

SOMEWHERE

Between

Strangers



A Novel

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination.

For everyone who ever fell in love

in a city that wasn't theirs,

with a person who wasn't planned.

PART ONE

Florence

“The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page.”

— Saint Augustine

Chapter 1: The Girl with the Wrong Map

Meera Iyer was lost. Not metaphorically lost—though she was that too, in ways she had not yet begun to understand—but literally, prosaically, hopelessly lost in the tangle of medieval streets between the Duomo and the Arno.

The map on her phone had died twenty minutes ago, its battery sacrificed to three hours of compulsive photograph-taking, and the paper map she'd picked up at the hostel's front desk was, she now realized, oriented with south at the top, which was either a charming Italian eccentricity or a deliberate prank on tourists. She suspected the latter.

It was September in Florence, and the air was thick with heat and the smell of stone and exhaust and something sweet that might have been jasmine or might have been someone's perfume. The streets were narrow here—barely wide enough for two people to pass without touching—and the buildings rose on either side like canyon walls, their shuttered windows giving nothing away.

She stopped at a corner and turned the map upside down. Then sideways. Then upside down again. None of these orientations made the streets in front of her correspond to the streets on the paper.

“You look like you're trying to read the map in four dimensions.”

The voice came from behind her—American, amused, male. She turned and saw a man about her age leaning against the wall of a building, a camera bag slung over one

shoulder and a gelato in his hand. He was tall—taller than anyone she knew in Mumbai—with dark hair that needed cutting and eyes the color of the Arno in the late afternoon, a kind of grey-green-brown that couldn't make up its mind.

“I'm not lost,” Meera said, in the tone of someone who is very lost.

He smiled. It was a good smile—slow, asymmetric, slightly self-deprecating. “Of course not. Where are you trying to not be lost on your way to?”

“The Ponte Vecchio.”

He pointed with his gelato. “Two blocks that way, then left at the leather shop with the green awning. You'll hear the river before you see it.”

“Thank you.” She folded the useless map and shoved it into her bag. Then, because she had been traveling alone for four days and had spoken to no one except hostel receptionists and waiters, and because his smile had been kind, and because Florence in September makes everyone a little braver than they usually are, she said: “Would you like to show me?”

He looked at her for a moment. Then he looked at his gelato, which was melting rapidly in the Tuscan heat. Then he looked back at her.

“Yeah,” he said. “I would.”

His name was Ethan James. He was twenty-nine years old, from Portland, Oregon, and he had been traveling alone through Europe for three weeks. He was a photographer—freelance, which he explained was a polite word for “unemployed with a camera.” He had come to Florence because he’d read somewhere that the light here in September was the best in the world for photography, and because he needed to be somewhere that wasn’t home.

He did not explain why he needed to be somewhere that wasn’t home. Meera did not ask. She understood that particular need too well to require an explanation.



They walked to the Ponte Vecchio. They stood on the bridge and watched the Arno turn gold in the setting sun. They talked about nothing important—the heat, the tourists, the absurd prices of the leather goods in the shops that lined the bridge—and everything important—the feeling of being alone in a foreign city, the freedom and the terror of it, the way that traveling solo strips away all the roles you play at home and leaves you with nothing but yourself.

“I quit my job,” Meera said, surprising herself. She hadn’t planned to tell him this. She hadn’t planned to tell anyone.

“What kind of job?”

“Software engineer. At a very respectable company in Mumbai. The kind of job that makes your parents weep with pride and your soul weep with boredom.”

He laughed. “And the soul won?”

“The soul won. But it was a close contest.” She paused. “I also called off my engagement.”

He raised his eyebrows but said nothing. He had that rare quality—rarer in men than in women, she had found—of knowing when to be silent.

“Arranged,” she added. “Not by force—my parents aren’t like that. By gentle, relentless, loving pressure. The kind that’s hardest to resist because you know it comes from a good place.”

“What was wrong with the guy?”

“Nothing. That was the problem. He was perfect—on paper. Good family, good job, good teeth. Liked cricket and cooking and called his mother every Sunday. And I felt absolutely nothing when I looked at him. Not dislike, not attraction, not even indifference. Just... nothing. Like looking at a well-designed spreadsheet.”

Ethan nodded slowly. “So you’re here.”

“So I’m here.”

They watched the last of the sun disappear behind the hills west of the city. The sky turned from gold to amber to the deep, bruised purple that only Mediterranean skies can produce. The lights on the bridge came on, one by one, and the water below became a mirror of scattered gold.

“Would you like to get dinner?” Ethan asked. “I know a place. Tiny trattoria, off the tourist track. The pasta is...” He paused, searching for the word. “Transcendent.”

Meera should have said no. She was alone in a foreign city, and he was a stranger, and every safety lecture she had ever received—from her mother, from her friends, from the internet—told her that accepting dinner invitations from strange men on bridges was the first chapter of a cautionary tale.

But the evening was warm, and the bridge was beautiful, and his eyes were kind, and she was twenty-seven years old and had just blown up her entire life, and if she couldn’t have dinner with a stranger in Florence, then what had been the point of any of it?

“Transcendent pasta?” she said. “How could I say no?”

Chapter 2: The Trattoria

“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are.”

— Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

The trattoria was called Da Sergio, and it occupied a ground-floor room on a street so narrow that the buildings on either side nearly touched above it. There was no sign outside—just a wooden door, propped open, from which emerged the kind of aroma that makes you realize you’ve been hungry your entire life without knowing it.

The interior was small—eight tables, red-checked cloths, candles in wine bottles, a chalkboard menu in Italian that Meera could not read and Ethan could only half-decipher. A large woman with grey hair and a flour-dusted apron appeared, looked at them with the evaluating gaze of someone who has been sizing up customers for forty years, and led them to a table by the window without a word.

“She decides what you eat,” Ethan explained. “You don’t order here. Sergio’s wife—her name is Lucia—she looks at you and decides what you need. It’s never wrong.”

“How did you find this place?”

“I got lost. Like you.” He grinned. “Getting lost is my primary research methodology.”

The food arrived in waves. First, bruschetta with tomatoes so ripe they were almost liquid, on bread that had been rubbed with garlic and drenched in oil that tasted of grass and pepper. Then a pasta—pappardelle with wild boar ragù—that was, Meera had to admit, genuinely transcendent. The meat was dark and rich and falling apart, the sauce was dense with wine and herbs, and the pasta itself was thick and rough and clung to the sauce in a way that made every bite a complete experience.

“Okay,” she said, after the third forkful. “You weren’t exaggerating.”

They drank red wine—a Chianti that Lucia had brought without being asked—and talked. They talked about food: Meera described her mother’s biryani, which she claimed was the single greatest dish in human civilization, and Ethan described the fish tacos at a shack in Baja

California that he said came close. They talked about music: she loved Carnatic classical and secretly loved Taylor Swift; he loved jazz and not-so-secretly loved Bollywood soundtracks.

“Wait,” Meera said. “You listen to Bollywood music?”

“My roommate in college was from Hyderabad. He played A.R. Rahman constantly. I resisted for about a week, and then ‘Jai Ho’ got into my bloodstream and never left.”

She laughed—a real laugh, the kind she hadn’t produced in months. It surprised her. Laughter had become a foreign language since she’d called off the engagement and watched her mother’s face crumple like a paper lantern in rain.

They talked about travel. Ethan had been to thirty-two countries, mostly on assignment—he’d shot weddings in Bali, street markets in Marrakech, fishing villages in Portugal. Meera had been to exactly three countries before this trip: India, Singapore (for a work conference), and Sri Lanka (a family holiday when she was twelve). This was her first solo trip, her first time in Europe, her first time doing anything entirely on her own.

“Are you scared?” he asked.

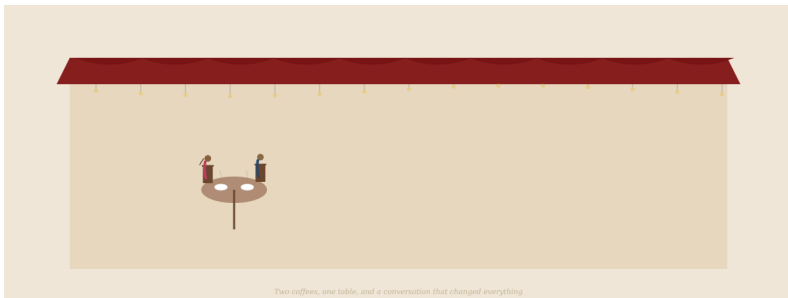
“Terrified,” she said. “Every single day. I wake up and for about three seconds I don’t know where I am, and then I remember, and the terror hits, and then—” She paused.

“And then?”

“And then it turns into something else. Something that feels like terror’s cousin. The one who went to art school.”

“Exhilaration,” he said quietly.

“Yes.” She looked at him across the table, across the candles and the wine and the remains of transcendent pasta. “Exactly that.”



Two coffees, one table, and a conversation that changed everything

They stayed at Da Sergio until Lucia began stacking chairs on the tables around them with the gentle but unmistakable determination of a woman who wanted to go to bed. Ethan paid—Meera protested; he insisted; they

compromised on splitting it, which in practice meant Meera paid for the wine and Ethan paid for everything else, which was not really a compromise at all, but she let it go because the night was warm and she was full of pasta and wine and a feeling she couldn't name.

They walked back toward the hostel—they were staying at the same one, it turned out, the Ostello Gallo d'Oro on Via Cavour—through streets that were empty now, the tourists gone, the Florentines asleep or hiding behind their shuttered windows. The city felt like it belonged to them. The echo of their footsteps on the cobblestones was the only sound.

At the hostel door, they stopped.

“Thank you,” Meera said. “For the directions. And the pasta. And the...” She waved her hand vaguely. “The everything.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“I was going to the Uffizi.”

“Me too.”

She smiled. “What a coincidence.”

“Astonishing.”

They looked at each other for a moment longer than was strictly necessary. Then Meera said goodnight, and walked through the hostel door, and climbed the stairs to her dormitory room, and lay on her narrow bunk staring at the ceiling, and did not sleep for a very long time.

In the bunk below her, a German backpacker snored steadily. In the bunk across the room, a Japanese girl murmured in her sleep. And Meera lay awake, her heart beating faster than it had any right to, thinking about a man with camera-colored eyes who had shown her the way to a bridge.



Chapter 3: The Uffizi, and After

“Art is the lie that enables us to realize the truth.”

— Pablo Picasso

They spent the next three days together. It was not a decision so much as a gravitational event—they were drawn together by a force that neither of them examined too closely, because examining it might have broken the spell.

At the Uffizi, Ethan taught her to see. Not in the way that art history professors teach—with dates and movements and scholarly interpretations—but in the way that a photographer sees: the quality of light on a cheekbone, the geometry of a composition, the emotional weight of a color choice. He stood behind her in front of Botticelli’s *Primavera* and said, very quietly, “Look at the way he uses the darkness behind the figures. They’re not standing in a garden. They’re standing in front of the void, and the flowers are their only protection.”

Meera looked. And for the first time in her life, she saw a painting not as a beautiful object behind glass but as a message from one human being to another, sent across five centuries, still arriving, still urgent.

“You see things differently,” she told him.

“I see things for a living. It’s the only thing I’m good at.”

“That’s not true.”

“What else am I good at?”

“Gelato selection. Map reading. Making strangers feel less strange.”

He smiled. That slow, asymmetric, devastating smile.

“You’re not a stranger, Meera.”

“We met forty-eight hours ago.”

“Time is irrelevant. Some people are strangers after twenty years. Some people are family after twenty minutes.”

She wanted to argue, but she couldn’t, because she felt it too—the irrational, unearned, inexplicable familiarity of his presence. She had known him for two days, and she could not remember what it had felt like not to know him.

Three Days in Florence

On the second day, they climbed to the Piazzale Michelangelo at sunset and watched the entire city turn to gold below them. Ethan took photographs. Meera sat on the stone balustrade and let the warm wind lift her hair and felt, for the first time in months, that she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

On the third day, it rained. They sat in a café near the Palazzo Pitti and drank espresso and talked for four hours without pause. She told him about her childhood in Mumbai—the flat in Andheri, the smell of her grandmother’s kitchen, the sound of the monsoon on the tin roofs. He told her about Portland—the rain, the coffee, the mountains you could see on clear days, the mother who had raised him alone after his father left when he was seven.

“She died,” he said, very quietly. “Six months ago. Cancer. That’s why I’m here.”

Meera reached across the table and took his hand. She didn't say "I'm sorry"—those words were too small for the weight of what he'd just told her. She just held his hand, and let the silence speak, and felt his fingers tighten around hers like a man gripping a rope in a storm.

They sat like that for a long time, their hands intertwined on the café table, the rain streaming down the windows, the world continuing outside without them.

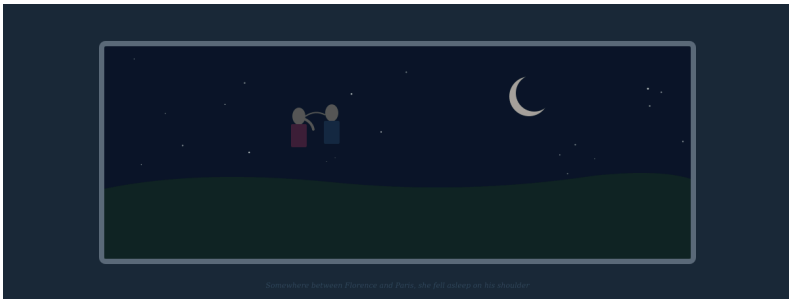
That was the moment. If you had asked Meera later—years later, decades later—when she fell in love with Ethan James, she would have said: “In a café in Florence, in the rain, when he told me about his mother and I held his hand and neither of us said a word.”



Chapter 4: The Train to Paris

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

— Marcel Proust



It was Ethan’s idea to take the train. “Flying is just teleportation with discomfort,” he said. “The train lets you watch the world change outside the window. You see the exact moment when Italy becomes France.”

Meera's original itinerary—the one she had meticulously planned in her Mumbai apartment, city by city, hostel by hostel, with the precision of a software engineer designing a system architecture—had her flying from Florence to Barcelona the following Tuesday. But itineraries, she was learning, were just suggestions that the universe was free to edit.

“Paris?” she said. “That’s not on my plan.”

“All the best things aren’t,” he said.

She changed her flight. It cost her eighty euros and a pang of guilt—her mother’s voice in her head, saying plans exist for a reason, Meera—and then she was on a train with a man she had known for four days, watching Tuscany unfold outside the window like a green and gold tapestry, and the guilt dissolved like sugar in the rain.

The train was a night train, and they had booked separate berths in the same compartment—a six-bed couchette that they shared with an elderly Italian couple and two French students. It was cramped and noisy and the mattresses were the approximate thickness of a chapati, and Meera would not have traded it for a first-class suite at the Ritz.

They sat in the corridor as the train climbed through the Apennines, watching the sunset paint the mountains in shades of rose and violet. Ethan had his camera, but for once he didn't use it. "Some things," he said, "you need to see with your eyes, not through a lens."

Somewhere south of Milan, the train entered a tunnel, and the world outside the window went black. In the sudden darkness, Meera felt his hand find hers. Neither of them spoke. The train emerged from the tunnel into the fading light, and their hands remained where they were, fingers interlaced, and Meera thought: this is what courage feels like. Not the grand, dramatic courage of quitting your job or canceling your engagement. The small, terrifying courage of reaching for someone in the dark.

Later, in their bunks, after the lights were off and the Italian couple was snoring in gentle counterpoint, Meera lay awake listening to the rhythm of the train and thinking about the mathematics of improbability. What were the odds? An Indian girl from Mumbai and an American boy from Portland, both traveling alone, both running from something, meeting on a street corner in Florence because one of them was lost and the other happened to be eating gelato in exactly the right place at exactly the right time.

The odds were astronomical. The odds were impossible. And yet here she was, in a couchette on a night train to Paris, her hand still warm from the memory of his.

She closed her eyes and let the rhythm of the train rock her to sleep. Somewhere between Florence and Paris—she never knew exactly where—her head slipped sideways and came to rest on something warm and solid. In her half-sleep, she registered the smell of his jacket—leather and soap and something indefinably him—and she thought, drowsily: I should move. And then she thought: I don't want to. And then she thought nothing at all, because she was asleep, her head on his shoulder, the train carrying them both through the dark toward morning.



PART TWO

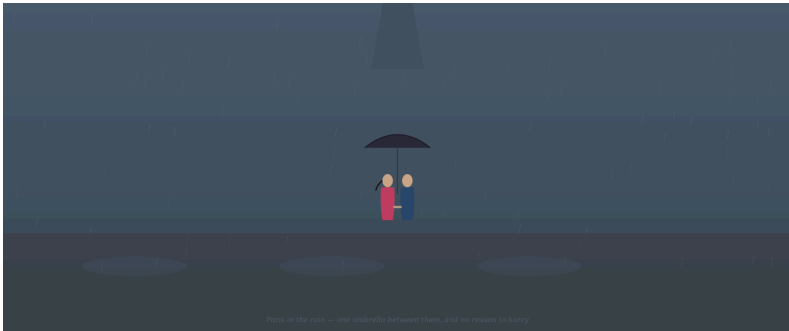
Paris



“Paris is always a good idea.”

— Audrey Hepburn

Chapter 5: Rain and Reckoning



Paris greeted them with rain. Not the gentle, apologetic drizzle that London produces, but a committed, theatrical downpour that turned the streets into rivers and the gutters into rapids and sent tourists scurrying into Métro stations like rats into holes.

They had one umbrella between them—Ethan’s, a battered black thing that he’d been carrying since Berlin. It was barely large enough for one person, let alone two, which meant they had to walk very close together, their

shoulders touching, their steps synchronized, the umbrella tilted slightly toward Meera because Ethan, she was learning, was the kind of man who would rather get wet himself than let someone else get rained on.

They walked along the Seine in the rain, past the bouquinistes with their green stalls shuttered against the weather, past Notre-Dame's reconstruction scaffolding, past the lovers on the bridges who kissed in the rain because they were in Paris and it was raining and what else were they supposed to do.

"This is ridiculous," Meera said, laughing, her hair plastered to her face, rain running down her neck. "We should go inside."

"Why?"

"Because it's raining."

"So?"

"So we're getting wet."

He stopped walking and turned to face her. Rain was streaming down his face, and his hair was dark with water, and his eyes were that impossible grey-green-brown, and he was smiling, and he said: "Meera, you quit

your job and broke your engagement and flew to a continent you'd never visited to walk around alone in cities where you don't speak the language. And you're worried about a little rain?"

She stared at him. Then she started laughing. Then she couldn't stop. She stood on the Pont des Arts in the pouring rain and laughed until her ribs ached, and Ethan laughed with her, and the rain kept falling, and the Seine kept flowing, and Paris went on being Paris all around them, and for one perfect, irrational, unrepeatable moment, Meera Iyer from Andheri, Mumbai, felt like the freest person on Earth.

And then Ethan kissed her.

Or she kissed him. Later, they could never agree on who moved first. Perhaps they moved simultaneously—two bodies obeying the same gravitational impulse, closing the distance between them as naturally as water flowing downhill. His lips were warm despite the rain. His hands came up to cup her face, and his thumbs traced the line of her cheekbones, and Meera thought: oh. So this is what it feels like. This is what I've been missing.

They stood on the bridge and kissed in the rain while the city flowed around them, and it was everything that the movies promise and the cynics deny and the romantics believe despite all evidence to the contrary: it was, simply and without qualification, the most beautiful moment of Meera's life.



Chapter 6: What He Didn't Say

“The worst kind of secret is the one you keep from someone you love.”

Ethan had a secret.

Meera didn't know it yet, but she sensed it—the way you sense a change in atmospheric pressure before a storm, the way you feel the temperature drop half a degree before the rain begins. There were moments—small, almost imperceptible—when something behind his eyes would shift, when his smile would thin by a fraction, when he would look at her with an expression that wasn't quite sadness and wasn't quite guilt but was something in between that she couldn't name.

It happened in the Musée d'Orsay, in front of a Monet. She was talking about the light in the painting, trying to describe what she saw in the way he had taught her, and when she turned to him for confirmation, his face was...

wrong. Just for a second. Just a flicker. And then it was gone, and he was smiling again, and she told herself she had imagined it.

It happened again at dinner, when she asked about Portland. “Do you have someone at home?” she said, and the pause before his answer was one beat too long. “No,” he said. “Not anymore.” And there it was again—that flicker, that momentary shadow, like a cloud passing over the sun so quickly you’re not sure it was ever there.

She told herself it was grief. His mother had died six months ago; of course there were shadows. Of course there were moments when the loss surfaced and darkened his eyes. She told herself this, and she believed it, because the alternative—that the man she was falling in love with was hiding something from her—was a thought she was not yet ready to entertain.

What Ethan was hiding was this: three months before his mother died, he had been diagnosed with a condition. Not terminal—not immediately, not certainly—but serious. A cardiac arrhythmia that could, in the wrong circumstances, become very serious very quickly. His doctor had told him to take it easy. His doctor had told him to avoid stress, avoid exertion, avoid anything that might trigger an episode. His doctor had not told him to

fly to Europe and fall in love with a woman he had no right to fall in love with, because his doctor had no idea he was the kind of idiot who would do exactly that.

Ethan had not told Meera about his heart because he didn't want her to look at him differently. He didn't want to become a project, a concern, a fragile thing to be handled with care. He wanted to be the man on the bridge with the gelato, the man in the café in the rain, the man who taught her to see paintings and kissed her on the Pont des Arts. He wanted to be whole, even if he wasn't.

And so he carried his secret through Paris the way he carried his camera—always with him, always heavy, always visible if you knew where to look.



PART THREE

The Distance



Chapter 7: The White Island

“Every paradise contains the seed of its own farewell.”



Santorini was the last stop. They both knew it, though neither said it aloud. Meera’s visa was running out. Ethan’s money was running low. Reality, which had been so obligingly absent for the past three weeks, was beginning to reassert itself with the quiet insistence of a creditor.

They had taken a ferry from Athens—eight hours on the Aegean, the sea so blue it looked computer-generated—and arrived in the port of Athinios in the late afternoon. A taxi wound up the cliff road to Oia, where Meera had booked a room in a tiny pension carved into the volcanic rock, with a terrace that looked out over the caldera and the endless, impossible blue.

For three days, they existed in a state of suspended disbelief. They swam in water the color of Ethan's eyes. They ate grilled octopus and feta and tomatoes that tasted like the sun had personally ripened each one. They watched the sunset from the castle ruins, surrounded by hundreds of tourists, and felt entirely alone because when you're in love, a crowd is just scenery.

On the third night, on the terrace of the pension, under a sky so thick with stars it looked like someone had spilled a bag of diamonds, Ethan told her the truth.

He told her about the diagnosis. He told her about the medications he took every morning when she wasn't looking. He told her about the episode he'd had on the ferry—a fluttering in his chest, a moment of dizziness, a cold sweat that he'd hidden by pretending to be seasick.

He told her everything, and when he was done, he looked at her with those impossible eyes and said: “I should have told you sooner. I’m sorry.”

Meera was very still for a long time. The stars wheeled overhead. A dog barked somewhere down the hill. The sea moved against the base of the cliff with a sound like breathing.

“Is it... how serious is it?”

“Manageable. With medication, with care, with regular monitoring—manageable. It’s not a death sentence, Meera. It’s a condition. Millions of people live full lives with it.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I didn’t want you to see me as broken.”

She turned to him. In the starlight, his face was all planes and shadows, and she thought of Botticelli’s figures standing in front of the void, protected by nothing but beauty and each other.

“Ethan,” she said. “You idiot. You absolute, beautiful, infuriating idiot.” And then she kissed him, hard, because she was angry and relieved and scared and in love, and all

of those things at once demanded the same response.



Chapter 8: Gate 24

“Every love story is a ghost story.”

— David Foster Wallace



Charles de Gaulle Airport. Terminal 2E. October 4th. 6:47 a.m.

Meera's flight to Delhi departed at 9:15 from Gate 31. Ethan's flight to JFK departed at 10:40 from Gate 24. Between them lay seven gates, two moving walkways, a duty-free perfume counter, and approximately 11,000 kilometers of Earth that they would, in a few hours, place between their bodies for the first time in twenty-six days.

They stood in the departure hall, surrounded by the meaningless bustle of an international airport at dawn—businessmen with wheeled suitcases, families with too many children, backpackers with too many patches on their bags—and tried to find the words for something that had no words.

“So,” Meera said.

“So,” Ethan said.

A long silence. An announcement in French, then English, then Arabic. A child somewhere was crying.

“I’ll call you every day,” he said.

“The time difference is ten and a half hours.”

“Then I’ll call you every day at a really inconvenient time.”

She tried to smile. It came out wrong—more like a grimace, or a suppressed sob, or both. “Ethan—”

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t say it.”

“Don’t say what?”

“Whatever you’re about to say that sounds like goodbye.”

She looked at him. His jaw was set, and his eyes were bright, and he was holding her backpack strap like it was the only thing preventing her from floating away. She wanted to memorize his face—every line, every shadow, the particular way his left eyebrow lifted when he was trying not to show what he was feeling—because she knew, with the cold clarity that airports impose on lovers, that she was about to walk through a door that would take her 11,000 kilometers away from this man, and she didn't know when—or if—she would see him again.

“It's not goodbye,” she said. “It's... see you later. In a different time zone.”

He pulled her close and held her. Not a romantic embrace—something rawer than that, something desperate and defiant, like two people clinging to each other at the edge of a cliff. She pressed her face into his chest and breathed him in—leather and soap and him—and thought: I am going to remember this smell for the rest of my life.

“Go,” he whispered into her hair. “Your gate is the other direction.”

She went. She walked away from him without looking back, because if she looked back, she wouldn't be able to leave, and she had a flight to catch and a life to return to

and a mother who was waiting for her in Mumbai with questions she didn't know how to answer.

She walked through security. She walked past the duty-free. She walked to Gate 31 and sat in a plastic chair and stared at the departure board and felt like someone had reached into her chest and removed something essential.

At Gate 24, seven gates away, Ethan James sat in his own plastic chair and felt exactly the same thing.



PART FOUR

Coming Home



Chapter 9: 11,000 Kilometers

“The art of love is largely the art of persistence.”

— Albert Ellis

They called. They texted. They video-chatted across the 10.5-hour time difference that turned their days into a complex negotiation between sleep, work, and longing.

Meera’s mornings were Ethan’s evenings. His lunchtimes were her midnights. They carved out a shared hour— 7 p.m. Mumbai, 8:30 a.m. Portland—and guarded it fiercely against the encroachments of real life: her mother’s dinner invitations, his freelance deadlines, the hundred small obligations that conspire to fill the spaces where love is trying to grow.

__Meera: __It's 2am here and I can't sleep and I miss you.

__Ethan: __It's 3:30pm here and I'm editing photos of Florence and every one of them has you in it.

___Meera: ___I wasn't in most of those photos.

___Ethan: ___You were in all of them. You just couldn't see yourself.

The distance was hardest in the small moments. Not the big dramatic absences—the missed birthdays, the holidays spent apart—but the tiny, everyday ones: the cup of chai she drank alone on her balcony in Mumbai, the sunset he watched alone from the Hawthorne Bridge in Portland. The moments that would have been nothing special if they had been shared, but that became, in the sharing's absence, small wounds that accumulated into a dull, persistent ache.

Meera went back to work. Not to her old company—she couldn't face that—but to a startup in Bandra that was building an app for something she only half understood. The work was fine. The commute was terrible. The salary was half what she'd earned before. She didn't care about any of it. She cared about the eleven thousand kilometers that separated her from a man she had known for twenty-six days and loved with a certainty that defied every rational principle she had ever been taught.

Her mother asked questions. Gentle, probing, relentless questions, delivered over cups of tea and plates of upma, with the tactical precision of a military intelligence officer. “Who is this boy you’re always talking to on the phone? An American? A photographer? Meera, what kind of future is this? What will people say?”

Meera didn’t know what people would say. She didn’t particularly care. But the question beneath her mother’s question—the real question, the one that had no answer—was this: how do you build a life with someone who is on the other side of the world?

Four months passed. The calls continued. The texts continued. The ache continued. And slowly, imperceptibly, the way a crack spreads through glass, doubt began to creep in.

Not doubt about her feelings—those were as certain as gravity. But doubt about the logistics, the practicality, the sheer mechanical impossibility of sustaining love across 11,000 kilometers and 10.5 time zones. How long could they go on like this? Who would move? Could she leave India—leave her mother, her friends, her language, her world? Could she ask him to leave his?

And beneath all of this, unspoken but always present, the question of his heart. Not his metaphorical heart, which was large and generous and entirely hers, but his literal heart, which was unpredictable and potentially dangerous and which she could not monitor from the other side of the planet.



Chapter 10: The Breaking

“Some things have to break before they can be mended.”

It ended on a Tuesday. Not with a fight—Meera and Ethan didn’t fight, which was part of the problem. They orbited each other at a distance, each afraid to push too hard, each afraid to say the things that needed to be said, until the unsaid things accumulated like pressure in a sealed vessel and something had to give.

The catalyst was a photograph. Ethan posted it on Instagram—a picture from a gallery opening in Portland. He was standing next to a woman—blonde, laughing, her hand on his arm. The caption said: “Great night at the Morrison Gallery. Thanks @jessicamorrison for the invite.”

The photograph was innocent. The woman was a gallery owner. Ethan had shot the event for his portfolio. But Meera, sitting in her apartment in Mumbai at 1 a.m.,

exhausted from a twelve-hour workday and hollowed out by months of missing him, looked at that photograph and felt something inside her crack.

She called him. He answered on the second ring, his voice warm and sleepy—it was 12:30 p.m. in Portland, and he'd been napping.

“Who’s Jessica?”

A pause. Just a beat too long. “A friend. She runs a gallery. I shot an event for her.”

“She had her hand on your arm.”

“Meera—”

“I’m not jealous,” she said, though she was. “I’m tired. I’m tired of looking at my phone and seeing you living a life I’m not part of. I’m tired of waking up at 2 a.m. because that’s the only time our schedules overlap. I’m tired of missing you so much that it hurts to breathe.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying...” She closed her eyes. The words were there—she could feel them, hard and sharp and necessary—but speaking them was like cutting cloth: irreversible. Once

she said this, she couldn't unsay it. "I'm saying I don't know how to do this anymore. I don't know how to love someone I can't touch."

Silence. The terrible, weighted silence of two people on opposite sides of the Earth, separated by oceans and time zones and the cruel mathematics of distance.

"Is this goodbye?" he asked. His voice was barely a whisper.

"I don't know," she said. And she hung up, and she cried, and outside her window the Mumbai night hummed with its ten million lives, and none of them knew or cared that Meera Iyer's heart had just broken into pieces small enough to fit through a phone line.



Chapter 11: The Silence

Two months of nothing.

No calls. No texts. No photographs of sunsets tagged with inside jokes. No voice notes sent at inconvenient hours. Nothing. The silence between them was absolute, and it was deafening.

Meera threw herself into work. She ran. She cooked elaborate meals that she ate alone. She went to a therapist, who told her that she was grieving, and that grief was a process, and that processes took time. She nodded and said the right things and went home and lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling and felt nothing.

Ethan, in Portland, was doing the same thing. Working. Running. Cooking for one. Lying awake at night in his apartment, listening to the rain on the roof, reaching for his phone to text her and then stopping himself, because

she had asked for space and he was going to give it to her even if it killed him, which, given the condition of his heart, was not entirely a figure of speech.

His heart. It was getting worse. The episodes were more frequent—fluttering, dizziness, a cold sweat that came on without warning and left him gripping the edge of whatever surface was nearest. His doctor adjusted his medication. His doctor told him to reduce stress. His doctor did not know that the greatest source of stress in Ethan's life was the absence of a woman in Mumbai who didn't know that his heart was failing.

Not failing. Struggling. There was a difference, his doctor assured him. A manageable difference. With the right treatment, with the right care, with the right... Ethan stopped listening. What he needed was not treatment or care or medication. What he needed was 11,000 kilometers shorter. What he needed was her.



Chapter 12: The Return

“Home is not where you live. Home is who you love.”

On a grey March morning, Meera’s phone buzzed with a message from an unknown number. She almost ignored it—she’d been getting spam calls all week—but something made her look.

It was a photograph. A boarding pass. DEL—Delhi. Gate 12. Departing Portland, connecting through Frankfurt. Arriving tomorrow.

No text. No explanation. Just a boarding pass and, after a moment, three words:

I’m coming home.

Meera stared at the screen. Her hands were shaking. Her heart was doing something that her therapist would probably have had a name for—something between panic

and joy and disbelief, something that felt like standing on the Ponte Vecchio at sunset and watching the world turn gold.

She typed: You don't have a home in India.

The reply came immediately: I have you. That's the same thing.

She sat on the edge of her bed and cried. Not the awful, hollow crying of the breakup, but something different—something warm and fierce and full of salt, like the sea at Santorini, like the rain in Paris, like every body of water that had witnessed their story.

Then she stood up, washed her face, and called her mother.

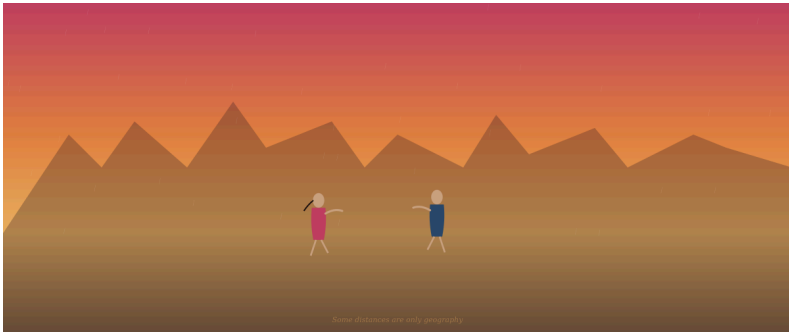
“Amma,” she said, “there's someone I need you to meet.”



Epilogue: The Bridge

“In the end, we only regret the chances we didn’t take.”

— Lewis Carroll, attributed



Indira Gandhi International Airport. Terminal 3. Arrivals.

Meera was wearing the red kurta she’d worn the night they first had dinner in Florence. She hadn’t planned it—she’d grabbed whatever was closest when the alarm went off at 4 a.m.—but when she looked in the mirror on her way out, she’d smiled. The universe, it seemed, still had a sense of humor.

She stood behind the barrier in the arrivals hall, surrounded by families holding signs and taxi drivers holding iPads and a small boy who was bouncing up and down with the unconcealed delight of someone about to see a person he loved. She understood that small boy perfectly.

The doors opened. Passengers emerged in the steady stream that airports produce—businessmen, tourists, a woman with an enormous hat, a couple arguing about a suitcase. And then—

He was taller than she remembered. Or maybe she was shorter. Distance does strange things to memory; it distorts the proportions of the people we love, making them both larger than life and somehow fragile.

He saw her. His face did something that she had only ever seen in paintings—it opened, like a flower, like a window, like a door to a room that had been locked for a long time. And then he was running. And then she was running. And then the 11,000 kilometers and the ten and a half time zones and the two months of silence and the terrible, stupid, magnificent improbability of it all collapsed into a single point of contact: his arms around her, her face

against his chest, the smell of leather and soap and him, and the sound of his heartbeat—irregular, imperfect, beautifully alive—against her ear.

“Your heart,” she whispered.

“Beating,” he said. “For you.”

Around them, the airport continued its indifferent business. Announcements were made. Flights were boarded. Luggage was lost. But Meera and Ethan stood in the arrivals hall of Terminal 3, holding each other, and for one moment—one perfect, irrational, unrepeatable moment—the distance between them was zero.



Some love stories begin with a plan.

This one began with a wrong map, a melting gelato,

and two strangers on a bridge in Florence

who didn't know they were about to change each other's lives.

Some distances are only geography.

Love is the bridge.

A Note from the Author

This story was written for everyone who has ever fallen in love with a stranger in a foreign city, and for everyone who has ever wondered what would have happened if they had been brave enough to say yes.

It was written for the solo travelers who eat dinner alone and stare at their phones and think: is this all there is? And for the ones who put down their phones and look up and find, standing in front of them, a person they didn't expect and can't forget.

Meera and Ethan are fictional, but the cities are real. If you ever find yourself lost in Florence, look for the leather shop with the green awning. The Ponte Vecchio is two blocks further on.

And if someone offers to show you the way, say yes. You never know where it might lead.

