

# The Distance Between Us

**A Novel**

**Amara Osei**

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*A Kelford Press Original*

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*For the ones who stayed, and the ones who almost didn't.*

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*'There are many things in the world and you are one of them. Many things keep happening and you are one of them, and the happening that is you keeps falling like snow on the already fallen snow.'*

— Anne Carson, *Plainwater*

# Chapter 1: The Lobby

## Meera

The coffee had gone cold twenty minutes ago, but Meera kept her hands around the cup because it gave her something to hold. The Aldridge Partners Mumbai office occupied the fourteenth and fifteenth floors of a glass tower in Lower Parel, the kind of building that looked like every other building on the street and rewarded this anonymity with astronomical rent. From her desk she could see, if she leaned past the partition, a thin corridor of Arabian Sea between two construction cranes. She rarely leaned.

It was a Monday in late January, the brief window when Mumbai allowed itself a chill — not cold, never properly cold, but enough that the city felt momentarily uncertain of itself. Meera wore a silk blouse the colour of dark tea, sleeves rolled to the elbow. Her desk held three stacked client decks, a pen she never used, and a framed photograph of her and Vikram at a cousin's wedding in

Udaipur, both of them smiling in that particular way married people smile when a camera finds them — performed intimacy, muscle memory of affection.

She was reviewing a go-to-market strategy for a consumer electronics client when Nandini appeared at the edge of her vision, holding a green tea and radiating the gentle chaos that trailed her like perfume.

'The London MD is arriving today,' Nandini said, parking herself on the corner of Meera's desk. 'For the Vantara restructuring. Three months, apparently. Priya's already panicking about seating.'

'Mm.' Meera highlighted a sentence on her screen that said nothing and meant less.

'James Whitfield. Have you met him? Singapore-based, but British. Rahul says he's good. Rahul also says he looks like he was assembled in a factory that makes men for BBC dramas, but you know Rahul.'

'I know Rahul.' Meera scrolled down. She wanted to write *This is obvious and insufficient* in the margins. She wrote *Consider additional channel diversification*.

Nandini studied her. 'You're in a mood.'

'I'm working.'

'Those are the same thing for you.'

Meera looked up and offered something that was almost a smile. Nandini was her closest friend in the office, possibly her closest friend full stop, which said something about the years since thirty. They'd started at Aldridge in the same cohort, seven years ago. Nandini had since married, divorced, adopted a Labrador named Keats, and started a weekend pottery class. Meera had since married and stayed married. She wasn't sure which of them had covered more ground.

'Dinner later?' Nandini asked.

'Can't. Vikram's hosting some founder thing at the flat. I should be there.'

'Should.' Nandini weighed the word. 'The most romantic word in any marriage.'

Meera returned to her screen. Nandini slid off the desk and walked away, trailing her gentle chaos back to her own partition.

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The flat in Bandra was on the sixth floor of a converted Art Deco building, the kind of address that announced itself without shouting. Vikram had found it three years ago, when his fintech start-up had closed its Series B and everything briefly felt like it was accelerating towards something good. They'd painted the study together, argued about bookshelves, made love on the living room floor before the furniture arrived. Meera remembered the paint colour — Dulux Chalk White 3 — more vividly than she remembered the lovemaking, which told her everything she needed to know and everything she refused to examine.

She arrived home at seven forty-five, slipping off her heels in the hallway. The flat smelled of catered paneer tikka and the woody cologne Vikram wore to impress people he wanted money from. She could hear voices from the living room — male, confident, performing the register of men who talked about runway and burn rate as though these were matters of life and death, which perhaps for them they were.

Vikram was by the bar cart, pouring whisky for a man Meera vaguely recognised from a Mint article. He looked up when she entered.

'Hey. There's food in the kitchen. Sunita set everything up.'

'Thank you.'

That was it. Not hostile, not cold. Just efficient. He turned back to his guest. Meera went to the kitchen, picked at a samosa she didn't want, and poured herself a glass of Sancerre from the fridge. She stood at the kitchen window and looked down at the street, where a man was selling jasmine garlands from a bicycle. The scent drifted up, faintly, or perhaps she imagined it because she wanted to smell something that wasn't catered food and business ambition.

She and Vikram had been married for ten years. She was twenty-four when it happened — a good match, everyone said, as though marriage were a game of cards and they'd drawn well. Vikram was smart, driven, not unkind. He opened doors and remembered her mother's birthday and never once raised his voice. These were not small things. She knew women whose marriages were minefields. Hers was simply empty. A room where all the furniture was in the right place but nobody sat down.

She couldn't remember when it had emptied. There was no single moment, no dramatic rupture. It was more like the way a river silts up — each deposit so fine you don't notice until one day the water doesn't flow and you're standing at the bank wondering how long it's been dry. They'd stopped having sex regularly around year four. Stopped talking about anything that mattered around year six. By year eight, Vikram had started sleeping in the study three nights a week, citing early calls with US investors, and Meera had stopped pretending this bothered her.

She drank her wine, changed into track pants and a cotton kurta, and sat on the bed with her journal — a cloth-bound notebook she'd bought at a stall in Kala Ghoda, its pages dense with her small, angular handwriting. She didn't write about feelings. She wrote around them. Observations, fragments, lines from poems. Tonight she wrote: *The jasmine seller below the window. Why does someone else's livelihood always look more honest than your own?*

She could hear Vikram laughing in the other room — the laugh he used for investors, warm, calibrated, three degrees more generous than his actual sense of humour.

She closed the journal and placed it in the bedside drawer, beneath Anne Carson's *Plainwater* and a packet of earplugs.

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The next morning she ran along Bandstand promenade at six fifteen. The sea was grey-green and restless, slapping against the rocks with a sound like wet cloth. A few other runners passed her — a man in a Mumbai Marathon finisher's shirt, a group of elderly men doing yoga on a concrete platform, their bodies folding with an ease that shamed her. The air was salt and diesel and, beneath it, the sweet rot of seaweed. Meera ran because it was the one hour of the day she didn't have to be anything — not a consultant, not a wife, not a woman holding herself together with the precision that people mistook for contentment. She ran until her lungs burned and then a little further, because the burning felt like proof of something.

She showered, dressed — a navy blazer, cream trousers, the small gold hoops her mother had given her — and took an Uber to the office. At eleven forty-five, Priya from admin sent an email: *James Whitfield arriving at noon. Welcome lunch in the 15th floor boardroom at 12:30. All Vantara project team please attend.*

Meera was on the Vantara team. She closed her laptop, checked her reflection in the dark screen — a habit she disliked in herself — and went to collect a client report from the printer that lived, for reasons nobody could explain, on the thirteenth floor.

She was crossing the lobby when the lift opened and a man stepped out, pulling a carry-on suitcase with the practised ease of someone who lived in airports. He was tall, fair-haired going grey at the temples, wearing a navy suit without a tie and the expression of a person who had endured a three-hour flight from Singapore in business class and wanted everyone to know he found it ordinary. Behind him came Rahul Mehra, Aldridge Mumbai's managing partner, talking energetically about traffic.

Meera knew who he was before Rahul introduced them. She'd read his bio on the Aldridge intranet. But more honestly, she'd been aware of his arrival the way you're aware of weather changing — not with alarm, but with a subtle recalibration of attention.

'Meera, this is James Whitfield, our APAC MD. James, Meera Kapoor — she'll be leading the Mumbai-side analysis on Vantara. Best strategic mind in this office, and I include myself.'

'You shouldn't,' Meera said. 'You're better at golf.'

Rahul laughed. James Whitfield smiled — a careful smile, acknowledging the joke without committing to it. He extended his hand.

'Good to meet you. I've read your sector work on financial services. The Banerjee Capital piece was particularly sharp.'

'Thank you.' His handshake was firm, brief. His eyes were grey-blue, the colour of the sea she'd run beside that morning, though she didn't think this at the time. She thought it later, in the journal, and then crossed it out because it sounded like the kind of thing a woman in a novel would think, and she was not that woman, and this was not that story.

'Rahul's been telling me about the traffic,' James said.

'Rahul tells everyone about the traffic. It's how we bond in Mumbai — through shared suffering.'

Another smile, slightly less careful. 'I'll try to contribute my own suffering stories.'

'Singapore traffic doesn't count.'

'It does if you're behind a taxi driver who's decided the expressway is a philosophical concept.'

Meera felt the corner of her mouth lift. A moment of wit offered and returned, the recognition that here was a person who could keep pace. She'd had a thousand such exchanges. This one was no different.

Rahul ushered James towards the lifts. Meera collected her report. She went to the boardroom for the welcome lunch and sat at the far end of the table, eating chicken biryani from a foil container and listening to James Whitfield talk about the Vantara restructuring with the calm authority of a man who'd done this many times before. He asked precise questions, listened to the answers, and had the rare ability to make everyone feel that their contribution mattered without ever relinquishing control of the conversation. A performance, she thought. But a skilled one.

He caught her eye once, across the table, during a silence that lasted a beat too long. She looked away first.

That evening she went home. Vikram was on a video call in the study, his voice a low murmur behind the closed door. She heated leftover dal, ate it standing at the counter, and washed her plate. She sat with Carson's

*Plainwater* and read the same page three times without absorbing it. Through the wall, Vikram's voice rose and fell — explaining, persuading, alive in the way he was only alive when talking about his company. She listened to this voice she'd lived with for a decade and felt the thing she'd learned not to name, the thing that lived in the space between what a life looked like and what a life was.

She opened her journal. She wrote: *A man arrived today. Nothing happened. I am writing this down because I don't know why I want to.*

She crossed out the last sentence. Then she wrote it again.

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# Chapter 2: The Assignment

## James

The hotel room was on the twenty-third floor of the Trident in Nariman Point, and from the window James could see the whole curved sweep of Marine Drive — the Queen's Necklace, they called it, though at ten in the morning the streetlights were off and the necklace was just a long grey road choked with traffic. He stood with his shirt unbuttoned, coffee in hand, watching a cargo ship crawl across the harbour mouth with the patience of something that knew time didn't apply to it. The room was too cold — the air conditioning set to that aggressive chill that Indian hotels deployed against their own climate, as though warmth were an enemy to be defeated rather than a fact to be lived with.

He called Claire.

She picked up on the fourth ring. Seven thirty in Singapore, which meant she was in the kitchen, half-dressed, negotiating breakfast with two children who had inherited her stubbornness and his talent for delay.

'How's Mumbai?' In the background, Sam was crying about something — the performative wail of a four-year-old who has learned that volume is leverage.

'Hot. Loud. The hotel's fine.'

'Sam, put the spoon down. Not in your sister's — sorry. What?'

'The hotel's fine.'

'Good. Listen, Lily's got a thing at school on Thursday, some kind of concert. She wants to know if you'll be there.'

'I'm in Mumbai for three months, Claire.'

'I know that. She's seven. She doesn't think in months.'

He heard the edge in her voice, the one that had been there for — how long? Two years? Three? Not anger exactly. The sound of a woman who had recalibrated her expectations so many times that the mechanism had worn

smooth, and now everything she said about his absences came out flat and lightly abraded, like sandpaper used too many times to cut.

'Tell her I'll video call. I'll watch the concert on the phone.'

'It's not the same and you know it.'

'I know.'

A pause. Sam's crying subsided into hiccups. He heard the rustle of her shifting the phone, the click of the kettle.

'Did you eat anything on the plane?'

'Yes.'

'Actual food, or just the nuts and three whiskies?'

'I had the chicken.'

'Alright. I've got to get them to school. Call tonight?'

'I'll call tonight.'

She hung up. He stood with the phone in his hand, looking at her contact photo — Hong Kong, three years ago, on the Peak Tram. She was laughing, hair blown

sideways, Lily on her hip. He couldn't remember who'd taken it. He couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed like that with him in the room.

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James Whitfield was thirty-eight and had spent the last decade living in places that weren't home. Dubai, then Hong Kong, then Singapore — each posting a rung on the ladder, each city offering a version of expatriate life that was comfortable, international, and faintly unreal, like living inside a departures lounge that served excellent wine. He'd grown up in Guildford, son of a solicitor and a school administrator, gone to Durham, read Economics, and graduated into consulting with the vague sense that he was good at organising other people's problems because it saved him from examining his own.

He could walk into a company that was bleeding money and, within a week, see the architecture of its failure: the misaligned incentives, the legacy systems nobody wanted to touch, the middle managers who'd built empires of inertia. He suspected this was true of most consultants — finding other people's dysfunction easier to diagnose than their own.

He showered, dressed — grey suit, white shirt, no tie — and went downstairs. A driver was waiting. He sat in the back of a white Toyota Innova and watched Mumbai scroll past — construction sites, street vendors, stray dogs sleeping in the shade of parked cars with the boneless ease of creatures who had solved existence by refusing to acknowledge it. The air smelled of diesel and frying onions and something floral he couldn't place. The city appealed to the part of him that was tired of Singapore's air-conditioned perfection — Mumbai didn't apologise for itself, didn't try to be legible. It simply was, and you either found your rhythm or you didn't.

At the office, Rahul Mehra met him with the enthusiasm of a man who understood that hosting the APAC MD was both an opportunity and a performance review. Standard Aldridge: glass, beige carpet, the tasteful sans-serif logo on every surface. He was given a corner desk on the fifteenth floor with a view of a construction crane and, beyond it, a sliver of sea.

He met the Vantara team after lunch. Vantara was a mid-size Indian conglomerate haemorrhaging cash from its logistics arm — acquisitions made with enthusiasm and without due diligence. His job was to restructure the division — firing several hundred people and telling the

founding family that their dead patriarch's strategic vision had been wrong. The human cost registered as a dull weight he'd learned to carry without letting it slow him down, which was either professionalism or sociopathy, and he'd stopped trying to determine which.

He spent the afternoon on the initial diagnostic, watching who deferred to whom, who spoke with data and who with opinion, who was afraid of him and who wasn't.

Meera Kapoor wasn't afraid of him.

He'd noticed her at the welcome lunch — the woman at the far end of the table who ate her biryani and said almost nothing and, when she did speak, made everyone else's contributions sound like rough drafts.

In the afternoon session, she presented her preliminary analysis of Vantara's logistics costs — stood at the whiteboard, handwriting small and certain, and walked the room through a cost-structure map better than anything his Singapore team had produced. She laid it out and let the work speak.

'The problem isn't the acquisitions themselves,' she said, uncapping the marker with her teeth because her other hand held a printout, and this small, unguarded gesture

struck him as the first unrehearsed thing he'd seen anyone do all day. 'The problem is that nobody integrated the back-end systems. You've got five logistics companies on five different platforms, and the holding company is reporting consolidated numbers that are essentially fiction.'

'Expensive fiction,' James said.

'The most expensive kind. I'd recommend a full platform audit before we touch the org structure. You can't restructure what you can't see.'

He agreed. She nodded once, as though his agreement were useful information but not validation she required.

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He called Claire that night as promised. She was putting the children to bed, so the call came in whispers and interruptions — *Lily, teeth, now* — less dialogue than dispatches from parallel lives that occasionally intersected over logistics. Sam's swimming lesson. Lily's concert. A leak in the upstairs bathroom. They did not discuss anything that mattered, and James understood — the way you know there is a crack in a wall because you've

arranged the furniture to cover it — that this was not because they were too busy but because they were too frightened.

He loved Claire. He told himself this and believed it, the way you believe in a country you were born in but haven't visited for years — with loyalty, with nostalgia, without current evidence. They'd met at a friend's wedding in Hampshire. She'd been finishing her PhD on Dutch Golden Age painting, and he'd been enchanted by the way she talked about Vermeer as though he were someone she knew personally and was mildly annoyed with. Then Dubai, and Claire left her lectureship. Then Hong Kong, and she stopped painting — small watercolours of domestic interiors that were better than she believed. Then Singapore, and Sam, and the slow accretion of resentment that builds when one person's career eats the other's life and both pretend this is temporary.

She never said: *You owe me*. She said: *It's fine*. Which was worse.

He poured himself a Laphroaig from the minibar and stood at the window. Marine Drive's streetlights were on now, the necklace restored, a long curve of amber light against the dark water. He drank slowly, feeling the peat smoke on his tongue, and thought about the three months

ahead with the guilty relief of a man who has been given permission to leave a room he didn't know he wanted to leave.

He thought about Meera Kapoor — the marker cap between her teeth — and then he stopped thinking about her because there was nothing to think about. She was a colleague. She was good at her job. That was all.

He lay in the hotel bed, which was too large and too white and smelled of industrial lavender, and read forty pages of le Carré's *A Perfect Spy* — a man who had spent his life performing versions of himself for other people and had forgotten which was real. He'd read it before. He found it more unsettling each time.

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The first week settled into rhythm. He ran at six thirty along Marine Drive, dodging stray dogs and the cricket players who colonised every flat surface at dawn. He called Claire every night and they talked about the children and the plumber and nothing.

He worked with Meera most days. What struck him was her restraint — a perimeter she maintained, an invisible line beyond which she didn't let people pass. He recognised it because he maintained one himself.

On Thursday, they were reviewing vendor contracts in a small meeting room on the fifteenth floor. Six thirty in the evening. The rest of the team had left. The room smelled of dry-erase markers and the ghost of someone's afternoon chai. Outside, the sky over the Arabian Sea was turning apricot and violet, operatic and brief.

'This vendor's been overbilling by twelve per cent for eighteen months,' Meera said. 'Either nobody in procurement noticed, or somebody noticed and was compensated for not noticing.'

'Which do you think?'

'I think we should bring data and not questions. Questions can be deflected. Data just sits there and stares at you.'

'That's a good line. You should put it in the report.'

'I'll put it in the appendix. Nobody reads the appendix. It's where consultants go to be honest.'

He laughed — a real laugh, not the one he used for clients, but the one that came before he could arrange it into something more appropriate. She looked faintly startled, as though she hadn't expected to be funny.

They worked for another hour. When they finished, they walked to the lifts together. The office was mostly empty, the lights dimmed to their evening setting. In the lift, they stood on opposite sides and neither spoke, and the silence was comfortable in the way that silence between strangers isn't and silence between people who might become something else sometimes is.

In the lobby, she said, 'Goodnight, James.'

'Goodnight, Meera.'

She walked out through the revolving doors and the city swallowed her, and he stood watching her go with the dim awareness that something had shifted — not dramatically, not irrevocably, but the way a compass needle moves when you carry it past a magnet, the tremor so slight you might have imagined it, except you didn't.

He went back to the Trident. He poured another Laphroaig. He opened *A Perfect Spy* and read until the words blurred. He slept, and in the morning the sea would be the same grey-green it always was, and he would go to the office and work beside a woman he barely knew, and this is how it begins — not with a thunderclap but with a silence that two people recognise in each other, across a

conference room, in a city that is not home, in lives that  
have slowly become containers for everything they cannot  
say.

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# Chapter 3: The Terrace

## Meera

The last slide deck was the one that broke her.

Not broke, exactly — Meera did not break. She had trained herself out of breaking the way one trains out of any inconvenient reflex. But at half past nine on a Thursday evening, with the fluorescents casting their pall across the open-plan floor and someone's Swiggy order growing cold by the printer, she found herself staring at a cell in a spreadsheet that refused to reconcile, and something inside her said: *enough*.

She saved the file. She closed the laptop. She walked past the rows of empty desks — the associates had cleared out by seven, the analysts by eight — and pushed through the fire door to the terrace.

The air hit her like a confession. Warm and thick and salt-tinged, carrying the diesel exhale of Marine Drive traffic six floors below. She leaned against the railing and looked out at the necklace of streetlights curving along the

waterfront, their reflections trembling in the dark water. The sky was the colour of bruised plum — that particular Mumbai purple when the city's light pollution met the monsoon haze. She breathed in and felt her ribs expand, the first full breath she'd taken in hours.

She heard the fire door open behind her.

'I thought I was the last one left,' James said.

He had his sleeves rolled to the elbow, tie loosened, holding two cups of the terrible machine chai — the kind that tasted of cardboard and powdered milk and some chemical approximation of cardamom. He held one out.

'Peace offering,' he said. 'For keeping you this late.'

'You didn't keep me. The Reliance deck kept me.'

'The Reliance deck that I assigned you.'

She took the cup. Their fingers didn't touch. She noticed that she'd noticed.

'Fair enough,' she said.

He leaned against the railing beside her, leaving a professional distance between them — the width of another person, or a secret.

'I keep forgetting this is here,' he said. 'This terrace. I've been in Mumbai offices where the only view is the air-conditioning unit of the building next door.'

'The partners chose this office for the view. Anil Mehta used to bring clients up here after the pitch. Said it closed more deals than any deck he'd ever built.'

James laughed — unguarded, slightly rough. Not the polished chuckle he deployed in meetings. The sound a person made when they were genuinely amused and too tired to moderate it.

'I believe it,' he said. 'Hard to say no to anything with that as the backdrop.'

They stood in silence. Below, the traffic crawled along the curve of the Drive. A cluster of teenagers sat on the sea wall, passing a phone between them, its screen a small blue rectangle of light. Somewhere, a car horn held a single note for three seconds, then four, then gave up.

'Can I ask you something?' Meera said.

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether it's a work question or a real question.'

She turned to look at him. He was watching the sea, his profile outlined against the city's glow. There was a tiredness in his face she recognised — not late nights, but something more structural. The tiredness of a person who had been holding a particular shape for a very long time.

'What's the difference?' she asked.

'Work questions have answers. Real questions just have other questions.'

'That sounds like something from a le Carré novel.'

He glanced at her, surprised. 'How did you know I read le Carré?'

'There's a copy of *A Perfect Spy* on your desk. Spine cracked at the halfway point, which means you're either reading it or rereading it.'

'Rereading. Third time. It's the one about the man who becomes so good at pretending that he forgets what's underneath.'

'I know what it's about.'

Something shifted between them. Not a charge — Meera distrusted that word, with its implication of something romantic and electrical and beyond one's control. More

like a door opening in a room she'd assumed was sealed. A draught where there shouldn't have been one.

'Go on, then,' he said. 'Ask your question.'

She looked back at the sea. A cargo ship sat on the horizon, lit up like a floating city.

'Do you ever think about the distance between who people see and who you actually are?'

He took a sip of the terrible chai. When he spoke, his voice was quieter.

'Every day.'

'Is it getting wider? The distance?'

'I think it gets wider so slowly you don't notice until you can't see the other side anymore.' He paused. 'Why do you ask?'

'I was sitting at my desk just now, and I thought — if I died there, it would be a perfectly reasonable summary of my life. Meera Kapoor, died where she sat, surrounded by slide decks. And the worst part isn't that it would be untrue. The worst part is that it would be accurate.'

'That's bleak.'

'Is it? Or is it just honest?'

He turned to face her, and she felt the weight of his attention settle like a hand on a shoulder. James had a way of looking at people that made them feel seen — she'd observed it in meetings, the way junior consultants straightened when he addressed them, the way clients leaned forward. A professional skill, she'd told herself. But here, with the wind carrying salt and petrol, with the city sprawled beneath them in its gorgeous, chaotic indifference, it didn't feel professional.

'Honesty and bleakness aren't the same thing,' he said, 'but people confuse them because the truth is usually less flattering than the story we prefer.'

'What story do you prefer?'

He smiled — something thinner and more private than the boardroom version. 'I prefer the one where I'm a man who chose his life. Rather than the one where I let it happen to me.'

'And which one is true?'

'Probably both. At different times.'

Meera felt something open in her chest — a loosening she hadn't anticipated. She'd spent years in conversations that skirted meaning: dinners with Vikram's start-up friends where everyone performed enthusiasm, office talk that stayed within the perimeter of work, phone calls with her mother that circled the same careful questions about grandchildren and happiness. To speak directly about the thing itself — the gap, the pretence, the distance between the life you inhabited and the life you might have lived — was so unfamiliar it felt physical, like stepping into cold water.

'I read a line recently,' she said. 'Anne Carson. "Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief."'

'Christ,' he said softly.

'Too much?'

'No. Too precise.'

They stood in the warm dark, the chai growing cold in their hands, and Meera thought about the curious intimacy of being tired in the same place at the same time. The way exhaustion stripped away the social varnish and left something raw and slightly dangerous underneath.

She thought about Vikram, probably at home already, sitting on the sofa with his laptop open, the blue light of the screen turning his face into a stranger's face. She thought about the bed they shared — the vast, neutral territory of their king-sized mattress, with its invisible line down the middle that neither of them crossed.

'I should go,' she said.

'Yes.'

Neither of them moved.

'The thing about le Carré,' Meera said, 'is that his spies don't betray their countries because they stop loving them. They betray them because the country they loved stopped existing.'

James looked at her for a long moment. 'You're not talking about spies.'

'No,' she said. 'I'm not.'

The fire door opened. Priya from HR, collecting something she'd left behind, offered a cheerful *Hi!* and disappeared. The interruption reset the atmosphere like a change in air pressure. Meera stepped back from the railing.

'The Reliance deck,' she said.

'Can wait until morning.'

'You don't mean that.'

'I do, actually. Go home, Meera. It'll still be broken tomorrow.'

She almost said *So will everything else* but caught herself. She nodded, set the chai on the ledge, and walked back through the fire door. In the lift, she caught her reflection in the polished steel — ruffled blouse, hair escaping its clip, mascara smudged beneath her left eye. She looked like someone who had been in a minor accident. Which, in a sense, she had.

In the cab home, she watched the city slide past — shuttered juice stalls, night-shift workers waiting for buses, stray dogs sleeping on the warm pavement. Her phone buzzed. A message from Vikram: *Won't be home till late. Don't wait up.* She almost laughed. As if waiting up were something she still did.

She pressed her forehead against the window. The glass was warm from the day's heat, and through it she could feel the vibration of the engine, the road, the city — twelve

million lives humming. She closed her eyes and saw the terrace. The railing. James Whitfield turning to face her in the dark.

*You're not talking about spies.*

No. She wasn't.

In her journal that night — the cloth-bound notebook Vikram had never once asked about — she wrote a single line:

*I am in trouble.*

She underlined it twice. Then she closed the journal, turned off the lamp, and lay in the dark on her side of the invisible line, listening to the city breathe.

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# Chapter 4: What We Don't Say

## James

The restaurant was Prashant's idea.

Trishna, in Colaba — the kind of place that had been serving butter garlic crab to Bombay's monied classes since before Bombay became Mumbai, with its cramped tables and indifferent lighting and waiters who moved with the unhurried authority of men who knew the food would speak for itself. He'd been twice before. He did not remember enjoying it this much.

There were six of them at the start. Prashant and Neha from the Mumbai team. Rohan, the engagement manager who laughed too loudly and ordered too much. Akanksha, the analyst who kept checking her phone under the table with the guilty furtiveness of someone expecting a message she shouldn't be. Meera. And James.

The crab arrived on a steel plate, swimming in a sauce the colour of burnt amber, and the table fell into the focused silence of people encountering something that demanded their full attention. James cracked a claw and the sweet, briny meat slipped free — garlic, butter, a thread of green chilli that lit a slow fuse at the back of his throat. He looked up and caught Meera watching him with something that might have been amusement.

'You eat crab like an Englishman,' she said.

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning you're trying to be neat about it. You can't be neat about it. That's the point.'

Prashant laughed. 'She's right, mate. Just get your hands in.'

James surrendered to the mess of it. The shell cracked and splintered. The butter ran down his wrists. Meera passed him a tissue without being asked, and the gesture settled inside him like a stone dropped into still water.

He was aware of her in a way that troubled him.

Not her presence — he was always aware of people's presence; it was part of the job, reading rooms, registering shifts in posture and tone. This was different. The way she held her glass of water with both hands, as though warming them. The way she listened — leaning forward, head tilted, giving the speaker the full surface area of her attention. The thin gold chain at her throat that caught the light when she turned. These were not things a managing director should catalogue about a colleague. He catalogued them anyway.

The table thinned. Akanksha left first, pleading an early call with Tokyo. Rohan followed, overfull and slightly drunk, hailing a cab with his arm raised like a man surrendering. Neha kissed Prashant on the cheek and said she'd wait in the car. Prashant lingered, ordered another round nobody had asked for, then caught something in the atmosphere — or perhaps just his wife's second text — and made his excuses with the easy grace of a man who understood social geometries.

And then there were two.

The restaurant was winding down. Waiters moved between tables collecting glasses, replacing tablecloths that didn't need replacing — the quiet choreography of closing time. A ceiling fan stirred the warm air without

cooling it. From the kitchen came the sound of water running, a pot being set down, a burst of Marathi that rose and fell like a brief song.

'We should probably go,' James said.

'Probably,' Meera said. She didn't move.

He signalled for chai. The waiter brought two small glasses without comment — dark, sweet, laced with ginger. James wrapped his hands around his glass and felt the heat seep into his palms.

'Can I tell you something strange?' he said.

'Strange how?'

'Strange in the way that I haven't said it out loud before.'

She waited. She had a talent for creating silences that were not empty but expectant, like the pause between a question and its answer.

'When I'm in a city that isn't mine,' he said, 'I feel more like myself than when I'm at home. And I've been trying to work out whether that means I'm adventurous or broken.'

'Maybe it means home isn't doing what home is supposed to do.'

'Which is?'

'Hold you. Isn't that what home is? The place that holds you when everything else lets go?'

He looked at her. The low light stripped away the composure she wore in the office like armour. She looked younger and older at the same time. She looked like someone he could talk to for a very long while.

'Claire and I,' he started, then stopped. He never talked about Claire. Not to colleagues, not to friends, not even to his brother Simon, who had once asked outright whether the marriage was working and received such a thorough deflection that he'd never asked again. But something about the hour, the emptying restaurant, the woman who had quoted Anne Carson on a terrace two nights ago and cracked open something he hadn't been able to close since — all of it conspired against his usual discipline.

'You don't have to,' Meera said.

'I know. That's why I want to.'

He took a breath. The ginger chai burned the tip of his tongue.

'Claire and I are very good at being married,' he said. 'We do all the things. Dinner three nights a week minimum. The children's school plays. Sunday lunches. A shared calendar, colour-coded — blue for children, green for social, red for travel. Very organised. Very functional. From the outside, you'd think: there's a couple who've figured it out.'

'But from the inside?'

'From the inside, it's like living in a house where all the furniture is in the right place but none of it is yours.'

Meera set her glass down. 'I know that house.'

'I thought you might.'

They looked at each other across the small table with its stained cloth and its scattering of crab shells, and James felt the vertigo of recognition — seeing your own condition reflected in another person's face and realising you were not, after all, the only one living inside that particular silence.

'Vikram is a good man,' Meera said, and the way she said it — with the precision of someone placing a glass on a high shelf — told him everything about what the word *good* was being asked to carry.

'Claire is a good woman,' he said.

'So we're both lucky.'

'So we're told.'

She smiled, and it was the saddest smile he'd seen on a person who was not crying. He wanted to reach across the table and — what? Touch her hand? Say something true? He did neither. He drank his chai.

They split the bill. Outside, Colaba was performing its nightly transformation — the tourist shops shuttered, the Causeway emptied, the old buildings looming like monuments to a Bombay that existed only in photographs and novels. The air smelled of jasmine from a flower seller's unsold garlands and diesel from the BEST buses grinding towards their depots. A man with a handcart of coconuts rattled past, the fruit knocking together with a hollow, musical sound.

'Which way are you?' James asked.

'Bandra. You?'

'Trident. I'll walk.'

'It's fifteen minutes. I'll walk with you.'

Such a simple sentence. And yet it rearranged everything. They fell into step along the pavement, navigating broken flagstones and sleeping dogs and the occasional man on a charpoy who'd pulled his bed onto the street to escape the heat. They walked close enough that their arms occasionally brushed — fabric against fabric, barely registering and entirely impossible to ignore.

'Tell me something that has nothing to do with Aldridge or Reliance or restructuring.'

'Like what?'

'Like — what do you read? When you're reading for yourself, not for work.'

'Poetry, mostly. And novels. The kind that don't resolve.'

'You don't like resolution?'

'I don't trust it. Life doesn't resolve. It just continues, or it doesn't. The books that pretend otherwise are lying.'

'That's a harsh standard.'

'I think it's a generous one. The greatest compliment you can pay a reader is to treat them as someone who can bear the truth.'

They passed the Regal Cinema, its art deco facade lit like a stage set, the film posters bleached and peeling. A couple leaned against the wall outside, arguing in low voices. James looked away. There was something uncomfortably intimate about witnessing other people's private negotiations.

'What about you?' Meera asked. 'Besides le Carré.'

'Graham Greene. Kazuo Ishiguro. Writers who are interested in the lies people tell to survive.'

'That's a very specific interest.'

'Yes. I suppose it is.'

They reached the Trident. The hotel rose before them, glass and stone against the dark sky, the lobby's warm light spilling onto the pavement. James stopped.

'Thank you,' he said. 'For dinner. For walking.'

'You're welcome.'

She stood in the warm night, her hair loosened by the walk, her face half in shadow and half in the lobby's glow. He thought about Claire, asleep in Singapore — or awake, perhaps, alone in their bed on Nassim Road, the children in their rooms, the house holding its shape around the absence at its centre.

'Goodnight, James,' Meera said.

'Goodnight.'

She turned and walked towards the cabs. He watched her go — the straight line of her back, the purposeful stride. Then she was in a cab and the cab was pulling away and the street was just a street again.

He went inside. The lobby was cool and hushed, the discreet efficiency of midnight. He took the lift to his floor, let himself into his room, and stood in the dark, listening to the air conditioning hum its mechanical lullaby.

Then he called Claire.

She picked up on the third ring. 'Hello?' Her voice had that flattened quality it took on in the evenings — tired, guarded, waiting to hear what kind of call this would be.

'Hi. Just checking in. How are the kids?'

'Fine. Lily lost a tooth at school. There was drama. Sam ate a crayon. The usual.'

'Which colour?'

'Blue. Why does it matter?'

'It doesn't. Just asking.'

A pause. The pauses were the worst part — small silences where something should have lived, where a different couple might have said *I miss you* or *When are you coming home?* Instead, the silence stretched like a hallway with too many doors, all of them closed.

'How's Mumbai?' Claire asked.

'Hot. Busy. The project's going well.'

'Good.'

'The team is strong. Good people.'

'That's nice.'

He sat on the edge of the bed. The sheets were crisp and white, turned down with a chocolate on the pillow — the impersonal kindness of hotels, which asked nothing of

you and offered nothing in return except a clean room and a locked door.

'Claire —'

'I should go. Early start. Lily's got swimming.'

'Right. Of course. Kiss them for me.'

'I will. Night.'

'Night.'

The line went dead. He set the phone on the nightstand and stared at the ceiling. The room was spotless, anonymous, designed for a man to lie in a strange bed in a strange city and feel nothing that might complicate his morning. But James felt something. It sat in his chest like a fist — not pain, exactly, but the specific ache of a conversation with a person you'd once chosen, conducted in the impoverished vocabulary of people who had stopped choosing each other years ago but couldn't say so.

He thought about Meera Kapoor walking into a cab on a Colaba street. The sad smile. *So we're both lucky.* The way she'd said *I know that house.*

He poured two fingers of Laphroaig from the minibar — they stocked it at the Trident, one of the reasons he always requested this hotel. Peat and iodine and something almost sweet underneath, like burned honey. He took it to the window and looked out at the sweep of Marine Drive, the necklace of lights against the dark water.

He was not a man who lied to himself. That was what he'd always believed — that his particular gift was his capacity for clear sight. He saw things as they were. He named them accurately. He made decisions based on evidence, not desire.

But standing at the window with the whisky turning warm in his hand, he confronted a possibility that his clear-sightedness had not anticipated.

That he had spent the evening with a woman who was not his wife. That the conversation had been the most honest he'd had in years. That he had told her things he hadn't told anyone, and she had told him the same. That he had walked with her through streets that were not his and felt, for those fifteen minutes, more at home than he'd felt in his own house in longer than he could remember.

And that none of it — not one minute — had been about work.

He finished the whisky. He brushed his teeth. He lay in the dark and listened to the sounds of the hotel — a door closing somewhere, the lift chiming, a television murmuring through the wall.

Sleep was a long time coming. When it arrived, it brought no dreams he could remember, only the sense of having crossed something — a line, a threshold — that he would not be able to uncross.

And in the morning, when he saw her name in his inbox, his pulse did something it had no professional reason to do.

He opened the email. It was about the Reliance deck.

He read it twice anyway.

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# Chapter 5: The Transfer

## Meera

The Singapore office smelled of nothing.

That was the first thing Meera noticed — the aggressive neutrality of the place. In Mumbai, the Aldridge Partners office carried the ghost of a hundred lunches, the faint sweetness of chai from the pantry, the salt air that crept through whenever someone propped open a fire exit to smoke. Singapore's office, on the forty-second floor of a glass tower in Raffles Place, smelled of filtered air and new carpet. Everything sealed.

She had arrived on a Sunday evening, a red-eye from Mumbai that deposited her into the antiseptic hush of Changi Airport at five in the morning. The taxi carried her through empty expressways lined with rain trees, their

canopies trimmed into perfect arches, and she had thought: this is a city that does not tolerate disorder. Good.

Because order was what she needed. The three weeks since the dinner in Colaba had been an exercise in reclassification. She had taken the memory of that evening — the way the restaurant had emptied around them, the way James had leaned forward when she spoke about Transtroemer and she had felt, physically felt, the heat of his attention — and she had filed it under Professional Rapport. Under Intellectual Connection Between Colleagues. Under Nothing.

She was good at this. Ten years in a marriage built on the careful naming of things. What Vikram and she had was not unhappiness; it was companionable distance. What she felt sitting across from James Whitfield was not desire; it was the pleasure of being listened to. Categories were armour, and Meera wore hers well.

The Singapore assignment was a regional restructuring — three Southeast Asian subsidiaries of a German manufacturing conglomerate that needed to be consolidated into a single entity. The kind of work that required long hours and close collaboration, and Meera had volunteered for it before the Colaba dinner, which

meant she could not be accused — could not accuse herself — of engineering the proximity. James was leading the APAC practice. Of course he would be here. It was structural. It was fine.

She told herself this on Monday morning as she stepped into the lift and pressed 42. The doors opened and he was standing by the coffee machine, sleeves rolled to the elbow, laughing at something Priya Mehta from analytics had said. He looked up. He smiled — not the performative smile he used in client meetings, but something quicker, less defended.

"Meera. Good flight?"

"Uneventful," she said. "The best kind."

"Entirely agree. Priya was just telling me the Straits Times ran a piece on Jungheinrich this morning. Apparently the unions are already nervous."

And like that, they were colleagues again. The client, the timeline, the stakeholder map. She poured her coffee — black, no sugar, the one small cruelty she inflicted on herself each morning — and carried it to her desk, six

metres from his glass-walled office. She could see him from where she sat. She noticed this and decided not to rearrange her desk.

•

The days took on a rhythm. Morning briefings at eight-thirty, the team gathered around a long table with the skyline behind them — the Marina Bay Sands like a surfboard balanced on three pillars, the harbour full of container ships waiting their turn. She brought the data, he brought the narrative. In meetings, they finished each other's arguments without effort, a synchrony the team noticed and Meera tried not to enjoy.

Lunches were communal. The team walked to Lau Pa Sat, the hawker centre in the old Victorian market building, its cast-iron columns painted green, ceiling fans turning above the noise and steam. Meera ate char kway teow from a stall run by a woman who had been cooking the same dish for thirty years — the flat rice noodles smoky with wok hei, slick with dark soy — and found herself sitting across from James more often than probability should have allowed. He ate chicken rice from the same stall every day, because he was, she was learning, a man of quiet habits disguised as spontaneity.

"You're a creature of routine," she said on the third day, watching him carry the same plate to the same seat.

"I prefer to think of it as loyalty."

"To a hawker stall?"

"Loyalty has to start somewhere."

The sentence hung between them. He picked up his fork. She looked away.

In the afternoons, they worked in parallel silence. Singapore suited this kind of work. The city itself was a consulting project — optimised, benchmarked, efficient. Even the rain arrived on schedule, the afternoon storms rolling in at four o'clock, hammering the windows for twenty minutes and then withdrawing, leaving the streets steaming.

Meera began to notice herself. This was the problem — not what she felt, but the fact that she had become an observer of her own behaviour. She noticed she had packed the navy silk blouse, the one that made her collarbones look architectural. She noticed she wore it on Tuesday. She noticed she checked, involuntarily, whether James had noticed. He had not appeared to. This did not help.

She noticed she laughed differently around him — lower, less careful. She noticed she held his gaze a beat longer than anyone else's. She noticed that when he said her name — *Meera*, with that particular British softness on the double vowel — something in her chest contracted, as if a hand had closed gently around a bird.

She noticed herself noticing, and that was the thing that frightened her.

•

On Wednesday evening, she called Vikram.

She sat on the bed in her hotel room at the Conrad, the city glittering through the floor-to-ceiling windows, and dialled. It rang four times. Five. She was about to hang up — almost hoped to — when he answered.

"Hey. One second." She heard typing. The particular rapid cadence of Vikram on his laptop. "Okay. Hi. How's Singapore?"

"Hot," she said. "How are things?"

"Good, good. Big week. The Series B term sheet came in from Elevation. Sanjay's being difficult about the valuation cap, but I think we can get him to twenty-two if

we restructure the liquidation preference. Did I tell you about the new CTO? Raveesh. IIT Bombay, ex-Flipkart."

He talked for twelve minutes. Meera timed it on the clock radio beside the bed — not consciously, not at first, but her eyes drifted to the green numerals as Vikram moved from the term sheet to the product roadmap to a problem with the payment gateway integration that he was explaining more to himself than to her. She made the right sounds at the right intervals. *Mm. That's good. What did Sanjay say?*

At the twelve-minute mark, she said, "I should probably eat something."

"Oh, yeah. Sure. Everything good otherwise?"

"Yes."

"Great. I'll let you go. Oh — Mum called. She wants to know if we're coming for Holi. I said maybe."

"I'll think about it."

"Cool. Night."

He hadn't asked how she was. Not once. Not *how are you*, not *how's the project*, not any of the small questions that constitute the architecture of care. She put the phone

down on the duvet and sat very still.

Vikram's indifference was not malicious. He was not withholding attention as punishment; he was simply elsewhere, always elsewhere, living inside a future that had no room for the present tense of their marriage. She had married a man who loved the next thing, and she had known this at twenty-four, had found it attractive — his restlessness, his hunger. She had not understood that hunger, by its nature, is never satisfied.

She ordered room service. A bowl of laksa, the broth thick with coconut milk and the sour bite of tamarind. She ate sitting on the floor by the window, cross-legged, the way she had eaten as a child at her grandmother's house in Jaipur. Below her, the city pulsed with light — clean, ordered, every building in its place. She thought about *loyalty has to start somewhere* and thought: I am not the kind of woman who does this.

She got into bed with her copy of *Plainwater* by Anne Carson and read until the words stopped making sense, which happened on page forty-three, at the line: *What really connects words and things?*

She turned off the lamp and lay in the dark, listening to the air conditioning — that mechanical breath of the sealed city — and thought: I can control this. Feelings are not decisions, and I am a woman who makes decisions.

She almost believed it.

•

Thursday. Friday. The days were long and useful, full of spreadsheets and stakeholder interviews and the satisfaction of complex problems yielding to structured thinking. She was good at her work. She knew this without vanity. The German CFO, a careful man called Brandt who wore the same grey suit every day, told James in her hearing that *your Ms Kapoor sees things before they happen*.

James relayed this to her after the meeting, in the corridor, the two of them walking towards the lifts.

"Brandt thinks you're clairvoyant."

"Brandt thinks anyone who reads the footnotes in a financial statement is clairvoyant."

James laughed. The lift arrived. They stepped in together. The doors closed.

Forty-two floors. She was aware of the space between them — less than a metre, close enough to smell his aftershave, something with bergamot and cedar she had not noticed in Mumbai or had noticed and refused to catalogue. She watched the numbers count down. Forty. Thirty-five. Thirty. She could feel the warmth of him beside her, like standing near a wall that had absorbed the sun.

Neither spoke. The doors opened. They walked out into the marble lobby, the humid evening, the noise of Raffles Place at six o'clock.

"Goodnight, Meera."

"Goodnight."

She rode the MRT back to her hotel. She stood in the shower for a long time, the water almost too hot, forehead pressed against the tile, and thought: I am in trouble.

Singapore gleamed outside her window, every surface polished. A city that had engineered away its chaos. She envied the idea that you could simply decide what you were and then become it, that discipline was a matter of infrastructure rather than will.

She opened her laptop. She worked until midnight on the integration timeline, her fingers steady on the keys, her mind doing exactly what she asked of it.

Almost exactly.

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# Chapter 6: The First Lie

## James

The rooftop bar was called Artemis, because everything in Singapore had a name designed to make you forget you were in Southeast Asia. It occupied the fifty-seventh floor of a hotel on Shenton Way, and from the terrace you could see the Strait of Singapore, the cargo ships strung along the horizon like beads on a wire. The team had colonised a long table near the railing — Priya, Tomás from the Madrid office, David Okafor who was running the technology workstream, two junior analysts whose names James kept confusing, and Meera.

It was Friday. The first week was done. Brandt had signed off on Phase 1. The mood was buoyant — consultants who had survived a week of being polite to a difficult client and could now drink on the company card.

James ordered a Negroni and sat at the far end of the table, where the breeze was strongest.

He was good at this — the social performance of leadership. Buying the first round. Making the junior analysts feel seen without being patronising. Claire had once said, during a fight that had started about school fees and ended somewhere much darker, that James treated every room like a boardroom. *You optimise people*, she had said. *You manage them. Even me. Even the children.* He had denied it, but he had known she was right, and the knowledge had sat inside him like a stone.

Meera was at the other end of the table, talking to Priya about something that made them both laugh. White linen shirt, untucked, sleeves pushed up. Her hair was down — she usually wore it pulled back during the day, secured with a tortoiseshell clip he had noticed and then been annoyed at himself for noticing. She held her wine glass by the stem, and the light from the bar caught the gold bangle on her left wrist.

He looked away. He talked to Tomás about football. He ordered a second round for the table. He did not look at Meera again for twenty minutes, which was a kind of discipline, which was a kind of admission.

•

The table thinned. Priya left at eight — early flight to KL. Tomás and David went to find a club on Ann Siang Hill. The two juniors, sensing the evening had moved into territory above their pay grade, made polite excuses and disappeared into a taxi. By nine o'clock, it was James and Meera and the skyline and the silence that settles when two people realise they have been waiting for exactly this.

"Another drink?" he said.

"I should probably eat."

"There's a place on Keong Saik Road. Vietnamese. Quiet."

She looked at him. He held the look — two seconds, long enough for both of them to understand what was being offered, which was not Vietnamese food.

"All right," she said.

They took the lift down and walked. Keong Saik Road was ten minutes away, through the narrow streets of the old Chinatown district, the shophouses painted in faded pastels — terracotta, sage, powder blue — their shuttered windows dark above restaurants that spilled warm light onto the pavement. The air was thick and still, carrying

incense from a temple on the corner and, beneath it, the green mineral scent of rain still evaporating from the stone.

They walked side by side, close enough that their arms occasionally touched. James was aware of each contact with a specificity that embarrassed him. He was thirty-eight. He had restructured a telecoms company in Dubai. He should not be undone by the accidental proximity of a woman's hand.

But he was.

The restaurant was called Le, and it was what he had promised — quiet, half-empty, lit by pendant lamps that cast pools of amber on dark wood. They sat in a corner. He ordered pho; she ordered bun cha. He asked for a bottle of Sancerre because ordering a full bottle when a glass would do was the smallest recklessness available to him.

"You know this city well," she said.

"Three years in Hong Kong teaches you to find the quiet places in any Asian city. The loud ones find you on their own."

"Were you happy in Hong Kong?"

The question arrived without preamble, without the social padding that surrounds personal questions between people who have known each other less than a month. He admired it. He was also terrified by it.

"I was busy," he said. "Which I mistook for the same thing."

She nodded. She did not press. This was something he had noticed about Meera — she asked questions and then created space for the answer, not the performative silence of someone waiting for their turn to speak.

"And you?" he said. "Were you happy in — where were you before Mumbai?"

"I've always been in Mumbai. Born there, schooled there, married there." She paused. "I've travelled for work. But Mumbai is the only city I've belonged to. Sometimes I think that's the problem."

"What problem?"

"That I've never had the experience of choosing a life. Everything I have — the career, the marriage, the flat in Bandra — it all followed a kind of logic. One thing led to the next. I never stood at a crossroads and chose."

"That's not the same as being unhappy."

"No," she said. "It's not." She picked up her wine glass, turned it slowly. "But it might be the same as not knowing whether you're happy or not. Because you've never had anything to compare it to."

The food arrived. The pho was superb — the broth clear and deep, tasting of star anise and charred ginger. They ate in a silence that felt more intimate than conversation. The clink of bowls, a couple arguing gently in Mandarin at the next table, the hiss of something hitting a hot wok in the kitchen.

"Can I ask you something?" Meera said.

"Yes."

"Do you ever feel like you're performing? Not lying, exactly. Just — performing a version of yourself that everyone has agreed is the real one?"

James set down his chopsticks.

"Every day," he said. "I think the performance is the thing I'm best at. Better than the strategy, better than the management. I'm extremely good at seeming like a man who has his life in order."

"And underneath?"

"Underneath, I'm a man sitting in a restaurant on Keong Saik Road, answering questions he wouldn't answer from anyone else."

She held his gaze. The pendant lamp swayed in the draught from the kitchen door, and the light moved across her face, and James felt something shift inside his chest — tectonic, slow, irreversible.

"We should probably go," she said.

"Yes."

He paid the bill. They argued about splitting it — a pantomime of professional propriety that both understood was beside the point. They walked out into the warm night.

•

He raised his hand for a taxi. One appeared almost immediately — this was Singapore. They got in. The leather seat was cool. The driver had the radio on low, a Mandarin pop song that sounded like someone describing weather.

"Conrad first," Meera told the driver. Her hotel.

They sat in the back seat, separated by eight inches of leather and everything they had not said. James looked out at the passing shophouses, the 7-Elevens glowing green, the occasional figure walking a small dog in the humid dark. He was aware of Meera beside him with the kind of attention he associated with danger — the alertness that preceded decisions you could not take back.

The taxi stopped outside the Conrad. The glass doors of the lobby shone with warm light.

Meera reached for the door handle. Then she stopped.

She turned to look at him. He could see the faint line of kohl at the edge of her lashes, the pulse in her throat, the slight part of her lips. She did not speak. He did not speak.

The moment held. Three seconds. Five. Long enough for James to understand that if he leaned forward, she would not pull away. He knew this with certainty. He also knew that if he did, every structure he had built — the marriage, the family, the careful architecture of his life — would begin to come apart.

He did not lean forward.

"Goodnight, Meera."

"Goodnight, James."

She opened the door and got out. She did not look back. The glass closed behind her, and she was gone.

"Orchard Road," James told the driver. "The Hilton."

•

The apartment was on the fourteenth floor of a serviced residence on Orchard Road — corporate furniture, corporate view. He let himself in. He poured two fingers of Laphroaig from the bottle he had bought at the airport and stood by the window, feeling the peat smoke fill his mouth.

He took out his phone.

Claire would be awake. It was nine-thirty in Singapore, half one in London, where she had taken the children to her parents in Berkshire for half-term. He could picture it: the old vicarage near Pangbourne, the garden running down to the Thames, Lily on the rope swing, Sam following the dog. Claire in the kitchen with her mother, performing her own version of a life in order.

He opened WhatsApp. Claire's last message, sent three hours ago, was a photo of Sam covered in mud, grinning. James smiled. It was involuntary, and it was genuine, and

it made everything worse.

He typed: *Quiet night in, early start tomorrow. Kiss the kids for me. x*

He read it back. Every word was a lie except *kiss the kids for me*. There had been omissions before. Elisions. But this was different. The construction of a false reality, transmitted via eleven words and a kiss that meant: *do not worry, do not look, everything is as it should be*.

He pressed send.

The message delivered. Two blue ticks. Claire had read it. Three dots appeared — she was typing. Then they stopped. Then they appeared again. Then: *Lovely. Sam caught a frog. Lily named it Professor Hops. Sleep well darling. x*

He put the phone face-down on the counter.

He finished the Laphroaig in one swallow, rinsed the glass, and went to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror.

A man who had lied to his wife looked back at him. The same grey at the temples, the same lines around the eyes that Claire called distinguished and that he called

evidence. But something behind the face had shifted. Not that he wanted Meera — he had known that since Mumbai, dimly at first, then clearly, then with annihilating certainty in the back of a taxi. The discovery was that he could want her and lie about it fluently, and that the lie had come so easily it might as well have been true.

He lay on the bed in the dark, still dressed, shoes still on, and thought about the moment in the taxi — the eight inches of air between them, the way she had turned, the pulse in her throat. He thought about what would have happened if he had leaned forward. He thought about Claire reading his message in her parents' kitchen while Sam showed her a frog.

Outside, Singapore hummed its clean, efficient hum. The city that had solved every problem except the ones that couldn't be solved.

He stared at the ceiling until it blurred, and then he closed his eyes, and he did not sleep for a long time.

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# Chapter 7: Gravity

## Meera

She had always believed she understood desire. She had read about it — Carson, Duras, the Urdu ghazals her father used to recite in the garden of their Jaipur house. She had felt it in the early years with Vikram — the wanting that was partly lust and partly the vertigo of discovering another person's body. But that had been a contained thing, sanctioned, mapped by wedding vows and the trajectory of a life correctly lived.

This was different. This was the trapdoor kind.

The week after the Keong Saik dinner — she could not think of it as a date, could not afford that word — Meera moved through the days with the precision of someone defusing a bomb. She did not seek James out. She did not avoid him. She occupied the exact middle distance that professionalism required, and if the effort was invisible, that was her business.

But the city conspired. They met in the lobby at 8:07 on Tuesday, both carrying coffee. She spent forty-five minutes in the Wednesday all-hands not looking at his hands. They reached for the same document in the printer room on Thursday, their fingers brushing over a warm sheet of A4, and she felt the contact travel up her arm like current.

She was losing the argument with herself. She wanted him. Not in the abstract, but in the specific, physical, irreducible way that bodies want. His hands. His mouth. His voice saying her name in the dark. The wanting had acquired the quality of a sound — a low hum beneath everything, the way you can hear the sea in a coastal city even when you cannot see it.

On Friday, Brandt called a meeting that ran from two until half-six. The team emerged ragged. Everyone wanted to go home. Meera did not. Home was a hotel room where the air conditioning whispered and there was nothing to do but think about a man she was not allowed to think about. So she stayed.

She revised the headcount model for the Malaysian subsidiary, cross-referenced severance obligations against local labour law. The office emptied. The cleaners came

and went. The sky outside turned the colour of a bruise — violet, then dark blue, then black, the city's lights emerging one by one like a code being typed.

At eight-thirty, James appeared in the doorway of her section.

"You're still here."

She looked up. Shirtsleeves, tie gone, the top two buttons undone. He looked tired. He looked like something she needed to stop looking at.

"So are you," she said.

"Brandt's feedback on the governance model. I wanted to get it done before Monday." He paused. "Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Neither have I. There's a hawker centre on Amoy Street that stays open late."

"I know the one."

"Walk?"

She saved her file. She closed her laptop. She picked up her bag. These were ordinary actions, and she performed them with ordinary calm, and inside her chest a fist was tightening.

•

They walked. The night was warm and close, the air thick enough to wear, carrying the mineral smell of the Singapore River and the green sweetness of frangipani. They bought satay from a Malay man who fanned the charcoal grill with a piece of cardboard, smoke rising in fragrant clouds, and ate standing at a high table, skewers accumulating between them.

They talked about the project, about Brandt, about the junior analyst who had sent an internal slide deck to the client's CFO. Everything they said was a bridge over the thing that mattered.

They crossed the river at Elgin Bridge, the water below them black and shining. A bumboat chugged past, and Meera watched its wake spread across the water, the reflected lights breaking and reforming.

"Meera."

She stopped. He had stopped a pace behind her. She turned. He was standing under a lamp, the light falling on one side of his face, and his expression — she would replay this moment — was the face of a man who had stopped pretending.

"I can't keep doing this," he said.

"Doing what?"

"You know what."

The river moved below them. The frangipani gave up its sweetness to the night.

"Yes," she said. "I know."

He took a step towards her. She could smell the smoke from the satay on his shirt, could see the pulse in the hollow of his throat. She did not step back.

"Come back to the apartment," he said. His voice was low and rough and certain.

She should have said no. She knew this in the moment and would know it afterward — she should have walked to the Conrad and read Anne Carson until the wanting passed. She should have chosen the woman she had agreed to be.

"Yes," she said.

•

The apartment was on the fourteenth floor. She stood in the hallway — carpet cleaner and the faint residual presence of Laphroaig. Through the window, the Orchard Road lights. On the counter, a bottle of whisky and a single glass.

James stood behind her. Everything that had been building since Mumbai concentrated in the six inches between her back and his chest.

He touched her shoulder. Just that — his hand on her shoulder, through the cotton of her shirt. She felt it everywhere.

She turned around.

The first time was nothing like she had imagined — and she had imagined it, in the hotel room and in the dark before sleep. What happened was awkward, urgent, graceless. They collided more than embraced. His hands were shaking. Her elbow caught the hallway table and knocked a set of keys to the floor with a clatter that made them both flinch. They made it to the bedroom — barely

— and the bedside lamp was too bright and neither reached to turn it off because that would have required letting go.

His shirt button caught in her hair. She laughed — a shocked, breathless sound that was almost a sob — and he freed it with careful fingers and then his mouth was on her throat and the rest of it was heat and need and the dissolution of every category she had ever constructed.

Afterward, she lay on her back and stared at the ceiling.

The ceiling was corporately white. The air conditioning hummed. James lay beside her, one hand resting on her hip with a tenderness harder to bear than the sex itself.

She thought about her mother.

This was involuntary, unwanted, and devastating. Her mother, Sunita Sharma, who lived in the family house in Jaipur and tended her roses and believed, with the faith of a woman who had never questioned her own life, that her daughter was happy. Sunita, who had married at twenty-two and stayed married for thirty-seven years and never once — Meera was certain of this — lain in a stranger's bed at eleven o'clock at night, smelling of someone else's skin.

The thought was not a judgement. It was a measurement — the distance between the woman her mother believed her to be and the woman she was. The distance was vast, and growing.

"Are you all right?" James's voice, close and quiet.

"I don't know."

He did not try to reassure her. He did not say *it's okay* or *we haven't done anything wrong* or any of the lies people tell in beds they shouldn't be in. He was quiet and his hand stayed on her hip.

"I should go," she said.

"Stay."

"I can't."

"You can. You just don't want to."

She turned her head to look at him. His eyes were grey-green, and the expression in them was one she recognised from her own reflection: a person who has done the irreversible thing and is still falling.

"I don't want to," she confirmed. "Because staying would make this something. And I don't know what this is."

"It's what it is, Meera."

"That's not an answer."

"No. But it's honest."

She sat up. She gathered her clothes — the linen shirt, the navy trousers, the bra draped over the bedside lamp like a small flag of surrender. She dressed with her back to him, aware of every inch of skin as it disappeared beneath fabric.

At the front door, she stopped. He had followed her, barefoot on the wooden floor.

"James."

"Yes."

"I don't regret this." She paused. "But I don't know how to not regret it, either."

He nodded. This was the most dangerous thing about him — not the charm, not the competence, but the understanding. He saw her clearly and did not look away.

She walked out into the Singapore night, still warm, still fragrant, indifferent to what had happened. In the back of a taxi she watched the city slide past and did not cry,

because she was Meera Kapoor and Meera Kapoor did not cry in taxis, and anyway the tears were deeper than that — structural, the grief of a woman who had proved she was not who she thought she was.

The hotel room was as she had left it. *Plainwater* on the nightstand, bookmark at page forty-three.

She showered under water so hot it turned her skin pink, scrubbing as though the evidence were on her skin rather than inside it — his hands, the sound he made when she touched his face, the way he had whispered her name as if it were a word he was tasting.

It was 2:14 a.m. The clock radio confirmed it in green numerals, the same clock radio that had measured Vikram's twelve-minute monologue about term sheets and CTOs.

She called Vikram in the morning. It was ten in Singapore, seven-thirty in Mumbai. The phone rang twice.

"Hey! You're up early for a Saturday."

"Am I?"

"Yeah, it's like — ten there, right? Quick thing, the board meeting went well, Sanjay came around on the valuation, we're looking at twenty-three pre. Raveesh presented the product roadmap and the Elevation guys were actually — are you there?"

"I'm here."

"You sound weird. Are you okay?"

The question she had been waiting for. It arrived now, casually, wedged between a valuation cap and a product roadmap, and Meera felt something collapse inside her — not dramatically, but the way a building collapses in controlled demolition, floor by floor, with terrible order.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just tired."

"Get some rest. Oh — Mum confirmed Holi. I told her we'd come. That okay?"

"Sure."

"Great. Love you. Talk later?"

"Talk later."

He hung up. She held the phone against her chest. She had wanted his indifference to absolve her — she saw this now with the ruthless clarity that shame confers. She had wanted him to be neglectful so that she could argue the emptiness of her marriage had created a vacuum and James had filled it. But Vikram had asked if she was okay. He had said *love you*.

The person who most needed to forgive her was herself, and she was not ready.

In the bathroom mirror: the same face, the same dark eyes, the same woman who had run along Bandstand promenade every morning for seven years believing she was a person of integrity. The woman in the mirror offered no opinion.

She walked to the Botanic Gardens because she needed to be somewhere that was not an office and not a hotel room and not a flat on Orchard Road. She walked among the orchids and the great domed rain trees, and the air was green and humid and alive, and she thought about gravity — how it was not a force you chose but a condition you discovered, how it did not ask permission, how it simply pulled, and you either resisted or you fell, and she had fallen, and the ground was rushing up to meet her.

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# Chapter 8: The Architecture of Excuses

## James

The second phone lived in the inside pocket of his navy blazer, zipped into the compartment meant for a passport. A cheap Samsung — prepaid, purchased with cash from a shop on Orchard Road where the clerk hadn't looked at him twice. James had stood in the shop for eleven minutes, pretending to compare screen sizes, before buying it. Eleven minutes of performing a decision he'd already made.

He kept the phone on silent. Always. The vibration was set to the lowest pulse, a faint tremor against his ribs that only he could feel, like a second heartbeat. When it buzzed during meetings, he would press his arm against it — a private rhythm no one else could hear.

It was a Thursday. Rain sheeted across the Marina Bay skyline, turning the towers into grey smudges. James sat at his desk and reviewed his calendar. The real calendar — the one Claire could see through their shared family account — showed: *7:00 a.m. gym, 9:00 team standup, 12:30 lunch with Rajiv (Temasek), 3:00 steering committee, 6:30 dinner — client (TBC)*. The dinner was not with a client. There was no client. The reservation was at a small Japanese place on Duxton Hill where the booths had high wooden partitions and the lighting was the colour of weak tea.

He had become a competent liar. Not a natural one — that distinction mattered to him, as though reluctance conferred a lesser guilt. He had developed protocols. The second phone never connected to WiFi; mobile data only, a separate network that left no trace on the apartment's router history. He paid for dinners in cash, drawing from ATM withdrawals he logged mentally as *miscellaneous expenses*. He kept a running inventory of his lies — not written down, never written down, but catalogued in some anxious partition of his mind, cross-referenced for consistency. *Tuesday: late meeting with regional compliance. Wednesday: drinks with the Hong Kong team, they're in town for the week. Thursday: client dinner, Japanese, might run late.*

The lies required scaffolding. If he said he'd been at drinks with the Hong Kong team, he needed to know who was actually in town, in case Claire mentioned it at a firm social. He'd started checking the internal travel portal each morning — not for work, but to verify his alibis against reality. It was exhausting. Rather like managing a second project with its own deliverables and risk register, except the downside wasn't a lost contract but the demolition of two families.

He told himself: *This is separate. This is contained. No one is getting hurt.*

The words had the shape of reason but not its weight. He repeated them anyway, the way one might repeat a prayer without faith — for the comfort of the rhythm, not the meaning.

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At half past six, he arrived at Meera's hotel. She opened the door in bare feet, still in her work clothes — charcoal silk blouse untucked from navy trousers, her hair loosened from whatever arrangement it had held that morning. Sandalwood and the faintly metallic scent of air-conditioned rooms.

"You're early," she said.

"I'm punctual. You're not ready."

"I'm never ready. I'm perpetually becoming ready. It's a process."

He stepped inside. Cream walls, a desk piled with documents, a laptop trailing its charger across the carpet like a leash. Her suitcase sat open on the luggage rack, clothes folded with the precision he'd come to recognise as distinctly hers.

He kissed her. She tasted of mint and espresso. Her hand came up to the back of his neck, fingertips cool against his skin, and he felt the day's careful architecture — the calendar, the alibis, the second phone pulsing against his ribs — dissolve into something simpler and more dangerous. This. Just this.

They didn't make the reservation.

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Later, she slept. James lay on his back and watched the city through the window. Singapore at night was a circuit board — precise, illuminated, every light serving a function. He could see the Supertrees at Gardens by the

Bay, their violet crowns glowing against the dark. Somewhere below, taxis queued in disciplined rows. He found it both soothing and suffocating.

She slept on her side, one arm folded beneath the pillow, her face half-hidden by her hair. In sleep, the careful control she wore during the day — the measured sentences, the posture that suggested she'd been told to sit up straight by someone she respected — softened. He could see the girl she must have been. The parted lips, the slight furrow between her brows, as though even in sleep she was working through a problem.

He watched her and felt something shift in his chest. It wasn't desire — desire he could manage, could file under appetite, under the forgivable weakness of being a man away from home. This was tenderness, and tenderness terrified him. Desire was a door you could close. Tenderness was a room you'd moved into.

His real phone buzzed on the nightstand. Claire.

He picked it up and walked to the bathroom, closing the door softly. The tiles were cold under his feet. He sat on the edge of the bathtub and answered the video call.

"There he is." Claire's face filled the screen — hair pulled back, the kitchen of their Hampstead house behind her. The light through the window was the pale, noncommittal grey of an English autumn. "Lily, come say hello to Daddy."

Lily appeared, pressing her face close to the camera so that her features distorted — an enormous nose, a single magnified eye. "Daddy! Look what I drew!"

She held up a sheet of paper. A house. Four figures standing in front of it, rendered in the universal idiom of children's art — circles for heads, lines for limbs, triangles for skirts. The house had a red door and what appeared to be a cat on the roof, though it might have been a cloud.

"That's brilliant, Lils. Is that us?"

"That's you and that's Mummy and that's me and that's Sam. And that's Whiskers but we don't have Whiskers yet because you said no."

"I said *maybe*."

"Maybe means no. Mummy said."

Claire laughed off-screen. "I said maybe means maybe. Which is true in theory."

"Daddy, when are you coming home?"

He pressed his thumbnail into the grout between the tiles.

"Soon, darling. A few more weeks."

"How many weeks?"

"Three. Maybe four."

"That's a hundred days."

"It's not a hundred days. It's about twenty-five."

"That's still a lot." She lowered the drawing. Her face was serious now, her mother's cheekbones already emerging from the soft geography of childhood. "Sam says you live in the phone now."

James swallowed.

"Tell Sam I don't live in the phone. I live with you lot. I'm just... working far away for a bit."

"Sam! Daddy says he doesn't live in the phone!" A pause. Then, quieter: "He doesn't believe you."

Sam's voice, distant and imperious: "Daddy come home."

Claire took the phone back. She studied his face — that appraising gaze, as though checking a painting for forgery. "You all right? You look tired."

"Long day. The Temasek review ran over."

"You should sleep."

"I will."

"James." She paused. He could hear Sam singing in the background, tuneless and committed. "I was thinking — half-term's coming up. Last week of October. The kids have been asking nonstop. What if we came out? A week in Singapore. I could look at galleries, the kids could do the zoo, the aquarium. We'd be out of your hair during the day."

The bathroom tiles pressed cold against his feet. Through the door, he could hear Meera turn over in bed, the sheets rustling.

"That sounds—" He stopped. Restarted. "That sounds great. Let me check what's in the diary. There might be a regional offsite that week."

"Check and let me know. Lily would be over the moon."

"I'll check tomorrow."

"Love you."

"Love you too."

He ended the call and sat in the bathroom, the phone dark in his hands. In the mirror above the sink: a man in his boxers, sitting on the edge of a bathtub in a hotel that was not his home, in a city that was not his city, having told his wife he loved her while the woman he was sleeping with lay in the next room. The man in the mirror looked competent. Composed. You would not, looking at him, guess the mess.

He washed his face with cold water and went back to bed.

Meera stirred when he lay down. "Who was that?"

"Claire. The kids."

A silence filled with everything neither of them would say.

"Are they well?"

"They're well. Lily drew a picture of the family. Sam wants me to come home."

Meera's hand found his in the dark, her fingers threading through his. She didn't say she was sorry. She didn't say anything about guilt or the future. She held on.

"Claire wants to bring them here," he said. "Half-term."

Meera's hand went still.

"To Singapore."

"Yes."

She withdrew her hand — not abruptly, but with a slow, deliberate motion, like someone setting down something fragile. She stared at the ceiling.

"Well," she said. "That's reasonable. They're her children. This is where you are."

"Meera—"

"What would you like me to say?"

He didn't know. He wanted her to say it was fine, that the compartments would hold. He also wanted her to say it was intolerable, that this — whatever *this* was — demanded more than what he was offering. He wanted, absurdly, for someone else to make the decision that was his to make.

"I don't know," he said.

"No," she agreed. "You don't."

They lay in the dark. Somewhere in London, his daughter was taping a drawing of their family to the refrigerator, and his son was singing, and his wife was looking up flights to a city where her husband was becoming someone she didn't know.

James closed his eyes. The architecture of his excuses stood around him — elaborate, load-bearing, precarious. He could feel the hairline cracks. It was only a matter of time before something structural gave way.

He just didn't know which wall would go first.

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# Chapter 9: The Return

## Meera

The Mumbai air hit her like a wet cloth. Even at eleven at night, the heat found her — dense, salt-laden, carrying the compound smell of exhaust and jasmine and something fried from the food stalls beyond the terminal. After three weeks of Singapore's scrubbed precision, Mumbai was an assault on every sense. It was also, unmistakably, home.

Vikram was waiting at arrivals. This was unusual enough that she noted it the way you'd note a changed painting in a familiar room. He stood by the pillar near the Starbucks, scrolling through his phone, wearing the soft grey T-shirt she'd bought him two years ago. He'd lost weight. Or perhaps she'd been away long enough to see him freshly, without the blur of daily proximity.

"Hey." He looked up, smiled, took her suitcase. The smile was genuine but brief, a reflex rather than an arrival.

"Flight okay?"

"Fine. Long."

"I got the car washed." He said this as though it were a form of welcome, and perhaps for him it was. He expressed care through logistics — the car washed, the flat cleaned, her preferred coffee restocked. These were not nothing.

In the car, he talked. The lease was up for renewal; the landlord wanted a fifteen per cent increase; there was a water pressure issue building management refused to acknowledge. He presented these facts the way he presented everything — as problems requiring optimisation.

"Also," he said, merging onto the Western Express Highway, "Kotak wants to lead our Series B. Harish called yesterday. Seventy crore, pre-money valuation of three-twenty. We're doing the term sheet next week."

"That's good, Vikram. Congratulations."

"It's not done yet. The terms are aggressive. They want a board seat and pro-rata rights on follow-ons, which—" He continued for several minutes. The streetlights swept across his face — amber, shadow, amber, shadow. She watched his mouth move and thought: *I have slept with another man. I am sitting beside this person I married and you are talking about pro-rata rights.*

She felt no urge to confess. She had expected guilt to manifest as a pressure to speak, the way a wound demands to be touched. Instead, it sat low and heavy in her abdomen, inert as a stone. Silence was a choice, and she was making it with the same deliberation she brought to everything.

"—so the dilution is manageable if we structure the—"

"Vikram."

"Yeah?"

"I'm tired. Can we just... be quiet for a bit?"

He glanced at her, surprised, then nodded. "Sure. Yeah, of course."

They drove the rest of the way in silence. The city streamed past — the half-built overpass near Bandra, the movie hoardings with their oversized faces, street vendors packing up for the night.

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The flat was exactly as she'd left it. This was the problem.

She stood in the doorway and looked at the living room — the oatmeal sofa, the bookshelf with its carefully curated spines, the Husain print they'd bought at an auction in their second year of marriage, when they still did things like go to auctions. Vikram's trainers by the door, the kitchen island with its single stool because they never ate at the same time.

Two people's possessions arranged around a shared space. But what was shared? The mortgage. The WiFi password. A contractual proximity neither of them had bothered to renegotiate.

She walked through the flat, cataloguing evidence. The bedroom: his pillow on the left, hers on the right, the gap between them a neutral zone that had widened imperceptibly over years. His bedside table held a phone charger, melatonin, *Zero to One* with a boarding pass as bookmark. Hers held Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband* — the irony of which she only now registered — and a jar of night cream whose lid she'd left unscrewed. A thin crust had formed on the surface.

The bathroom: his razor, her moisturiser, separate toothbrush holders. At some point the single holder they'd shared — a ceramic thing from Fabindia — had been replaced by two cups, and neither had remarked upon it.

*Not a catastrophe, she thought. Not a war. Just a slow, mutual withdrawal, so gradual that by the time you notice the distance, you can't remember crossing it.*

Vikram was already in bed when she came out of the shower, his phone casting blue light across his face.

"Night," he said, without looking up.

"Night."

She lay in the dark and thought of James's apartment in Singapore — the books stacked on the floor, the way he'd passed her coffee without asking how she took it because he already knew. Two sugars, no milk. Such a small piece of knowledge. Such a dangerous one.

She placed her phone face-down on the bedside table and listened to Mumbai — car horns, a dog barking, the building's generator cycling on. These were the sounds she'd slept to her entire life. They were not comforting.

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Saturday morning. Her parents' flat in Juhu.

The building was called Sea Breeze, which was optimistic — it was four streets from the water and the only breeze came from the ceiling fans. The stairwell smelled of damp

concrete and someone's lunch. Third floor. The door was open. It was always open.

Her mother was in the kitchen — where her mother existed most fully, amid the pressure cookers and steel tiffin boxes and the worn cutting board that had been in the family longer than Meera had. Asha Sharma stood at the counter, sari pallu tucked into her waist, grinding ginger on a small stone mortar. The kitchen smelled of turmeric and heating ghee and the permanent base-note of cumin that had seeped into the walls over decades.

"You're thin," her mother said, by way of greeting.

"I'm the same."

"You're thin. Singapore food doesn't agree with you. Sit. Dal is almost done."

Her father was in the living room, settled into his armchair with *The Hindu* across his lap. He wore his reading glasses on the tip of his nose and his house chappals, held together with optimism and old glue.

"Meera. Come. How was the flight?"

"Fine, Papa."

"Singapore is clean, they say."

"Very clean."

"Good. Cleanliness is undervalued." He returned to his paper.

This was the choreography of her parents' life, unchanged since her childhood. Her father read. Her mother cooked. Between them, a marriage moved like a slow river — steady, unremarkable, carrying everything it needed without fuss. They did not discuss their relationship. They did not experience the marriage as something separate from themselves. It simply was, the way gravity was, the way the monsoon was — a condition of existence.

Meera sat at the kitchen table and watched her mother cook. Asha's hands moved with the economy of forty years' practice — no wasted motion, no hesitation. She salted by instinct, tasted with the back of a spoon, adjusted without measuring.

"Amma. Are you happy?"

Her mother looked up from the dal. "What kind of question is that?"

"A real one."

"Happy." Asha repeated the word as though testing it for structural integrity. "I have my health. Your father has his. You children are settled. The dal is coming out well today." She shrugged. "What more is there?"

"But do you ever want... more? Something for yourself? Something that's just yours?"

Her mother studied her — a look sharp with comprehension Meera hadn't invited.

"I wanted to be a teacher," she said, after a pause. "Did you know that? Before I married your father. I was good at maths. My professor said I should do a master's."

"I didn't know that."

"It wasn't possible. The times were different. Your father needed a wife, and I needed a life, and those things pointed in the same direction." She stirred the dal. "I don't sit and mourn the maths degree. What would be the use? You make a life with what you have. Not with what you wanted."

"Is that wisdom or resignation?"

Her mother smiled — quick, complicated. "Ask me again in ten years. I still haven't decided."

Meera wanted to argue — to say that making a life with what you have was a polite way of describing surrender. But she heard their arrogance. She, who had every advantage her mother lacked — education, career, financial independence — and had made of them what, exactly? A sterile flat in Bandra. A marriage she'd stopped tending. An affair with a married man in Singapore.

She was not brave. She was not liberated. She was a woman who had confused desire with courage and called it wanting *more*.

"The dal is ready," her mother said. "Call your father."

---

That evening, she went running. Bandstand promenade at dusk — the Arabian Sea flat and pewter-coloured, the sky streaked with the last orange of a sun already below the waterline. Couples on benches, children chasing each other, old men walking in pairs with their hands clasped behind their backs.

She ran south, towards the rocky point where the promenade curved and the city noise thinned to water against stone. Her breathing settled. Running was the one place where her mind went quiet.

Except tonight.

She thought of her mother's hands grinding ginger. Of Vikram's face in the streetlight. Of James saying *I don't know* in the dark of a hotel room, and how those three words had contained more honesty than anything either of them had managed in weeks.

She thought of the text she'd composed that afternoon, lying on the narrow bed in her childhood bedroom. She'd typed: *I miss you and I don't know what that means for what I'm supposed to be doing here.* Then she'd stared at the words — precise, true, damning — and deleted them, letter by letter, watching the cursor eat the sentence backwards until the screen was blank.

The tears came near the rocky point, where the spray misted her face. She stopped, hands on her knees, and cried. Not elegantly — her face twisted, her breath ragged, a sound from somewhere deep in her chest that she didn't recognise as her own.

She wasn't sure what she was crying for. Not for James — or not only for James. Not for the marriage, which had been failing long before Singapore. Perhaps for her mother, standing in a kitchen for forty years with a maths degree she never got. Perhaps for herself, unable to locate

the version of herself that had been legible, coherent, who knew what she wanted and could want it without wounding anyone.

Perhaps she was crying because she had learnt that you could love someone and betray someone and miss someone and resent someone and none of these feelings cancelled any of the others. They coexisted, stacked like geological layers, each one true, each one pressing down on the ones beneath.

The sea was dark now. She wiped her face with the hem of her T-shirt and began the run back. By the time she reached the flat, her breathing was even and her face showed nothing.

Vikram was on a call in the study. She showered, sat on the sofa with a book she didn't read. At ten, he emerged.

"I ordered in," he said. "Thai. Your usual."

"Thanks."

He sat beside her. Not close, but not at the far end either. The distance between them had its own geography — measured, familiar, maintained by mutual agreement.

"It's good to have you back," he said.

He meant it. That was the worst part. He meant it as a statement of preference. He preferred the flat with her in it. Whether this constituted love or habit or simply an aversion to disruption, she could no longer tell.

"It's good to be back," she said, and the lie was so smooth, so practiced, so indistinguishable from the truth, that she almost believed it herself.

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# Chapter 10: Home

## James

London in November was a study in grey. Not the flat grey of overcast skies, but a textured thing — the wet slate of Hampstead rooftops, the silver-black of bare plane trees, the dove-coloured light that filtered through the kitchen window and lay across Claire's shoulders as she poured milk into her coffee.

James had been back for ten days. The Mayfair office was smaller than he remembered, the corridors narrower, the ceilings lower, as though the building had contracted in his absence. His desk overlooked Berkeley Square, where a man in a waxed jacket walked a retriever each morning at eight-fifteen and a woman in a red coat smoked by the garden gate at noon. He noticed these things because noticing was all he had — small, external observations that kept him from noticing what was happening inside.

The restructuring was genuine. APAC oversight was being centralised under a new London-based committee, and his presence was required for at least three months of transition planning. He'd told Meera in a voice note from the taxi to Heathrow, speaking quietly into his second phone. *Three months. Maybe longer. I'm sorry.* She'd replied: *Don't apologise for going home. It's where you should be.*

The statement was factual and, for that reason, unbearable.

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Home was a Victorian terrace in Hampstead. Red brick, white sash windows, a front door painted the particular shade of dark green that estate agents described as *heritage*. They'd bought it six years ago, before Sam was born, when his bonus had been large enough to make the deposit and Claire's parents had contributed the rest. Claire had chosen every fixture, every paint colour, every piece of furniture. The house was her creation — warm, considered, layered with the evidence of a life she'd built while he was building his career in other cities.

He'd forgotten how much of the house was Claire. The botanical prints she'd found at Portobello. The bookshelves organised not by author but by the colour of the spines — a system that drove him mad but that visitors always admired. The kitchen table, reclaimed oak she'd sanded and sealed herself during a wet February when Lily was a baby and Claire was going half-mad with the isolation of new motherhood. He remembered her in the garage in an old shirt of his, sawdust in her hair, eyes bright with something he hadn't seen in years. Purpose. She'd had purpose that winter, even if it was only a table.

Now she had purpose again, and this was the problem.

Claire had started a part-time course in contemporary curation at the Courtauld. She'd mentioned it on a phone call months ago, and he'd murmured encouragement without registering the significance. But the Claire who met him at the airport was different from the one he'd left. She stood straighter. She talked about exhibitions — a Kara Walker retrospective, a show of postwar Japanese photography at the Barbican — with the quick enthusiasm of someone whose mind was being fed after a long famine. She had new friends: Priya, who ran a project space in

Peckham; George, a retired dealer who brought her catalogues from his personal library. She wore her hair shorter, cut to the jaw, sharper.

She was, James realised, becoming someone. Or rather: becoming the someone she'd been before she married him and filed herself away inside the role of trailing spouse, the woman who packed the boxes and found the schools and made houses into homes in cities she hadn't chosen.

This should have been a relief. His wife was happier. Instead, it made everything worse, because it meant the marriage was not the dead thing he'd told himself it was. It was simply something he'd stopped tending, and now that Claire was tending it from her side — growing, changing, reaching — the asymmetry was brutal. She was trying. He was sleeping with someone else.

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On Thursday, Lily's school held a parent assembly. Year Three performing songs about community and belonging. James and Claire sat in the hall on plastic chairs too small for adult bodies, their knees touching in the narrow row. The hall smelled of floor polish and poster paint and the sweet-stale scent of a room full of small children.

Lily stood in the second row, wearing her school polo and a paper crown she'd decorated with glitter. She caught sight of James and waved with her entire arm, an unguarded gesture that made the girl next to her stumble. Claire laughed and squeezed his hand.

The children sang. Something about working together, being kind. The words were banal, but they sang with such conviction — mouths wide, voices pitchy and effortful — that James felt something crack open in his chest. A physical sensation, a shifting of plates, as though his sternum were a door that had been forced.

Lily sang directly at him. She had Claire's eyes — hazel, steady — and his own chin, the stubbornness of its line. She sang as though the song were the most important thing she had ever done, as though producing sound in a room full of people who loved her were a form of bravery, which, he supposed, it was.

Afterwards, in the corridor, she ran to him and grabbed his hand. "Did you hear me? I was loud."

"You were very loud. The loudest."

"I know." She was not modest. This was Claire's influence — the conviction that your voice mattered, that volume was a form of presence. "Daddy, will you pick me up tomorrow?"

"I'll try."

"Don't try. Do it."

Claire, behind them, holding Sam on her hip: "She's been reading motivational posters."

"I haven't. I just know things."

James knelt and hugged her. She smelled of glue stick and apple. Her arms went around his neck with the trust of a child who has not yet learnt that the people who hold you can also be the ones who let you down.

He held on.

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Friday evening. The Flask in Hampstead, unchanged in fifteen years. Low ceilings, dark wood, the smell of cask ale and something indefinably English — wet wool, perhaps, or the collective exhalation of a thousand Friday evenings.

Marcus Hale sat across from him, halfway through his second pint of Doom Bar. They'd been at Cambridge together — Pembroke, PPE, the years when the future was a territory you hadn't yet ruined. Marcus was a barrister now, family law, which meant he spent his days watching marriages disintegrate and his evenings maintaining one with the grim determination of a man who'd seen the alternative.

"You look rough," Marcus said. "Jet lag?"

"Something like that."

"Singapore was good?"

"Singapore was fine. Efficient."

"You always say that. 'Efficient.' As though you're reviewing a hotel." Marcus studied him over his glass.

"How's Claire?"

"She's good. Really good, actually. She's doing this course at the Courtauld. She seems... lighter."

"Good for her. She needed something."

"I know."

"And the kids?"

"Lily's running the school. Sam's obsessed with trains."

"Normal childhood, then."

"Very normal."

Marcus waited. He was good at waiting — it was, he said, the most underrated skill in cross-examination. Just shut up and let the silence do the work.

James drank. He thought about telling Marcus everything. The words were right there, queued up behind his teeth like passengers at a gate. *I've been having an affair. Her name is Meera. She's Indian, she's brilliant, she reads poetry, she runs in the mornings, and I think about her when I wake up and before I fall asleep and in every gap between the things I'm supposed to be doing. I think I might love her, and I know that saying that makes me a cliché, and I know that being a cliché doesn't make it less true.*

"Marcus."

"Mm."

"Do you ever—" He stopped. Turned his glass on the table, leaving a wet circle on the wood. "Do your clients ever think they're doing the right thing? The ones who leave."

Do they think they're being brave?"

Marcus set down his pint. "Some of them. The ones leaving abusive situations — yes, genuinely brave. The rest?" He shrugged. "They tell themselves stories. 'We grew apart.' 'She changed.' 'He didn't see me.' Some of it's true. Most of it's the narrative you construct to make the decision feel righteous rather than selfish."

"And is it? Selfish?"

"Usually. That doesn't mean it's wrong. Sometimes selfish is correct." He paused. "But if there are children, James, the calculation changes. It always changes when there are children."

The pub was filling up. A group of young professionals commandeered the corner table, their laughter sharp and uncomplicated.

"I'm not asking for a reason," James said. "I was just curious."

"Of course you were." Marcus looked at him steadily. "And I'm a barrister who's watched three hundred marriages end and never once heard anyone say, 'I made a

clean break and nobody got hurt.' It doesn't exist, James. The clean break. It's a fairy tale we tell ourselves so we can bear to pick up the axe."

They talked about other things. Football. Marcus's extension. The election. The conversation moved on, but the words stayed — *it doesn't exist, the clean break* — lodged like a piece of glass too deep to extract without causing more damage.

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He walked home through Hampstead. The streets were wet from a rain that had come and gone while they were inside. The pavement shone under the streetlights, reflecting the lit windows of houses he passed — each one a small theatre. Through one window, a family eating dinner. Through another, a man alone at a desk, his face lit by a screen. Through a third, a couple on a sofa, not touching, watching something he couldn't see.

How many of these houses contained people living the same fracture? The lit windows revealed nothing. That was the nature of windows — they let light out without letting truth escape.

He turned onto his street. His house was there, halfway down, its green door visible under the porch light Claire always left on. The upstairs windows were dark — the children asleep. The sitting room glowed through the curtains. Claire would be there, reading or marking up exhibition notes, a cup of chamomile going cold on the side table.

He stood on the pavement and looked at his house. The house where his daughter slept with a paper crown on her bedside table and his son clutched a stuffed giraffe named Gerald.

He took out the second phone. One new message from Meera, sent forty minutes ago: *Are you awake?*

He typed: *I miss you.*

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. Then:

*I know.*

Neither of them said what they meant. What he meant was: *I am standing outside my life and I cannot find the door back in. I am holding two things that cannot both be held. I am going to drop one of them, and it will break, and I don't know which one it will be.*

He put the phone away. He walked up the path, past Claire's potted rosemary — woody now, almost bare — and opened the green door. The hallway smelled of fig candle. Her coat hung on the hook by the door, next to his, next to Lily's school jacket, next to Sam's raincoat with the dinosaur print.

Four coats on four hooks. A family, arranged by the door, waiting for the next departure.

He hung up his jacket and went inside.

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# Chapter 11: Across the Table

## Meera

The flight landed at Heathrow at six forty in the morning, that grey provisional hour when England looks like a country still deciding whether to exist. Meera collected her suitcase from the carousel — a navy hard-shell she'd bought for the Singapore transfer, its surface scuffed with the evidence of a life in transit — and walked through the nothing-to-declare corridor with the mild fraudulence of a person who had, in fact, a great deal to declare but no form for it.

The cab into London passed through the kind of landscape that always disoriented her: the flat grey sprawl of Hounslow, the terrace houses with their sodden front gardens, then the city assembling itself like an argument — the suburbs tentative and repetitive, the denser terraces of Hammersmith, and finally the grand assertions of

Kensington, stone-faced and unapologetic. She watched it with the attention of a person visiting a lover's hometown for the first time, though she would not have used the word *lover*. She had no word for what James was. The absence of a word was its own kind of precision.

Five weeks. Thirty-six days, if she was counting, which she had been and then made herself stop. Since Singapore, the affair — she used the word only in her journal — had been conducted through a second phone in the zipped pocket of her handbag, a cheap Samsung that contained nothing but his messages and a single photograph he'd sent of a fox in his back garden at dusk, caught mid-turn, looking at the camera with magnificent indifference. She'd stared at that photograph more times than she would admit. Not because of the fox but because of the garden — the lawn, the wooden fence, the edge of a trampoline in the corner of the frame. She tried not to think about his children but their existence was always there, like a bruise you keep pressing to confirm it still hurts.

The hotel was in Bloomsbury, on a street of Georgian townhouses converted into establishments that called themselves *boutique*, which in practice meant small rooms with good taste. She checked in, unpacked, and

stood at the window. The view was a courtyard garden — bare trees, a wooden bench, the first crocuses pushing through the soil in determined purples and whites. She'd been to London before, for work, but always as a visitor. This time was different, and the difference lived in her body like a second pulse.

She showered. She dressed with a deliberateness that embarrassed her — the charcoal trousers, the cream silk blouse, the single gold chain at her collarbone. Not too much. Never too much.

He had chosen a restaurant in Fitzrovia. An Italian place, narrow and candlelit, where the pasta was made by someone's grandmother, or at least by someone who wanted you to believe in the grandmother. She arrived first, which was strategic. She wanted to be seated, composed, a glass of wine already ordered, when he walked in. She wanted the few seconds of watching him before he saw her — the way his face would change when he found her. Those seconds were a private theatre she'd earned through five weeks of restraint.

The restaurant smelled of garlic and warm bread and beeswax candles, their flames trembling each time the kitchen door swung open. She watched the other diners — a couple in their sixties sharing Chianti with the easy

silence of long marriage; two young women laughing over their phones; a man alone, reading, his fork moving from plate to mouth with absent-minded regularity.

Then James was there. He came through the door and she felt the room reorganise itself around him, or perhaps it was just her attention, which amounted to the same thing. He wore a dark jacket over a white shirt, no tie. His hair was shorter than Singapore. She smiled and he smiled and he sat down across from her and said, 'You look well.'

'I look tired,' she said. 'I was on a nine-hour flight.'

'You look tired and well. Both things.'

'That's very diplomatic.'

'I'm told I'm good at diplomacy.'

'You're told a lot of things, most of them by people who want something from you.'

He laughed — the unguarded laugh, the one from the terrace in Mumbai. They ordered food. And for a while it was easy, in the way it had always been easy between them — conversation that moved quickly, that turned corners, that found the precise intersection of intelligence and warmth she had never located with anyone else. She

told him about her promotion — heading Aldridge's India practice now, the youngest person to hold the role, and the first woman. He reached across the table and squeezed her hand once, briefly.

'You deserve it,' he said, and she believed him, and the believing hurt because it came from someone who knew her — actually knew her, in the specific, unshowable way that mattered — and whose knowledge of her had no future, no address, no place in the life the promotion was part of.

After dinner they walked. This was his idea, and she understood that walking was something they did instead of deciding — movement as a substitute for resolution. They stepped out into the cold March night, the streets shining with earlier rain, and she fell into step beside him.

James walked with his hands in his pockets, narrating the city — the church where Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath were married, the pub where Orwell drank, the square where Virginia Woolf had lived. He did this the way some people breathe: unconsciously, because the knowledge was so much a part of him that sharing it was a reflex.

They took the Northern line from Goodge Street, standing close in the half-empty carriage, not touching. At Archway they climbed into the cold air and he led her up the hill, along a street of large Victorian houses set back behind privet hedges and wrought-iron gates. This was Highgate, though he didn't say the name. She knew. She'd looked it up weeks ago, scrolling through property websites to see what the houses looked like in this postcode where his children slept.

'That's the school,' he said, gesturing to a low building behind a fence, its windows dark. But even in the darkness she could see the children's paintings taped to the glass — bright, chaotic rectangles of colour. Lily's age. Something twisted in her chest.

'And that's the café,' James continued, pointing to a corner shopfront with a green awning. 'Best flat white in North London, allegedly. Claire —'

He stopped. The name sat between them like a glass set too close to the edge of a table. Claire got her coffee there. Claire, who existed in this specific geography, who walked these pavements, who carried her order home in a reusable cup — Meera knew because James had once mentioned it and she'd memorised it the way she

memorised everything about him, as though collecting these fragments might assemble into an understanding of why she was not enough.

'It's fine,' Meera said. Though it was not fine. Though the word *fine* was doing the work of an entire vocabulary she didn't trust herself to use.

They walked on. He showed her the park where he ran on Sunday mornings. The Victorian terrace where — he didn't point, but she saw the way his gaze drifted to a house with a green door and a child's bicycle leaning against the garden wall, and she understood.

That house. That green door. Behind it, a kitchen she'd never stand in. Bedtime stories she'd never overhear. A life — whole, furnished, inhabited — that had been in progress for years before she entered any room James Whitfield occupied, and that would continue long after she left.

He didn't realise what he was doing. He was showing her because when you love someone — and she could use that word now, in the privacy of her own mind, now that she understood it didn't matter — you want them to see where you live. You want them to know the texture of your days.

He was offering her the architecture of his real life as a gift, not understanding that for her it was a map of everything she could not have.

They went back to Bloomsbury. Of course they did. The hotel room was small and warm and smelled of the freesias housekeeping had placed on the desk. They kissed in the hallway outside her door while she fumbled with the keycard, and then they were inside and it was the way it always was — urgent, tender, slightly desperate, the lovemaking of people who know they're running out of something but can't name what.

Afterwards, he slept. He always slept first — one of the small asymmetries she'd catalogued without resentment. She lay on her side and watched the orange glow of the streetlamp painting a stripe across the ceiling. His phone buzzed once on the bedside table and the screen lit up, and in that brief illumination she saw the lock-screen photograph.

Claire. Lily. Sam. On a beach — Devon, maybe, or Cornwall, somewhere grey-skied and windswept. Claire was laughing, her hair blown sideways, one hand holding a sun hat the wind was trying to claim. Lily was in a red anorak, pointing at something beyond the frame. Sam was in his mother's arms, face pressed into her shoulder. They

looked happy. Not performed-happy, not photograph-happy, but the unguarded happiness of people caught in a moment they don't know is being preserved.

The screen went dark. Meera lay still. The feeling that moved through her was not jealousy — she'd expected jealousy and had prepared for it the way she prepared for difficult clients. This was something else. This was grief. Clear, clean, the kind that arrives not with drama but with the quiet certainty of a door closing in a house you've already left.

She had been in love with a man who existed only in hotel rooms and foreign cities. A man extracted from context, lifted out of the life that made him who he was. The James she knew — the James who quoted le Carré on terraces, who kissed her in taxis in Singapore, who sent photographs of foxes — was a partial person, a man with the most important chapters removed. The real James lived behind a green door in Highgate, and the real James was not hers. Had never been hers.

She pressed her face into the pillow. Cotton and detergent and, faintly, him. She did not cry. Crying was for people who still believed the situation might change.

At some point before dawn she reached for her journal and wrote in the dark, the pen pressing hard:

*I came to his city and saw his life and it was a life. A real one. With a bicycle by the door and paintings on the windows and a woman who drinks flat whites from a reusable cup. I have been loving a ghost. The ghost has a house.*

She put the journal away. She looked at James sleeping, one arm thrown above his head, his face younger in sleep. She touched his hair once, the way you touch something you are about to return.

Then she turned away and waited for morning.

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# Chapter 12: The Honest Conversation

## James

He knew before he saw her.

It was in the text she sent that morning — *Russell Square, the café on the north side, 11am* — stripped of the playfulness that usually lived in her messages, the wit, the trailing thoughts. This was operational language. The language of a woman who had decided something in the hours he'd been asleep beside her.

He arrived early because he was always early — a habit his father had installed in him along with the handshake. The café was one of those London places in a state of permanent aspiration: exposed brick, reclaimed wood tables, a chalkboard menu in handwriting designed to look spontaneous. He ordered a flat white and sat by the window. The plane trees were bare, their branches like cracked ink against the white sky.

He thought about the previous night. The walk through Highgate, which he'd narrated without thinking, pointing out the school and the café as though giving a tour of his own interior landscape, which of course he was. Meera's face as they'd passed the house — the green door, Lily's bicycle — and how she'd said *It's fine* in a voice that contained every possible meaning except the one it pretended to carry. The way she'd been in bed afterwards — present but already departing, the way a train is at the platform, doors still open, but you can feel the engine shift.

He'd woken at seven to find her on the far corner of the bed in a hotel robe, reading something on her real phone. She'd looked up and smiled, and the smile was kind, which was how he'd known.

Now she was here. He saw her cross the square with the precise, unhurried stride he associated with her. She wore a dark coat over the cream blouse from last night, and her hair was down, which she rarely allowed. Today the discipline had changed shape.

She ordered black coffee. She sat across from him and placed her hands flat on the table, palms down, the way she did at the start of client presentations, and he recognised the gesture: a steadying.

'Thank you for coming,' she said, as though this were a meeting she'd scheduled.

'You don't need to thank me for having coffee with you.'

'I think I do. Because I think you know what this is.'

Her face was composed — the word he always came back to, because Meera's composure was not passivity but architecture. She built it. It cost her something. But today there was a tremor beneath it, not enough to crack the surface but enough to know the structure was under strain.

'Tell me,' he said.

She lifted her coffee, took a sip, set it down.

'Last night,' she said, 'you showed me your life.'

'I showed you Highgate.'

'They're the same thing, James.'

He said nothing. She was right, and the rightness of it opened a door he'd been keeping shut with his shoulder, and he could feel the pressure now, the whole weight of the thing behind it.

'I saw the school,' she said. 'I saw the paintings in the windows. I saw the bicycle by the gate. And the café where —' She paused, edited. 'The café. And I understood something I've been refusing to understand for months.'

'Which is?'

'That you have a life. A real, whole, inhabited life. And I am not in it. I exist in the gaps — in hotel rooms and conference trips and the hour after midnight when you can pretend nothing else is real. But everything else is real. That's the problem. Everything else is real and I am the thing that isn't.'

The words landed with the force of something carefully considered, polished smooth. He recognised the precision — the same she brought to strategy documents and the journal she thought he didn't know about, which he'd glimpsed once in Singapore, when she'd fallen asleep with it open on the pillow and he'd read a single line — *I am building something that has no foundation* — and closed it and never mentioned it, because mentioning it would have meant acknowledging what they stood on, which was nothing, which was air.

'Meera —'

'Let me finish.' She held up one hand. 'Please.'

He waited. The espresso machine hissed. A woman at the next table typed furiously.

'I'm not going to be the woman who waits in hotel rooms,' Meera said. 'I'm not going to be a set of deleted messages and a phone with no name saved. I'm not going to spend the rest of my thirties loving someone in airports and then going home to a bed that feels like a country I'm visiting. I can't. Not because I don't —' She stopped. Gathered herself. 'Not because this doesn't matter. It matters. That's exactly why I can't.'

He felt it then — the thing he'd been holding at bay through systems of deception and the practised liar's art of believing his own story. It came up through him like water rising, and it was not anger or panic but sorrow, pure and total, the sorrow of a man standing where two truths meet and cancel each other out.

'I don't know how to do this,' he said. His voice was quieter than he expected. 'I don't know how to want two lives at once and live honestly in either of them.'

'I know.'

'Claire has started a curation course. She's happier than she's been in years. She talks about exhibitions and materiality and the politics of display, and she's alive when she talks, really alive, and I sit there thinking: you're becoming the person I fell in love with, and I'm becoming a person who doesn't deserve you.'

'You're not supposed to hold both things. That's what I'm saying.'

'What are you saying?'

She looked at him with an expression he would carry for years — steady, gentle, certain. 'I'm saying that what we've been doing is a kind of violence. To ourselves, to the people around us, to the truth. And we've dressed it up as something tender, because it was tender, parts of it were the most tender thing I've ever —' Her voice caught. 'But tenderness doesn't excuse it. And the fact that we've been kind to each other — that's almost worse. Cruelty would be simple. Cruelty you can walk away from and feel righteous. Kindness makes you grieve.'

The word *grieve* hung in the air. James thought of Lily's gap-toothed smile at the assembly. Sam's hand reaching for his at three in the morning. Claire at the kitchen counter, reading Kara Walker articles aloud while he

loaded the dishwasher. He thought of the second phone in his desk drawer, and the lies he'd told with it — the invented client dinners, the fabricated conference calls, a deception so thorough he'd begun to admire it, which was the most damning thing of all.

'I've been a coward,' he said.

'We both have.'

'No. You're not a coward. You're here, saying this.'

'I'm here because the alternative is worse. Staying in something dishonest because the honesty is too painful — that's not bravery. That's just a different kind of hiding.'

He reached for his coffee. It was cold. He drank it anyway.

'What happens now?' he asked.

'We stop.'

Two words. The complete dismantling of everything they'd built — the texts, the voice notes, the shared language that had grown between them like a vine through a wall, structural and ultimately ruinous.

'Just like that.'

'Not easily. But yes. We stop. You go home to your family. I go back to Mumbai. We don't text and we don't call and we don't find reasons to be in the same city. And eventually the distance does what distance does.'

'What does distance do?'

'It becomes the truth. It becomes the shape of things, instead of the thing we're trying to overcome.'

He looked out the window. The sky had whitened further, pressing down on the rooftops.

'I should tell you something,' he said.

She waited.

'I've never used the word. You know the one. And the reason I haven't is that I thought not saying it was a form of protection — that if I didn't say it, what we were doing was somehow contained. But that was a lie. The word was there every time. In every text, every phone call, every time I looked at you across a table. Not saying it was its own kind of lie. I want you to know that.'

She closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were bright, but she did not cry. He had never seen her cry. He suspected she saved it for her morning runs, for the

promenade at Bandstand, where she could pass the tears off as exertion.

'I know,' she said. 'It was there for me too. And the reason I didn't say it is because I knew that once it was said, we'd have to decide what to do about it. I wasn't ready. I'm still not ready. But I'm less ready to keep pretending that not saying it makes it smaller. It doesn't. It makes it unbearable.'

They sat with that. The café noise continued around them — the espresso machine, the typing woman, a couple arguing about the avocado toast — and James had the vertiginous sensation of a profound private event occurring inside a perfectly ordinary public space, the way the most important moments of a life always happen surrounded by people who have no idea.

'I should go,' she said. 'My flight's at four.'

'I'll walk you.'

'No. I think it's better if we leave separately.'

It made sense. They became different people in shared space, and that had to stop.

He stood when she stood. She extended her hand — a handshake, formal and absurd, the same gesture from the Mumbai lobby. He took her hand, and then it became something else — his other hand closing over hers, their foreheads almost touching, her breath warm against his jaw. He smelled jasmine and something mineral — her shampoo or her skin or her sadness.

'Goodbye, James,' she said.

He couldn't say it. The word was too final. So he said nothing. He let go. She picked up her bag and walked to the door and opened it and turned left, towards Russell Square, towards the Tube, towards Heathrow, towards Mumbai, towards the rest of her life.

He stood at the window and watched her go. She did not look back. The dark shape of her coat moved between the plane trees until she turned the corner and was gone.

He sat back down. Two cups on the table — his empty, hers half-full, a crescent of lipstick on the rim. The waiter approached.

'Can I clear these?'

'Not yet,' James said. 'Give me a minute.'

He sat with the cups for a long time. Then he paid and walked out into the grey March afternoon and turned right, towards the life he'd chosen, or the life that had chosen him, or the life — and this was the truest version — that had been there all along, waiting for him to stop leaving.

He did not look back. The word *last* was a room he was not yet ready to enter. So he walked, and the city closed around him, and the distance began.

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# Chapter 13: The Distance Between Us

## Meera

The monsoon ended the way it always ended — not with a final downpour but with a slow withdrawal, the rains thinning over days until one morning the air was dry and the city looked rinsed, exhausted, slightly embarrassed, like a person who had been weeping and was now pretending they hadn't. The pavements cracked as they dried, pale lines spreading across the concrete. The sea turned from monsoon grey to its post-rain turquoise, improbable and bright.

Three months. Meera counted them not in days but in meetings, in mornings run along the Bandstand promenade while the city reconstituted itself around her. She had been promoted in June; by September the promotion had absorbed her entirely. She led a team of fourteen. She flew to Hyderabad, to Bengaluru, to

Chennai. She sat in boardrooms and said things that mattered and was listened to, and the listening was its own kind of sustenance.

She had not heard from James.

She knew — from the company directory, checked once in July and then deleted from her browser history — that he had been transferred to the New York office. She did not know if Claire had gone with him. She did not know if Lily was painting in acrylics now, or if Sam had started reception. She did not look. The not-looking was its own daily discipline, like running or journaling or the way she'd learnt to breathe through the moments when his absence surfaced without warning — once while buying coffee at the Blue Tokai on Hill Road, when the barista asked if she wanted a flat white and the phrase detonated in her chest.

She'd said, 'Black, please.' She'd paid and left and did not cry, because the grief had changed shape — no longer sharp but diffuse, a weather system that moved through her at intervals and then passed.

Vikram had sold his start-up. The acquisition had made the *Economic Times*. The number was large enough to change the texture of their lives — not the fundamentals,

but the options.

They'd gone out to dinner to celebrate. Masque, in Mahalaxmi, the kind of place where the tasting menu was an experience and the experience was the point. Vikram talked about grape varietals — a new interest since the sale — with the earnest enthusiasm of a convert, and Meera listened, and the listening was different from the listening she'd done for years. Closer to actual curiosity, or at least the willingness to be curious, which might have been the same thing.

At some point during the third course — a preparation of raw jackfruit that tasted, inexplicably, of the sea — Vikram reached across the table and took her hand.

She let him.

His hand was warm and dry and familiar in the way a decade makes a body familiar — not with desire but with knowledge, the accumulated data of ten thousand casual touches. She knew the callus on his right palm. She knew the way his fingers curled around hers, neither tight nor loose, the pressure of a man reaching for something he wasn't sure was still there.

It was the most intimate they'd been in two years.

She looked at him — really looked, with the full attention she usually reserved for strategy documents — and saw a man she had married at twenty-four and spent a decade adjacent to and never fully reckoned with. Vikram Kapoor. Thirty-six. A man who had built something and sold it and was now holding his wife's hand across a table, and the hand-holding was an act of such ordinary, tentative hope that it undid her more than anything James Whitfield had ever done.

Because this was real. Not a hotel room, not a foreign city, but here, this table, this man's hand in hers. It was not enough and it was not what she'd imagined, but it was *here*, and it was *hers*, and she was learning that being present in an imperfect life was not the same as accepting imperfection. It was a choice you made every morning, not because you were certain but because certainty was a fantasy she'd outgrown.

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The flat in Bandra was different since the sale. Not physically — same rooms, same view of the Arabian Sea from the balcony. But the quality of the space had changed, the way a room changes when the people inside it begin to pay attention. Vikram had taken up cooking — a development so improbable that Nandini, when told,

had laughed for a full minute. He made dal. He made biryani. He made, on one disastrous Saturday, a *cacio e pepe* that tasted of nothing but pepper and regret. Meera ate everything and told him when it was good and when it wasn't, and the telling felt new — a currency of honesty, small and practical, that had no precedent in their marriage.

She had started writing in her journal again. The entries had shifted from the notation of grief to something broader, more exploratory.

*September 14. The distance is still there. Between Vikram and me, between who I am and who I present. But I can see it now. I can see its dimensions, its edges. I have stopped pretending it doesn't exist. I don't know if this is the beginning of something or the end of something, but it is at least an honest position from which to look.*

She'd visited her parents in Juhu — her father reading the *Times of India* on the veranda, her mother making chai with the radio playing old Hindi film songs. Her mother had looked at her across the kitchen and said, 'You seem different,' and Meera had said, 'Different how?' and her mother had said, 'Like you've stopped running from something,' and Meera had laughed and said, 'I still run

every morning, Maa,' and her mother had given her the look — the one that said *I know what I said and I said what I meant* — and turned back to the chai.

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One evening she sat on the balcony and watched the sun go down over the Arabian Sea. The sky layered itself in bands of colour — amber into rose into violet into the deep blue of approaching night. The fishing boats were coming in, their lamps lit, small points of gold against the darkening water.

The air smelled of salt and the jasmine that grew in the planter box, and beneath that, whatever Vikram was cooking inside. She could hear him through the open door — the clatter of pans, a Chet Baker album from his phone, the trumpet clean and melancholy in the evening air.

She thought about James. She allowed herself to think about him the way you might think about a country you had visited once and would not return to — with tenderness, without longing. He was in New York. He was in a life. She hoped Lily was painting. She hoped Claire's course had led somewhere — a gallery, a room full of art she'd chosen and arranged.

She did not hope he was happy. That would have been too simple. She hoped he was honest, which was harder and rarer and which she herself was still learning, day by day.

Vikram appeared at the door. He wore an apron — navy cotton, from a market in Goa — and his hands were dusted with flour.

'How was your day?' he asked.

She considered the question. Not the automatic version, but the real one: *What happened to you today? Who were you, in the hours I wasn't watching?*

'Long,' she said. 'Good. The Chennai team signed off on the Murugappa proposal. And I had a call with Annika in Stockholm about the Nordic expansion.'

'What kind of partner are you looking for?'

She told him. He listened. He asked questions that were not expert but were genuinely interested, and the interest was its own small revolution, because for years they had occupied the same space without occupying the same conversation. This ordinary exchange about work was a bridge. A provisional one, made of plywood and good intentions, but a bridge.

She meant it. Or she tried to. And the trying was not failure — she was certain of this now. The trying was the thing itself.

The distance between them was still there. She could feel it at night, on her side of the mattress that was no longer clearly demarcated but was not yet shared. Not the distance of estrangement — not anymore — but the distance of two people who had been far apart and were walking towards each other across unfamiliar ground, each step a decision.

She did not know if this was the beginning of something or the end of something. She held both possibilities, and sometimes one outweighed the other, and sometimes they balanced, and sometimes she couldn't tell because her hands were shaking.

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The alarm went off at five forty-five. The room was dark. Vikram was asleep, his breathing low and even. She silenced the alarm and lay still, listening. Mumbai was already stirring — the distant call of a muezzin, the first auto-rickshaw coughing to life below, a crow on the

windowsill announcing its territory with the hoarse, insistent cry that was as much a part of morning as the light.

She pulled on her running clothes — the black leggings, the grey singlet, the trainers wearing through at the heel. She drank a glass of water at the kitchen counter, looking at last night's dishes, clean and stacked in the rack, catching the first light.

Outside, the street was empty except for a man setting up a tea stall, his kettle already steaming, and a stray dog with a torn ear that watched her pass with the equanimity of a creature no longer impressed by morning.

The promenade. The sea. The light was coming in low over the city behind her, casting long shadows across the concrete, and the water was silver-grey and still, as though the Arabian Sea had decided to hold its breath. The air was salt and diesel and the green smell of seaweed clinging to the rocks below the wall.

She ran. Not fast, not desperately, not with the punishing intensity of the months before. She ran the way a person runs who has somewhere to return to — steadily, with purpose. Her feet struck the concrete in a rhythm that was

almost music, and the sea moved beside her, and the city rose behind her, and the morning opened ahead of her like a sentence she hadn't finished writing.

She was not happy. Happiness was the wrong word — too conclusive, too bright, a destination on a map she'd stopped consulting. What she was, as the promenade stretched ahead, was present. She was here, in this body, on this road, in this city that smelled of salt and jasmine and exhaust and possibility. She was a woman who had loved and lied and grieved and was still here, still running, still waking at five forty-five to move through a morning that asked nothing of her except that she show up for it.

The sea did not care about her. The city did not know her name. The light came in regardless, as it always did, whether she was ready for it or not.

She ran. The promenade curved ahead, following the coastline, and she followed it, and the distance she covered was the distance she had, and it was enough, and it was not enough, and she kept going.



## About the Author

**Amara Osei** writes literary fiction for Kelford Press. Her stories span continents and generations, exploring families, migration, identity, and the small moments that change everything. Her prose has been described as luminous but never showy — finding the universal in the specific. *The Distance Between Us* is her fourth novel.

She lives between Accra and London.

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