," explains Felix cheerfully. "It's Santa Claus, see?" He takes off his hat and adds it to the snowman. "There."

Then Dani steps up to them with two large snowballs and adds them to the other snowman's chest.

"Mrs. Claus is a fox," she says, satisfied.

Wolfgang nods. "You two always manage to keep things child-friendly."

"Oh calm down, kids know what tits are," says Dani.

She's about to say more, but Aria cartwheels wildly through the snow and knocks over Mrs. Claus.

"So much for that," says Felix as Aria straightens up, cheeks red, invigorated.

She continues to cartwheel, and the adults form a protective blockade around Santa. Jalesh joins them and offers two antler-like sticks to be the arms, and then helps Wolfgang and Kala hunt for stones to form the expression.

"Papa why is this Santa pregnant?"

Wolfgang snorts. "You think like your mother. Apparently, this Santa is fat, not pregnant..."

"Oh. It'd be cool if he was pregnant. Then he could have Santa babies," says Jalesh as he gathers stones. Then he gasps. "Hey! Then he wouldn't need elves! He could just have all his kids make the toys!"

Kala laughs and shakes her head. "Don't you think that's unfair to the kids?"

"Well, they're not human kids, maybe they don't like to play," says Jalesh.

Wolfgang squints. "Not human?"

"Isn't Santa some kind of demon?"

Wolfgang grins. "Shit, Jali, no. That's Belsnickel. Or Krampus. Or...one of the other Christmas demons." He frowns and mumbles to Kala, "Why do we have more than one of those? Or any?"

Jalesh shrugs and says, "Stupid Germans" and Wolfgang hastily puts a fist up to his mouth so he doesn't audibly wheeze.

They finish gathering stones, then return to the snowman and let Jalesh decorate the face. Kala pours some hot chocolate for him, which he gratefully accepts, and then he poses next to the odd snow-Santa and grins as Kala snaps a photo.

Kala and Wolfgang smile at each other and gently laugh, taking the tenth step up the staircase. They look at the next picture -- a beaming Jalesh, sitting on a soccer field with his elbow on the ball, missing a tooth. Kala clicks her tongue softly and pats his tiny, pixelated face.

"He played his little heart out that day," she murmurs.

Wolfgang nods. "He didn't even care he knocked a tooth out."
She grins. "No."

Kala leans against Wolfgang in the blistering July sun, chewing on the lip of her water bottle as she watches her son dive to block a goal. Her eyes widen as he hits the field, but he gets up instantly and shouts something at one of his teammates. She exhales, gripping Wolfgang's hand.

"I hate this, Wolfgang, I hate this, I hate this..."

"It's soccer, not trench warfare," says Wolfgang with a roll of his eyes.

"He's so little," says Kala.

"No he isn't!" grumps Aria. "Stop talking!"

Kala bounces Elsa on her knee to soothe herself, watching Jalesh tumble, jump, and collide with other players. She winces repeatedly and Wolfgang bites his bottom lip to avoid snapping at his wife for her oversensitive relationship with sports.

Kala gasps loudly when Jalesh runs into another player and falls. Wolfgang looks at her with wide eyes.

"Are you done?" he whispers.

"Is -- is he okay?" she asks.

Wolfgang shakes his head, then leans to kiss the side of her mouth. "I love you, but I have to sit somewhere else so I don't kill you."

She laughs and nudges him away, and he takes a seat on the other side of Aria. Jalesh continues to play aggressively, and as the clock winds down, he throws himself in front of another player, gets tangled, but manages to kick the ball into the net. Then he and the player tumble to the ground and knock into the metal side of the net.

Jalesh's team gathers around, cheering for him. Kala gets to her feet, cradling Elsa, and arches to see what happened. Jalesh gets up, grinning, his mouth full of blood.

"Oh my God, Wolfgang, I told you!" Kala hisses, quickly handing Elsa to Sani and running alongside the field.

Wolfgang hurries after her, and Jalesh stumbles off the field after his team pats his back and whoops. He steps up to his parents, and then he reaches into his mouth and extracts a tooth.

He looks at it curiously. "Huh."

"No," breathes Kala. "Honey, oh my God, doesn't that hurt?"

Jalesh shrugs. "Yeah, kinda."

He extends his hand and drops the tooth into Kala's palm. She frowns at it while Wolfgang kneels in front of Jalesh and gently cups his head in his hands.

"Did you hit your head?" he asks kindly. "You okay?"

Jalesh nods. "I'm okay. Got the goal, so it doesn't really matter if I'm okay."

Wolfgang chuckles and pats the side of his head. "Okay."
They help him off the field to their seats, where he plops down on the grass, leaning on the soccer ball, and drinks some water. He wrinkles his nose.

"Ew. Blood."

Kala sighs and gently smiles, and then she murmurs, "You played very well."

He beams. "Thanks, mama."

She takes out her phone and lifts it up. "Smile with that pretty missing tooth for me, please..."

Jalesh laughs and smiles, and she takes a picture.

They continue up the stairs, pausing now at the picture for his eleventh year -- this one of Kala tossing highly-pigmented powder on Jalesh, who's grinning and halfheartedly dodging her.

The sun sears the tops of Kala's shoulders as she works her way through the boisterous, rainbow-splattered crowd. She holds onto Elsa and Sani tightly, looking ahead at Aria on Wolfgang’s shoulders. They all jostle together, laughing as more powder and colored water hits them, wandering further into the commotion. Aria throws turquoise powder this way and that, laughing, while Elsa looks around with wide, wondering eyes. They round the corner of a large float and see Jalesh, who's covered from head to toe with color, a human prism. He grins at them and waves at Kala, who smirks.

She passes Elsa to Wolfgang and nudges Sani to stay close. Then she reaches into her bag of bright pink powder and approaches her oldest son, who puts his hands up in alarm.

She throws the powder onto him, and he retaliates, both of them laughing hard. Wolfgang watches for a moment, laughing too, and then he lifts his phone up and takes a series of pictures. When Kala and Jalesh see that he's documented this moment of nonsense for all time, they both flush and cover their faces. He winks at them and pockets his phone.

In Berlin on the staircase, Kala chuckles. "Aw, Holi..." She shakes her head and touches her fingers to the frame. "I loved that. We should do that again with them now that the younger ones are older."

Wolfgang nods in agreement, and then he laughs. "Do you remember...how many Bhang thandais I drank that day?"

Kala groans. "Oh my God! I can't believe no one told you they contain an intoxicant..." She pauses to shake her head, laughing with him. "That was not your finest moment as a parent."

He grins. "Stumbling around, stoned out of my mind, with four small children..."

She covers her face and laughs. "Oh...I felt so terrible, I thought you knew!"

He shakes his head and they lean against each other, still chuckling; they find themselves closer than expected, so he moves her hair out of her face and kisses her gently. She smiles and softens in his arms, meeting his eyes as he pulls away.

Then they take the twelfth step, observing the image of Jalesh at el Museo de Arte Moderno in Mexico City. He's borrowed Hernando's glasses, and is pretending to stroke a non-existent beard in front of an abstract painting. Kala grins hugely.

"What...what is any of this supposed to be?" Jalesh murmurs to Kala as they browse the museum, a few feet behind Hernando and Wolfgang, who are walking in tandem and whispering excitedly
about the art.

Kala looks at a large painting of a...swan? Albino flamingo? She sighs.

"Art isn't really my area, Jali..."

Jalesh gestures at Wolfgang. "When were you going to mention to me that he's a huge nerd about this?"

"He likes to hide anything about him that makes him seem sensitive," murmurs Kala.

"I think the whole mobster thing cancels out everything else, he shouldn't worry," says Jalesh with raised eyebrows.

Kala laughs, and they hasten to catch up with Hernando and Wolfgang, who has Elsa on his shoulders. Lito, returning from a venture into the latest installment, joins them too.

Hernando takes his hand in greeting, then chuckles and says, "While you were gone, a woman came up to us and said we make a lovely couple."

Wolfgang grins. "Watch out, Lito, you know I have a history as a homewrecker."

Kala lets out a helpless laugh and smacks Wolfgang's shoulder. "Wolfgang!"

"Do I want to know?" asks Jalesh, rolling his eyes.

"No," says Kala cheerfully.

He increases his pace to walk ahead of them all with Aria, who looks at him with an expression of profound grief.

"Jali. Get me out of here. Please get me out of here."

"I think we're stuck for a while," he grumps.

They pause in front of a huge, sea-green square painted on a black canvas.

"Groundbreaking," says Jalesh.

"I'm going to die," says Aria.

Jalesh shakes his head and they look at each other, and then Aria laughs and nods knowingly, gesturing at the painting.

"It's clearly the best thing here," she says.

Jalesh plays along. "It's the most important work of art this century."

Aria grins. "Expensive."

"Priceless, I would say," replies Jalesh.

They start to laugh, jostling each other. The adults catch up and Wolfgang glances at them, a slow smirk starting in the corner of his mouth.

"Jali, c'mere," he says.
Jalesh cautiously walks up to his father, who turns to Hernando and takes his glasses off.

Hernando yelps softly. "I cannot see at all now, you realize!"

"Live with it," says Wolfgang, putting the glasses on Jalesh's face, grinning.

He nudges Lito and asks for the fussy vest he's wearing, and Lito laughs and hands it over. Wolfgang puts it on Jalesh and nudges him towards the painting again, and then takes his phone out.

"Okay, professor, smile big," he says.

Jalesh rolls his eyes hugely while Aria darts out of the reach of the camera, giggling. Kala starts to laugh with Lito, and when Jalesh leans on the railing in front of the painting, pushes his glasses up his nose, and puts on a highbrow expression, they nearly collapse.

"Oh my God," wheezes Kala.

"Look, look at him!" says Lito through broken laughter. "What a little actor!"

Wolfgang takes a picture, and then Jalesh doubles over, laughing too.

Another step up the stairs, another year. They stop to look at the next picture -- Jalesh, age thirteen, with his foot high in the air as he kickboxes with Sun; Wolfgang near them with raised brows, impressed.

Kala hums and glances at Wolfgang, smiling. "I think you taught him too well. I think he could win a fight against you."

Wolfgang laughs. "Yeah, he'd kick my ass at this point."

She grins and nods, rubbing his back. "Old man..."

"Hey," he says, and then they both laugh.

They turn back to the picture, taking it in with amused smiles.

Jalesh circles his Aunt Sun in the garage, grinning and watching her carefully. Wolfgang sips a beer cautiously, observing them, while Kala sits nearby on the bumper of their car, also nervous.

"Don't hurt him, Sun," she murmurs.

"I'm not going to hurt him," says Sun, rolling her eyes.

"You can hurt me," says Jalesh with a shrug. "I want to learn this right."

Sun grins playfully. "That's what I like to hear."

She throws a punch, which Jalesh dodges, and he twists their arms together and pushes Sun off. Kwon-ho, sipping a mimosa, wanders into the garage from the house. He narrows his eyes.

"Should you really be teaching a Bogdanow how to fight? He's already got that instinct. It's like giving Spiderman a gun, you know? Unnecessary."

"I may have the instinct," says Jalesh as he dodges another punch, panting. "but I need to get better at it. You should have seen what happened to me this winter...it was gnarly."
Kwon-ho stands by Wolfgang to observe and nudges him. "He picks fights, doesn't he?"

Wolfgang briefly covers his face and groans.

"That answers that," says Mun, laughing.

Sun and Jalesh fight for a few more minutes, and then Mun chuckles and takes out his phone.

"You look good, babe," he says as he takes a photo.

"Do not distract me, Detective..."

Mun snaps a few more photos, unfazed, and captures one where Jalesh strikes Sun's palm with the bottom of his foot. Luckily for Jalesh, the picture depicts the moment just prior to Sun grabbing his ankle and flipping him onto his back.

He groans feebly. "Damn it..."

"You offered me your foot," says Sun with a shrug, pulling him to his feet. "Rookie mistake."

He laughs and shakes it off, and Mun tilts his phone to show Wolfgang the picture. "What's that meme? Ten pictures taken seconds before disaster?"

Wolfgang snorts and nods. Mun grins. "I'll print this one up for you guys."

Kala and Wolfgang take yet another step up the staircase. They look at the fourteenth picture, which shows Jalesh's soccer team thrusting him high over their heads as confetti rains down. Kala shakes her head as she looks at it and grins softly.

The air explodes with cheers and boos as Jalesh maneuvers with the ball of the field, as the time runs out. Kala and Wolfgang get to their feet and watch breathlessly alongside Felix, Dani, and the children.

"C'mon, Jali," murmurs Wolfgang, glancing at the countdown.

"This is too stressful," whispers Kala, her hands on her heart.

"C'mon, my man!" shouts Felix.

Dani squeals and points. "He's got an opening, oh my God, oh my God..."

Jalesh looks around wildly, surrounded by the opposing team; then he kicks the ball forward, slides, and nudges the ball into the net as his feet go out from under him. The buzzer goes off and the refs give the thumbs up that the shot was good.

"Fuck yeah!" Felix and Wolfgang roar simultaneously.

Kala and Dani both scream and whoop, and Elsa looks at them with mild concern. Aria hollers in solidarity, as do the Velasquez-Berner children, all madly waving flags with his school's crown on them.

Several players fall on Jalesh, but he gets up, and suddenly melts out of view as his team surrounds him. He remains lost in the crowd for a moment, and then they see his team lift him overhead as if he's body-surfing. He thrusts the trophy they handed off to him high over his head, grinning blindingly. Kala laughs and hurries towards the side of the field so she can take a picture.
When the team finally sets Jalesh down, he partakes in a sassy dance which leaves his team guffawing and his coach holding his head in his hands. Kala rolls her eyes as her son continues to dance, pointing at the losing team to taunt them.

Wolfgang comes up next to her, hands on his hips, nodding at his son’s antics. The teams start to shout at each other, and Jalesh makes the jerk-off motion at one of the other players and flips him off.

Wolfgang snorts while Kala gasps indignantly.

"What a little shit," says Wolfgang, grinning.

Kala covers her face at this remark.

Then Jalesh turns, noticing that his parents are watching; his cheeks darken and he grimaces apologetically. Wolfgang laughs into his hands and Kala sighs sharply.

Kala and Wolfgang look at each other and laugh, indulging in the memory. She shakes her head and presses her hands affectionately to his chest, grinning.

"That was the first time he snuck off to a party, wasn't it?" she murmurs. "After that game?"

Wolfgang nods. "He paid for it."

She laughs. "Yes, I think spending the night throwing up is plenty of punishment."

Wolfgang chuckles in agreement and they move up a step. They look at the picture of fifteen-year-old Jalesh sitting in a Chicago police precinct, feet up on a desk, in between Will and Diego as they all eat hot dogs after a long day of patrolling.

"Hey Gorski, tell me, how'd you end up with this kid considering he's a child of the mob?" asks Diego.


"Listen," says Diego after taking a particularly fierce bite out of his hot dog, "there was nothing fucking alleged. Google "restaurant shootout Berlin"...there's some sketchy footage."

Will snorts. "Jali's a good kid, stop giving him shit."

"Still can't get over it, Gorski," says Diego. "We even know about the Bogdanows here and you've got one in your fucking Cluster."

"D, it's been years since you found this out," says Will, laughing as he adds more relish to his hot dog.

"Hey, it could have been worse," says Jalesh. "He probably would have married my dad if Riley wasn't around."

Diego hollers and slaps the table. " Damn, Gorski! I like this kid!"

Will shakes his head, then smirks. "He's not wrong."

Jalesh snorts and continues to eat. Diego laughs and shakes his head too, and then the police captain comes in and eyes the three of them. Diego and Will straighten up, and the captain looks at Jalesh, questioning his borrowed police attire.
“Nephew,” says Will quickly.

The captain narrows his eyes. "You have a brother?"

"Diego's nephew," says Will, nodding.

"That's right," says Diego, squeezing Jalesh's shoulder.

The captain huffs, pinching the bridge of his nose, and moves on. Jalesh grins hugely and kicks Will.

"Really smooth."

"Fuck off."

"Yeah, smooth Gorski..."

Wolfgang and Kala glimpsed all this through their connection with Will and barely contained laughter. Kala asked for a picture, and Will tossed his phone to a fellow officer to take one of the three of them.

Kala smiles at the memory and seeks Wolfgang’s eyes. There are only two pictures left, followed by an empty space.

The sixteenth picture shows Jalesh on the couch with Aria’s head on a pillow in his lap. She's enduring a flu, sleeping restlessly, and he's watching her to make sure her temperature doesn't rise. He's abruptly a man in this picture, the result of a growth spurt and the disappearance of baby fat; at a glance, he could be Wolfgang with black hair, but on closer inspection, Kala sees that her features are definable too -- her dark eyes with a wicked sparkle, her tawny skin. Her shoulders sink as she looks at this picture, studying the love in his eyes as he strokes his little sister's hair.

Jalesh took care of his siblings without question or complaint whenever his parents were too exhausted to do so, and Kala's unsure if she's every properly expressed her gratitude.

"What would we have done without him?" she murmurs to Wolfgang.

He shakes his head distantly. "I don't know."

It was Elsa who took this picture, finding her eldest brother and sister together on the couch late at night. She snapped the picture to use against them in the future whenever they fought, and Kala found it in the camera roll weeks later and shed an immediate tear.

She remembers the night well, despite going to bed before the picture was taken.

Aria had spent most of the day throwing up and was ashy and dehydrated by night. She refused to go upstairs and sleep in her room, insisting she was too tired to climb the stairs. Wolfgang offered to carry her but she started to cry, exhausted, and waved him off.

Jalesh promised to stay with her on the couch, feeding her tiny bites of saltine crackers and offering her some seltzer water with a straw. She cried out of self-pity for a few minutes, but relaxed after Jalesh began to share embarrassing stories about their parents that only he had heard.

Kala and Wolfgang, in the kitchen making soup, listened in and laughed quietly.

"Yeah, can you imagine?" says Jalesh to a sniffling Aria. "Who's stupid enough to get out of the safari jeep and explore the African wilderness? Our parents, apparently. They almost got eaten.
Wolfgang and Kala glance at each other and shake with silent laughter, reflecting on the misadventure that their honeymoon in Kenya was.

Aria giggles feebly. "We always knew they were dumb..."

Jalesh laughs. "Yeah, but like, it takes a special kind of stupid to almost get eaten by leopards."

She giggles more. "Tell me about it..."

Wolfgang touches Kala's waist as she stirs the soup. She grins and leans to kiss him, and then they dish the soup up for Aria and bring it out to her.

She accepts it with both hands and smiles faintly, and Jalesh puts a protective arm around her while she devours the first few bites.

"Can you make sure her fever doesn't get worse?" murmurs Kala, passing him a thermometer from her robe pocket.

He nods, excited that he's been given this responsibility. She nods in response, and then she puts her hand on Wolfgang's arm and they depart upstairs to go to bed.

On the staircase, Wolfgang and Kala look at each other. Kala's chin trembles slightly as they take the final step, as she gazes at the picture of Jalesh and Kiani at Shiro's school in Nairobi.

Jalesh and Kiani are in the midst of a dance lesson, showing several young Kenyan children the right moves -- at the moment Shiro snapped the picture, however, Jalesh had his head in his hands. His girlfriend's superior dance skills had put him to shame, and he couldn't help but laugh and hide his face.

Kala grins gently and thumbs over the image of her son under the glass.

"They're perfect together," she says to Wolfgang.

He nods. "They are."

Her grin softens and she shakes her head, recalling the wild echoes of children's laughter, the chipper reassurances of her son and Kiani that anyone can learn to dance. She remembers the intensity of the sun, the smell of baked earth and biriyani -- a fragrant rice dish with sweet spices. She remembers the soft appreciation in her son's eyes as he interacted with Shiro's students, and the image of him carrying one of them on his shoulders hits her like a bullet.

She breathes in, tears falling. "We did it." She shrugs and cries, then lets all her breath out at once.

His voice is soft, confirmational. "We did it."

She wipes her eyes, and then she quickly squeezes his waist and hurries down the stairs to her purse in the kitchen. She takes out a framed photo of Jalesh which shows him accepting his diploma from one of his teachers, and then she takes a small tool kit from under the sink. She returns upstairs and pauses by Wolfgang, offering him the picture and the tools.

He smiles and quickly taps in a hook on the empty space, then affixes the graduation picture -- eighteen years, eighteen pictures, a childhood complete.

Kala sniffs and stares at the picture, and then she and Wolfgang meet eyes. They smile gently, and
without a word, continue up the stairs and into their bedroom.

***

**Five Years Later**

Kala touches her finger to her granddaughter’s nose, giving a soft, astonished gasp as Kinaya giggles.

“Look at you,” she murmurs, tickling Kinaya’s tummy as she stretches her legs and arms, snuggling deeper into her crib. “Oh, you like tickles, yes…”

Wolfgang shifts on the carpet next to Kala, taking one of his granddaughter’s hands and gently squeezing it. They never deny the opportunity to babysit Kiani and Jalesh’s first child.

“Are you ready to eat now?” asks Kala.

Kinaya flutters her lips and brings her feet together in the air, reminding Kala was a certain yoga pose is called “happy baby.” Kala grins, and then she leans against Wolfgang and laughs.

“Isn’t she sweet?” she asks.

Wolfgang nods, taking a moment to tug on one of Kinaya’s stubborn ebony curls. He shakes his head with affection, and Kala looks at him, lingering on his grey stubble and the worn wrinkles under each eye. He smiles at her and puts a silvery strand of her hair behind her ear. They grin and gently touch noses.

Then Kala smiles and says, "I'm not ever giving this baby up, no, we're keeping her..."

Wolfgang laughs and picks Kinaya up, snuggling her. Then Elsa, age sixteen, opens the front door and comes in. She tosses her silky corn-colored hair over her shoulder and tugs Leo in after her by the hand. She pauses in the door to the living room and smiles at her oldest brother's first child.

"Oh, Leo, look it's Naya..."

She and Leo come over to peer at Kinaya for a moment. Kala glances at Elsa and notices she's wearing sparkly eyeshadow, and she smirks slightly and pats her youngest daughter's side. Then she looks at Leo -- as lanky and messy as Felix, with features which reflect Dani's soft elegance -- and she chuckles.

"How are you two?" she murmurs.

Elsa smiles and touches two fingers to Kinaya's lips. "Good. We saw a movie. We're going to go rehearse upstairs now."

Kala nods and smiles, watching as her youngest daughter and her boyfriend depart. Wolfgang smiles to himself and meets Kala's eyes -- when they first discovered that their daughter was interested in Felix's son, Kala was sure Wolfgang was going to throw a party.

They bump shoulders, laughing, and go back to studying their granddaughter -- wide eyes, an expressive mouth, a distinct blend of Jalesh and their daughter-in-law.

Kinaya was born only a week before Kala's father passed away, and her arrival helped ease the grief. Kala and Wolfgang coped by helping Kiani and Jalesh adjust to life as new parents, which was a
hassle for them considering Jalesh was often on the night shift for the Berliner Polizei and Kiani was finishing her law degree. Kinaya, like Jalesh, was unexpected.

Kala clicks her tongue on her teeth in adoration, then leans to kiss the side of her granddaughter's mouth. "Tiny thing..." She smiles and sits back, wrists bending as she leans. Then she meets Wolfgang's eyes as Kinaya burps. "This is perfect. All the fun of having a baby with none of the responsibility..."

He grins and bounces Kinaya. "Exactly..."

He passes Kinaya to Kala, who rocks her; then she giggles, reflecting on last Christmas with her mother, who squinted and pointed at each woman in the room. "Kala...Kiani...Kinaya..." She remembers the disgruntled way her mother blinked. "Could...could one of you have a name which is not so similar?"

Kiani told her to call Kinaya "Naya," and Priya chuckled and sipped some white wine, overwhelmed.

Kala hums affectionately as she looks at Kinaya, and then her eyes find the small portrait of her father on the piano. She swallows, throat tight, and then she smiles warmly at Kinaya, who burbles.

She thinks distantly of Sani, who she's sure is in the same kitchen her father occupied for decades, cooking something alongside his adventurous girlfriend Maxine -- a chef herself, who came to Mumbai specifically to try the Dandekar Restuarant. She thinks of calling him, but her thought is interrupted by the arrival of Aria, now twenty, toting a young woman behind her.

Kala sighs, already sure she'll be unable to remember this girlfriend's name. Aria changes girlfriends so frequently, it's impossible to keep up.

"We're just here to pick up my old anatomy book," says Aria, adding, "this is Gabriella, not like you're going to remember..."

Wolfgang snorts at this and he and Kala both wave. Aria and her girlfriend disappear up the stairs, and Kala has just reached into a nearby baby bag to offer Kinaya a bottle of juice when the front door opens for the third time. Jalesh and Kiani, both in formal clothes, stumble through it exhaustedly.

"That," says Kiani dramatically as she drops her purse in the foyer, "was a nightmare. The police commissioner talked for nearly three hours. Three. It broke a record..."

Jalesh shakes his head as he loosens his tie, at loss for words.

"Thanks for babysitting," adds Kiani, hurrying over to Kinaya and taking her out of Kala's arms. "Hello, hello!" Kinaya burps and presses closer. Kiani giggles. "Oh, hello."

Jalesh joins her and puts an arm around her waist, grinning as he pinches his daughter's earlobe. Then he glances at his parents.

"Was she okay?" he asks.

Kala grins. "She was perfect. We want to keep her."

"Well, you can't," says Kiani as she squeezes her daughter. "No, you can't..."

"Do you want to stay for dinner?" asks Wolfgang.
Jalesh and Kiani smile and nod. Aria and her girlfriend return downstairs, along with Elsa and Leo. The group takes seats at the dining room table as Kala and Wolfgang plate up some buttery pasta.

Kala turns with two dishes in her hand, looking at the group at the table. Then she smiles, recalling a quiet morning ten years ago, when her children gathered around the same table, pouring blueberries and brown sugar on their pancakes, all laughing together, unaware of her gentle gaze. She remembers Jalesh nudging Aria as they both dissolve into laughter at a joke of Sani's; she remembers the way Elsa wrinkled her nose and stuck her tongue out, digging her spoon into some syrup nearby. And she remembers, as the morning sun shifted between the buildings in Mitte, the expressive bond between her four children as they talked.

She seeks Wolfgang’s eyes as she sets the plates in front of Jalesh and Kiani. He smiles softly at her, and she smiles back, unable to think of a single thing that she's missing.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were curious...

1. Jali and Kiani have two children and adopt two more. He takes a break from the police force to play professional soccer, and she redefines immigration law in Germany as a lawyer.

2. Sani runs the Dandekar Restaurant for years and founds the Sanyam Foundation, where underprivileged kids learn the art of cooking and earn scholarships.

3. Aria becomes an ER doctor. She meets her wife when she's thirty, and the two of them travel around the world with Doctors Without Borders.

4. Elsa acts onstage in London, Paris, and New York. Leo works as an actor in Hollywood. The two of them pause their careers to have kids.

5. Kala's pharmaceutical company serves as a model for the world. She set the standard for ethical business practices in pharmacology and is honored with a Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to eradicate HIV.

6. Wolfgang works alongside Nomi and Amanita to found a safe place for Sensate children.

7. He dies quietly in his sleep at age 88.

8. Kala dies two years later in the same way.

I wish I could have written it all. This fic has meant more to me than anything. Thank you for all the lovely comments and all the support. I love you <3

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