



**BRINGING
BACK
KAY-KAY**

DEV KOTHARI



**WALKER
BOOKS**

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FOR KEYA AND VIRA.

YOU KNOW, RIGHT?

AND FOR ABHI.

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That morning, before I found out you were missing, Kay-Kay, I was home alone, feeling sorry for myself.

While you'd been at camp, things had been so different for me. The summer holidays finally started to feel a bit special. Ma cooked my favourite dishes for a change. Dad took me with him when he went shopping or to the club. And it was only a handful of times that either of them commented on what I did or how I did it – telling me I should do it properly, as you would have done. Towards the end of the fortnight, I felt like Ma and Dad were finally starting to see me. The way you see me. Of course, I'd missed you while you'd been away, but for the first time in a long, long time, life felt so light and easy. It was as if I'd been sitting in the shade for too long and I'd finally stepped into the sun.

Pathetic, right?

I'm sorry, Kay-Kay. I think that morning, when Ma and

Dad were running frantically up and down the platform at the railway station looking for you, I was still in my pyjamas sipping chai, wishing you'd be away for a little while longer.

Careful what you wish for. Isn't that what Nani always said? I wish, I so wish, that I'd been more careful. Because without you, there's no sun, no warmth, no light.

There never will be.

When Dad rang to ask if you'd come home yet, I said something like, "Aren't you supposed to be picking him up?"

"Just answer the question, Lena," he yelled. Then he swore. Dad, our dad, swore. Proper, proper swore. I couldn't believe my ears.

"No," I whispered, fear creeping into my thoughts. *Where are you? What's happened?*

"Call me immediately if he shows up," Dad said in a choked voice.

"Y-yes, but what's going o—?"

He hung up without another word. I thought of calling him back, but I knew he'd get more cross. I kept opening the front door, staring out at the stairs leading up to our flat and checking to see if you were coming. When the doorbell rang, I ran so fast to open it that I slipped and

fell, banging my knee on the coffee table. But it was only the newspaper boy. I slammed the door in his face, poor guy, and threw the rolled-up *Deccan Express* across the living room. Then I quickly scrambled to get it like a dog chasing a stick in the park. God knows what I was expecting to find in it – news of a train accident, a natural disaster – no idea. After pacing up and down the living room about a hundred times and chewing my fingertips raw, it finally occurred to me to call Samir.

Of course! He'd have come back on the same train as you.

I remembered seeing his phone number on a Post-it stuck on the desk in your room. The first time I called him, he didn't pick up, but I kept calling. He finally answered after the fifth time.

"Hello, Samir?" I said.

I heard muffled sounds on the other end of the line – the phone being passed around.

"Samir, are you there? It's Lena."

"Hello, Lena beta. This is Mrs Pratap talking."

Samir's mum! God, she is the worst of all the mums. I always marvel at how you can be so nice and polite to her. I can't even bear the way she talks – sickly sweet and so fake.

"Auntie, is everything OK? Has something happened?"

She tutted. “Oh no, beta! You don’t know? You poor, poor child.”

“Is my brother not with Samir?”

“I don’t know if it’s my place to tell you. What if your parents take offence?”

Yes, she actually said that. It took everything I had to not scream into the phone.

“Please, Auntie,” I somehow managed to say. “I’m really worried.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. It’s such a terrible tragedy. But Karthik did not come back with Samir.”

This time, I was not calm. “What do you mean? What happened?”

“What to tell you, Lena? Karthik did get on the train with Samir yesterday evening, but then he disappeared. No one can find him. It’s so ...”

I don’t know what she said after that. I didn’t hear her any more. I didn’t hear anything, except the pounding of my heart. A moment later, Kay-Kay, when it all sank in, I collapsed onto the floor in a crying heap.

What has happened to you?

Schoolboy Goes Missing from Train

Fifteen-year-old Karthik Krishnan, who was returning home to Lamora after attending a summer camp in Goa, has gone missing under mysterious circumstances.

Mrs Rita Varghese, lead coordinator at Wildlife Adventures, said Karthik had attended a two-week camp with three other students, all from Saint Vincent's School in Lamora. A camp coordinator accompanied the four boys to Margao Junction on Saturday 13 May, where they boarded the ERS-Lamora Overnight Express at 5.15 p.m. When the train arrived at Lamora Junction at 6.43 a.m., fifty-three minutes later than its scheduled arrival time, Karthik was nowhere to be found.

Samir Pratap, another member of the group, said the four boys had dinner together at nine-thirty p.m. and had gone to their berths soon after. Mr and Mrs Krishnan, who were waiting to pick up their son at Lamora Junction, enlisted the railway police's help as soon as it

became apparent that Karthik was no longer in the party. Other than his backpack, a thorough search of the train resulted in no clues.

Karthik's distraught parents are desperate for any news of him. Mrs Krishnan broke down in tears while speaking to the Deccan Times. She said, "Karthik means everything to us. We love him so much. We just want him back."

Several people in the local community have expressed their shock and concern over Karthik's disappearance. The Deccan Times spoke to Mr D'Angelo, principal of Saint Vincent's School, which is still recovering from a recent incident in which a fire injured three students and one teacher. Mr D'Angelo said that parents and teachers are struggling after yet another blow and are praying for Karthik's safe return. He described Karthik as a top-ranking and talented student who recently sat the Class 10 board exams.

The devastated family has filed a First Information Report (FIR) at the Lamora

Central Police Station. Inspector Rana said the police are pursuing all avenues of investigation and has urgently appealed to anyone with any information to come forward.

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Once the newspaper article came out, the phone wouldn't stop ringing. We'd all rush to pick it up, but it was Dad who usually got there first, with a worried "Hello? K-Karthik?" Ma and I would look on anxiously. But within a moment or two, we'd realize it was only another so-sorry-to-hear-about-your-son call. Ma would go back to sitting on the sofa, alternately staring into space and crying, and I'd sit back down next to her on the edge, biting my nails and wondering again and again where on earth you could be.

Waiting felt like torture, so I busied myself doing things for Ma and Dad. Dad would nod his head when I made cup after cup of chai. Ma would give me a half smile when I'd cook Maggi or khichadi and hand her a bowl. But she'd just push her food around. And Dad seemed to survive on tea alone. After Dad had been to the police station or Ma had spoken to one of the aunts, they'd shake their heads and tell me "No news yet." They

knew I was there, and yet it was like I didn't exist.

But I didn't really care about that any more.

I'd look at them and see only lines – dark lines that appeared out of nowhere on Dad's face, wiggly lines of tears on Ma's face, criss-cross lines of their interlaced fingers. Most times, once I'd made sure there was nothing more I could get for them, I'd just go to my room and cry into my pillow.

It was hard enough without you, Kay-Kay. I couldn't watch their pain too.