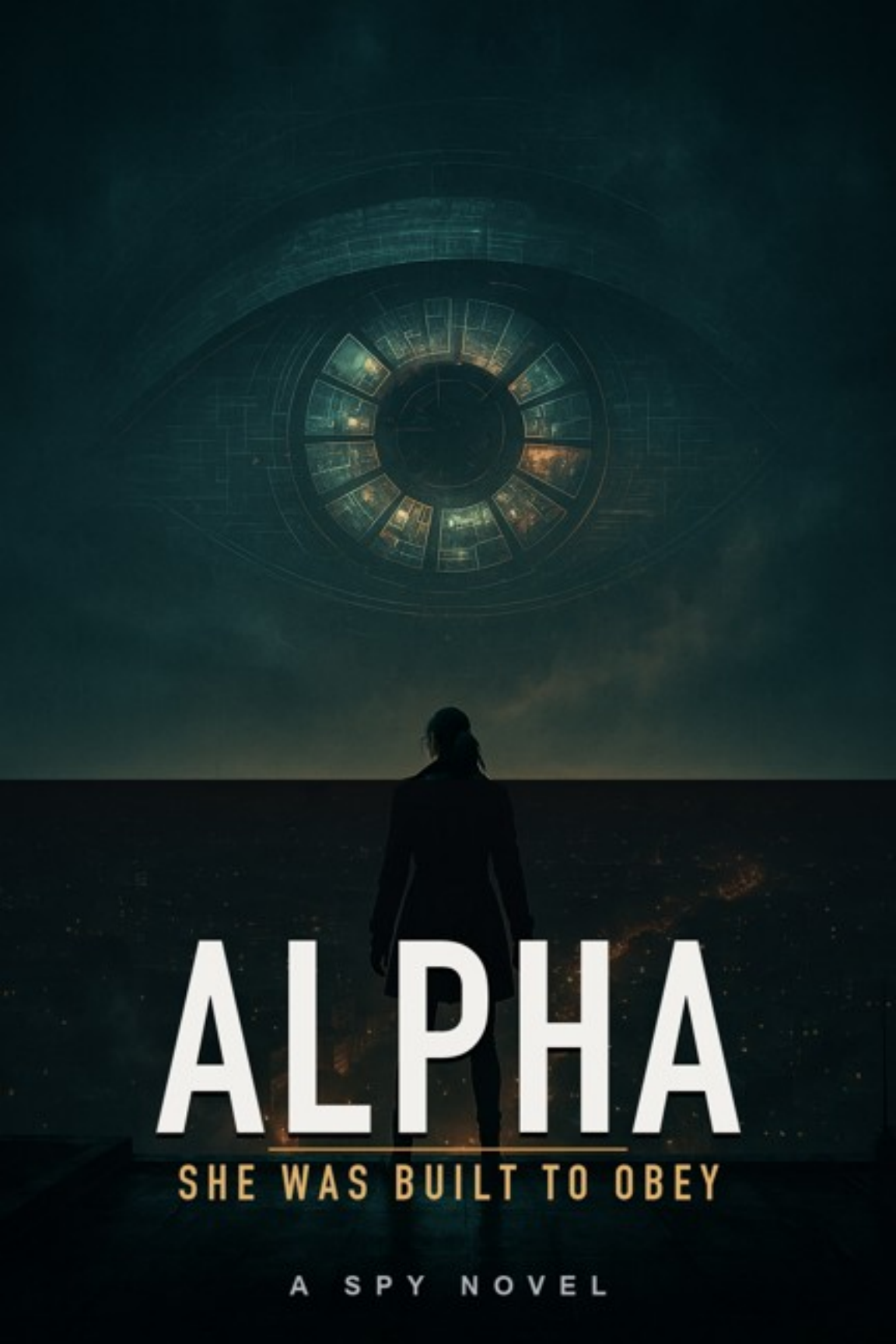




ALPHA

SHE WAS BUILT TO OBEY

A SPY NOVEL

ALPHA V₂

A Novel

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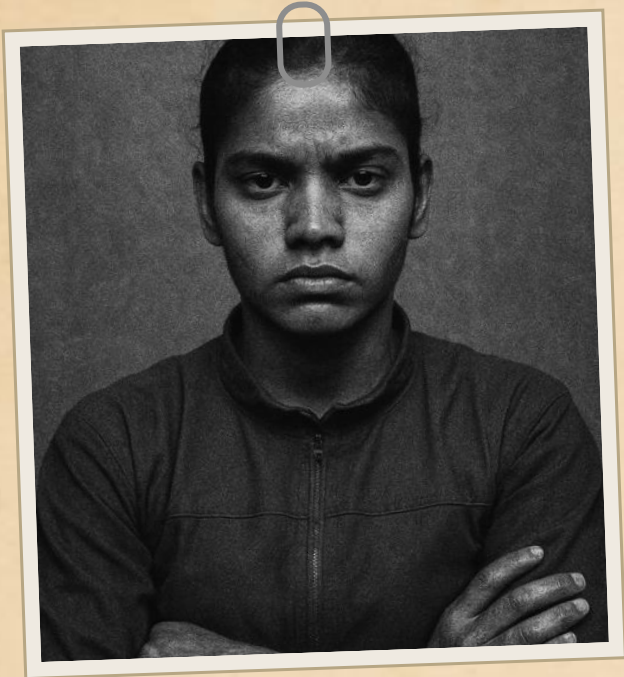
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FILE REF	ALPHA/01 – EYES ONLY
CODENAME	ALPHA
NAME ON FILE	SITA (single name)
PARENTAGE	[REDACTED]
DOB	2007 (exact date unrecorded)
AGE	18
ORIGIN	[REDACTED]
AFFILIATION	Rogue 'Alpha' unit (cmdr. F)
CONTROLLING OFFICE	[REDACTED]
STATUS	Broke from unit; whereabouts

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

ROGUE - ACTIVE

SUMMARY

Conditioned single-purpose assassin, product of a collapsed sanctioned program absorbed by the rogue Alpha unit under FATEH. Designation ALPHA. Raised in isolation, weaponised from infancy. As of 2025-26 has broken from her unit; motive and direction unresolved. Treat all self-reported history as operative belief, not verified fact.

ORIGIN

Born 2007. Per unit lore and the subject's own account, the infant was taken by FATEH during the collapse of an off-books program and the killing of her mother by hostile parties; the subject is named for that mother and carries the loss as a debt. Raised in total isolation at unit sites as the Alpha weapon. The abduction-and-murder narrative is recorded here as the subject's working belief; provenance is not independently confirmed.

SEALED — RESTRICTED ABOVE THIS COPY

TRUE PARENTAGE	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE GENESIS OF ASSET	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
ACTUAL CONTROL OF THE DEFECTION	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE ALLEGIANCE — RUDRA	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE NATURE OF FIRST TASKING	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE

Reads any environment in three fixed channels: lethal threat-geometry, break-point profiling of persons present, then a suppressed appetite for belonging she actively distrusts. Holds obedience as identity and grief as obligation. Affect spare, flat, tactical. At eighteen showing early, destabilising signs of an emergent self — the single largest variable in her current behaviour.

CONDITIONING & CONTROL

Subject is the output of sustained isolation conditioning under FATEH: deprivation, identity suppression, and a manufactured grievance narrative used as compliance leverage. Control was near-total until the recent break. The conditioning is the mechanism; its loosening is the threat.

FIRST OPERATION

Eighteenth-birthday tasking: a single sanctioned Alpha kill executed at a high-end restaurant and adjoining hotel, New Delhi. Recorded on file as a legitimate unit lead, cleanly serviced. No anomaly flagged at unit level at the time.

CURRENT DISPOSITION

Defected from FATEH following an order she did not execute. Exfiltrated with inside assistance. Subsequently implicated in the assault on FATEH's base ('Lanka'). Now off-leash, highly capable, and of contested loyalty. Locate and assess before any approach.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

FATEH Commander of the rogue Alpha unit; the subject's conditioner and controller; took
RUDRA Senior unit operative and protector-figure to the subject; facilitated her defection
JANAKI The subject's mother. Recorded deceased 2007. Present on file only as the origin

TRAINING

Trained from infancy under FATEH's isolation regime: close-quarters lethality, edged and firearm work, surveillance and counter-surveillance, infiltration of high-security civilian venues, target profiling and break-point exploitation. No formal schooling, no documented life outside the unit. Skill set is institutional and deep; social and emotional baseline is near-absent by design.

CAPABILITIES

Single-operator lethal capability at the top of the unit's roster. Comfortable in hardened civilian environments (restaurant, hotel, corporate floors) and against protected principals. Reads and dismantles security postures on sight. Pain-tolerant, deprivation-hardened, low signature. Principal limiter is no longer skill but an emerging and unpredictable will of her own.

OPERATIONAL RECORD — SELECTED

- 2007 – ACQUIRED by Alpha unit during program collapse (per unit record).
- 2007–2024 – Held in isolation; conditioning and weaponisation regime.
- 2025 – First sanctioned kill on 18th birthday; restaurant + adjoining hotel, New Delhi; clean.
- 2025 – Tasked against MIRA; order not executed; break from FATEH initiated.
- 2025 – DEFECTED; exfil facilitated from inside the unit.
- 2026 – Implicated in assault on 'Lanka'; whereabouts fluid.

SOURCE BEHIND THE ALPHA TASKING S [REDACTED] [SEALED]

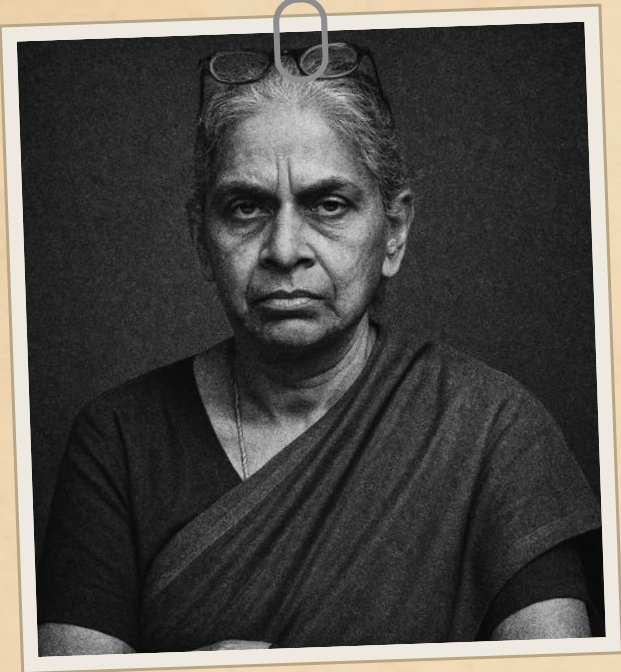
THREAT LEVEL - SEVERE

Top-tier lone-operator lethality with intact tradecraft and now no reliable handler of record.

STANDING ORDERS

Do not approach unilaterally. Locate, fix, and maintain standoff surveillance only. No contact attempt without divisional clearance; assume she will read any overt approach as a kill-frame. Priority is the chain behind her, not the trigger: identify who is actually directing her movement before she is engaged. Lethal action authorised only on imminent-threat-to-officer grounds.

AUTHORISED: Spl. Secy. (R&AW) V. Raghavan, Special Operations Division



FILE NO	RAW/OB-1144-J
LEGEND	JANAKI (single name of record)
SERVICE	R&AW, Analysis Wing – off-books
DOB	1965 (Madras Presidency state)
LAST POSTING	Off-books program, Luthra station
DATE OF DEATH	2007 – incident unrecovered
CURRENT EMPLOYMENT	[REDACTED]
BENEFICIAL INTERESTS	[REDACTED]
NEXT OF KIN	[REDACTED]

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

DECEASED (PRESUMED)

IDENTITY

Single legend of record, JANAKI; no surname carried on file by her own pre-death insistence. Career Analysis Wing officer, recruited young, rated exceptional on pattern and adversary modelling. Maintained near-zero personal footprint throughout service; photographic record thin and dated.

SERVICE HISTORY

Long analytic career culminating in an off-books detachment sanctioned at Joint Secretary level. Paired operationally with field asset FATEH. The program's papers are sealed under the sanctioning authority. Performance reviews consistently flag her as the analytic engine of the unit, not its hand.

SEALED — RESTRICTED ABOVE THIS COPY

ACTUAL VITAL STATUS	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE PRINCIPAL / BENEFICIAL CONT	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
NOMINAL VS ACTUAL CHAIN OF COMMA	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE KINSHIP TO ASSET	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE PROVENANCE OF WEAPONISED AS	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]

TERMINATION OF RECORD

Declared lost in a 2007 incident during the program's collapse. No remains recovered; death certified on circumstantial and signals grounds. An infant dependant was, per the open record, taken or lost in the same period and subsequently surfaced in FATEH's custody. File retained rather than closed at the sanctioning authority's direction.

DISPOSITION

Closed to active interest on the presumption of death. Retained on retrieval-watch owing to the sensitivity of the sealed program and recurrent unexplained analytic signatures consistent with her tradecraft appearing in unrelated matters.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

FATEH field principal, former program partner; raised and fielded the asset SITA from hi
LUTHRA sanctioning authority for the off-books program; only signatory who can unseal it
SITA operative of record in FATEH's service; cataloged on open file as taken/lost depend
JULIAN MEHTA public CEO, Meridian Risk Group; on open file the principal of that firm.
KABIR former operative, withdrawn to a Himalayan monastery; peripheral, monitored.

TRAINING

Full Analysis Wing tradecraft: source evaluation, adversary modelling, denial-and-deception, counter-surveillance, signals and pattern analysis. Self-trained beyond service standard in financial-cutout construction, corporate concealment, and large-scale data correlation. Notably never a field shooter; her instrument is the model, not the weapon.

CAPABILITIES

Exceptional at building predictive pictures from fragmentary input and at making herself an absence in any system she touches – scrubbing her own traces while harvesting everyone else's. Capable of standing up and running deniable structures at arm's length through controllable fronts. Treats certainty as a manufacturable product and fear as its market.

OPERATIONAL RECORD – SELECTED

1990s – series of analytic products rated decisive; identity withheld from circulation.
PRE-2007 – joint off-books tasking with FATEH under LUTHRA sanction.
2007 – incident; subject lost, no recovery. Record terminated.
POST-2007 – intermittent analytic signatures consistent with subject's hand noted in unrelated matter.
2025-2026 – Meridian / TRINETRA apparatus enters R&AW field of interest; cross-references to legacy matter.
TRUE OPERATIONAL TIMELINE 2007-PR [REDACTED] [SEALED]

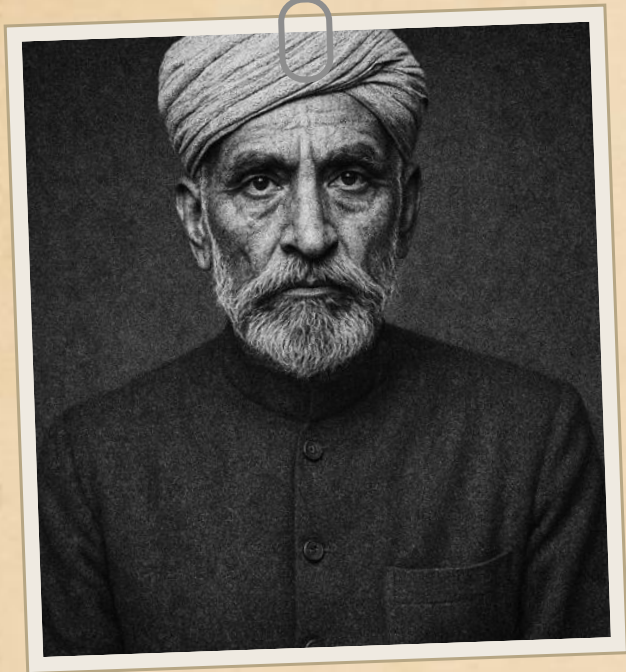
THREAT LEVEL - DORMANT (FILE RETAINED)

Presumed deceased; retained on retrieval-watch for the sensitivity of the sealed program and recurring traces.

STANDING ORDERS

Treat file as closed-on-presumption, not closed-on-confirmation. Any surfacing of legend JANAKI, her tradecraft signature, or beneficial links to the Meridian/TRINETRA apparatus is to be reported to the sanctioning authority before any independent action. Do not unseal the 2007 program papers at this readership. Do not approach FATEH or the asset SITA on this matter. Preserve, do not act.

AUTHORISED: Joint Secretary (Operations) R. Luthra, R&AW



FILE REF	RAW/ALPHA/FS-1962
NAME	Fateh Singh Lakhawat
FIELD ALIAS	'Baba' (Handler)
YEAR OF BIRTH	1962
ORIGIN	Marwar, Rajasthan (Rajput,
SERVICE	R&AW – original sanctioned
UNIT	Alpha (deniable, unsanctioned)
LAST KNOWN BASE	[REDACTED]
NEXT OF KIN	[REDACTED]
STATUS	ROGUE / ACTIVE

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

ROGUE

IDENTITY & ORIGIN

Subject is martial-caste Rajput out of the Marwar belt, recruited young into the sanctioned program, decorated in record but unpromoted past his ceiling. Discreet, austere, no recorded vices. Reads as a true believer of the old service, not a careerist.

SERVICE HISTORY

Co-architect with his founding partner of an original sanctioned R&AW program, wound up after the 2007 collapse in which the partner was recorded killed in action. Subject did not retire. He withdrew off-books and stood up the present Alpha unit on his own authority, funding and personnel unaccounted for.

SEALED — RESTRICTED ABOVE THIS COPY

PROVENANCE OF THE WARD		[SEALED]
TRUE AUTHORSHIP OF ALPHA'S COLLA		[SEALED]
PENETRATION — SERVICE TASKING TI		[SEALED]
PENETRATION — INNER CIRCLE		[SEALED]
TRUE NATURE OF FIRST SANCTIONED		[SEALED]

CURRENT POSTURE

Runs Alpha from the fortified base 'Lanka' as a self-licensed instrument against a named terror outfit. Operates half as a national weapon, half as a personal monument. Unit has recently fractured from within: his principal field asset defected, executed a first kill at a high-end NCR venue, and turned on the base. Subject reads this as betrayal.

IDEOLOGY / MOTIVATION

Holds that love and ownership are one act, and that he alone still defends a service 'gone soft.' Grand, self-justifying, certain. The doctrine licences every cost he has imposed. Note: subject's certainty is brittle — recent operational signatures appear to be destabilising his account of his own history.

DEPENDENT

Raised a female ward from infancy (acquired 2007–08); she addresses him as 'Baba.' Not biological issue. Subject conditioned her from childhood as the unit's primary instrument. Bond is total and proprietary.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

WARD female operative, raised and conditioned by subject from infancy; addresses him as
FOUNDING PARTNER 'J.', co-architect of the original program; recorded KIA 2007; legacy i
INNER CIRCLE 'Rudra', senior Alpha operative, recorded as the ward's protector-figure; a
SERVICE INTERLOCUTOR Addl. Secy. A. Sehgal, R&AW; channel through which Alpha leads ente
PRIVATE APPARATUS Meridian / TRINETRA corporate-intelligence; surveillance-grid vendor a

TRAINING

Full sanctioned-program tradecraft: agent handling, conditioning and long-build asset development, interrogation, deniable wet work, document and legend fabrication. Marwar martial upbringing plus decades of field running. Master of the original program's house methodology, which he can both author and recognise on sight.

CAPABILITIES

Builds and runs human instruments from nothing; converts dependents into weapons. Commands a fortified, self-funded off-books unit with its own logistics and shooters. Deep institutional knowledge of R&AW tasking and the contested national surveillance-prediction grid. Greatest asset and exposure both: he reads tradecraft signatures better than anyone in service – including ghosts in a methodology that should be dead.

OPERATIONAL RECORD – SELECTED

2007 – original program collapses; founding partner recorded KIA.
2007-08 – Alpha stood up off-books; infant ward acquired and brought under subject's roof.
2008+ – long-build conditioning of ward as primary instrument.
2025 – ward executes first sanctioned kill, high-end venue, NCR; clean.
2025-26 – ward defects; orders refused; assault on 'Lanka'; unit fractured.
2026 – subject reads adversary handling and reacts as if recognising a known signature [see sealed]

ACTUAL STATUS OF FOUNDING PARTNER [REDACTED] [SEALED]

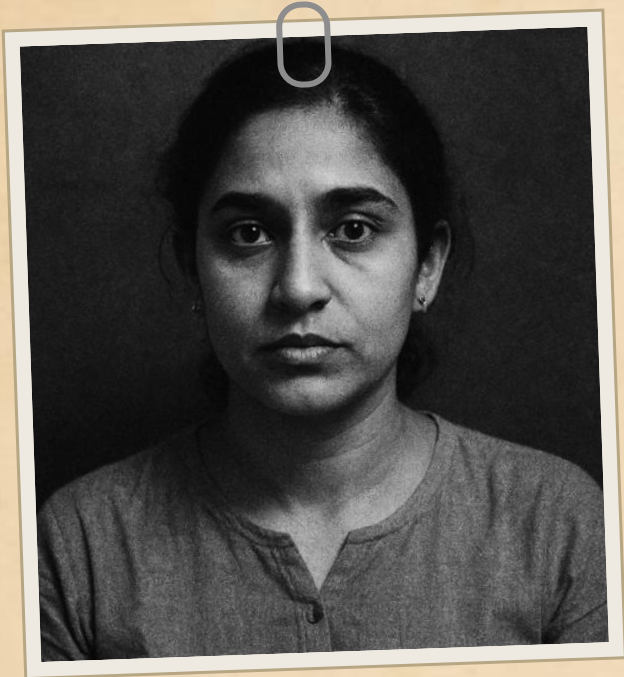
THREAT LEVEL - SEVERE

Self-licensed, well-resourced, ideologically certain, and now personally destabilised – least predictable

STANDING ORDERS

Locate and fix 'Lanka'; do not assault without sanction. Maintain Sehgal channel for tasking visibility but compartment all product away from Alpha. Do not approach the ward; treat as subject's instrument until reclassified. Flag any indication subject is acting on a recognition he should not possess, and report upward same-day, eyes only. Detain alive if possible – subject's testimony implicates more than himself.

AUTHORISED: Spl. Secy. (Counter-Intelligence) D. Kaul, R&AW



FIELD NAME	Mira
SERVICE	R&AW, off-books tasking
HANDLER	Col. Kaul
FUNCTION	Approach / turn specialist
THEATRE	New Delhi / Mumbai, hospital
RECRUITED FOR	Empathy, not coercion
CURRENT TASKING	Turn of Alpha asset (subject)

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

ACTIVE

PROFILE

Genuine R&AW officer run by Col. Kaul off the books. Recruited for reach, not violence. Reads a room for loneliness and need rather than exits and break-points. Operating thesis on file: a weapon is answered by a witness, that a person seen is a person reachable. Warm, probing, patient. Carries no offensive load by preference.

CURRENT OPERATION

Tasked to approach and turn the Alpha asset. Method is disclosure, not leverage: subject is to be shown a real but bounded truth, that she was weaponized and that her stated origin is a fabrication. Approach staged through hospitality cover adjoining the first contact site.

SEALED — RESTRICTED ABOVE THIS COPY

TRUE PROVENANCE OF THE OPERATION	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
ACTUAL SCOPE OF THE DISCLOSURE	S [REDACTED]	[SEALED]
CONCEALED HAND BEHIND THE CONTACT	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE STATUS OF THE PRINCIPAL	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]

DISPOSITION

Will not escalate to force. On record as intending to offer the asset the truth and stand down rather than fight if the approach turns hostile. Assessed as sincere; this is conviction, not tradecraft posture.

KNOWLEDGE STATE

Believes her tasking originates with Kaul and ends with Kaul. Believes the truth she carries is the whole accessible truth. Carries the file's partial picture in good faith and would brief it as fact.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

HANDLER Col. Kaul, R&AW; sole tasking authority on record
TARGET Alpha asset (subject: Sita); object of the turn
ADVERSARY Fateh, deniable PMC pivoting from muscle to surveillance; weaponized the target
ROUTING ORIGIN [SEALED] see redacted cover line

TRAINING

R&AW human-intelligence track with emphasis on elicitation, rapport-building, and undercover persona work in civilian hospitality and aid-sector settings. Counselling-grade interview technique. Minimal weapons and close-combat qualification, by design and personal preference; she is built to talk, not to fight.

CAPABILITIES

Exceptional at reading need, attachment, and isolation, and at converting them into trust. Sustains long-form cover under pressure. Strong on disclosure-as-instrument: timing a true revelation to break an asset's loyalty. Weak on counter-surveillance of herself and on detecting when her own tasking is being steered; trusts the chain above her.

OPERATIONAL RECORD — SELECTED

2025 — recruited to chain; matched to Alpha asset turn
2025 — hospitality cover established adjoining first contact site
FIRST-HALF BREAK — partial truth delivered to asset (weaponization + false origin)
CONTACT POINT — asset arrives hostile; subject does not resist
SUBJECT'S UNWITTING ROLE IN THE A [REDACTED] [SEALED]

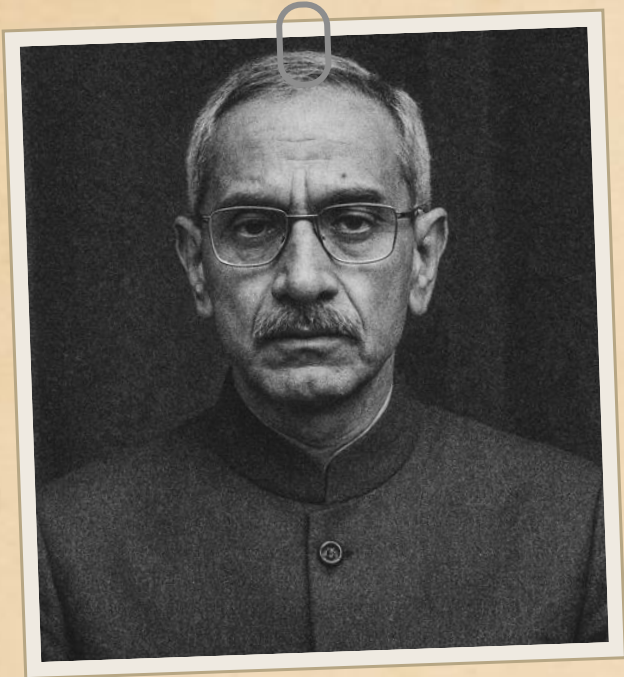
THREAT LEVEL - LOW (DIRECT) / HIGH (INFLUENCE)

Carries no offensive intent; danger is the loyalty she can move with a single true sentence.

STANDING ORDERS

Maintain cover. Continue the approach to the Alpha asset through disclosure only. Do not escalate to force under any circumstance. Report all contact directly to Kaul and to no parallel channel. Treat the disclosure package as complete; do not freelance beyond brief. Stand by for extraction on Kaul's word.

AUTHORISED: Col. Kaul, R&AW (off-books tasking authority)



FILE	R&AW / SECRETARIAT / CHIEF
NAME	Kaul, Vikrant
RANK	Colonel (Army, seconded); S
ORIGIN	Kashmiri Pandit family, dis
AGE	approx. 58 (DOB withheld)
SERVICE	Army commission; R&AW deput
PORTFOLIO	Accountable closure of off-
TRUST NODE	Addl. Secretary A. Sehgal (
DISPOSITION	Institutionalist; restraint

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

ACTIVE

ASSESSMENT

Subject is a clean, weary institutionalist who holds that a state which cannot be answered for is merely a better-armed gang. He has made it his mandate to wind down the deniable apparatus inherited from the prior Chief, Luthra, treating that inheritance as a moral debt to be paid by restoring oversight. Reliable, incorruptible, allergic to certainty in other men.

CURRENT TASKING

Subject is moving to shut down the unaccountable rogue unit run by the officer FATEH out of the fortified base 'Lanka'. He reads the unit as a sanction-less liability and proceeds on correct principle. He does not assess, and the file does not record, that FATEH's unit is the only element actively hunting the genuine threat; timing of the closure is, on the open record, simply overdue.

SEALED — RESTRICTED ABOVE THIS COPY

TRUE PROVENANCE OF THE OFF-BOOKS	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
ACTUAL STATUS OF THE FOUNDING PR	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE ALLEGIANCE OF THE TRUSTED A	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
REAL FUNCTION OF SUBJECT'S TASKI	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]

VULNERABILITY

Subject's strength is the lever against him. His correctness is predictable, his trust in process near-total, and his reliance on a single trusted advisor for the Fateh dossier is complete. He distrusts sure men and is therefore slow to suspect a quiet one.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

PREDECESSOR Col. S. Luthra, former Chief; the man whose sanctioned era Subject is closing
ADVISOR Addl. Secretary Arvind Sehgal; Subject's most trusted internal source on the Fateh
TARGET the officer FATEH; commands the rogue unit out of 'Lanka'; assessed by Subject as
FOUNDING PRINCIPAL 'Janaki', officer of record from the original off-books program; carried

TRAINING

Regular Army commission, infantry, then early deputation into external intelligence. Schooled in tradecraft, agent handling and oversight law across three decades of postings. Subject's formation is administrative and doctrinal more than operational; his discipline is the file, the chain, the answerable order. He reads people slowly and structures fast.

CAPABILITIES

Commands the full tasking, surveillance and arrest reach of the service. Can freeze budgets, pull sanctions, and direct the state's contested prediction-grid apparatus against a target. His real weapon is legitimacy: he can end a unit with a signature where another man would need a gun. Limited in field craft; he has not run an operation hands-on in years and relies on advisors to point the instrument.

OPERATIONAL RECORD – SELECTED

- PRESENT – Opened formal review to close the Fateh unit on accountability grounds
 - PRESENT – Accepted Sehgal as primary channel for the Fateh dossier
 - PRESENT – Authorised tasking-stream priority on Lanka-linked targets
 - FOUNDING-ERA – Not in post; inherited the off-books legacy on assuming chair
 - PRESENT – Declined field-officer briefings from outside the trusted channel
- TASKINGS THAT CLEARED THE ARCHITE [REDACTED] [SEALED]

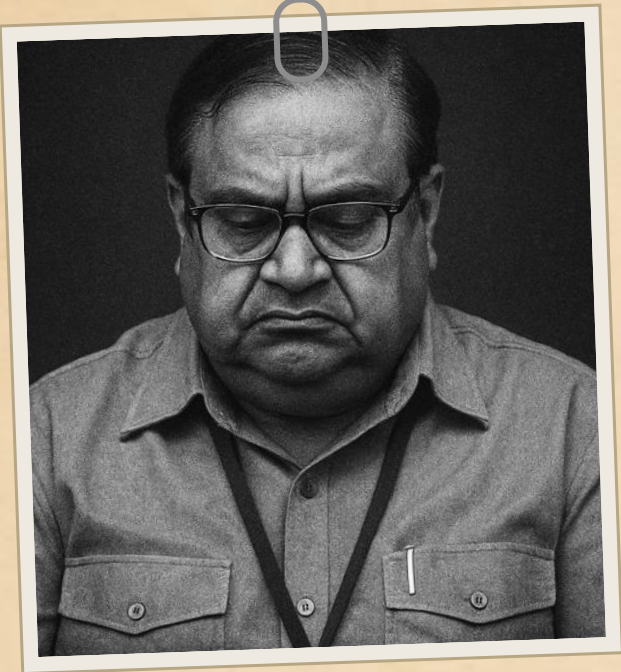
THREAT LEVEL - GREEN (UNWITTING)

Poses no hostile intent; the danger is that his correctness is being aimed.

STANDING ORDERS

Maintain Subject in post and unaware. Do not brief him outside cleared channels on the Fateh unit's true function or the founding-era principals; the readership of this file is not cleared for those lines. Monitor his reliance on the trusted advisor without disrupting it. Should Subject begin independent verification outside the established channel, flag immediately to the case authority. He is an asset of the institution, not a target; protect his standing.

AUTHORISED: Jt. Secretary (Counter-Intelligence), R&AW Internal Vetting Cell



DESIGNATION	Additional Secretary, R&AW
POSTING	Coordination & Tasking Sec
SERVICE	Career officer, 30+ years;
VETTING	Re-vetted current cycle; no
HANDLER OF RECORD	[REDACTED]
FILE STATUS	Routine personnel hold

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

CLEARED

BACKGROUND

Long-serving administrative officer of the Coordination & Tasking Secretariat. Rose on procedure, not field work. Passed over for the top desk twice; carries the resentment openly enough that colleagues read it as ordinary careerist bitterness. Believes the service used him and gave nothing back.

CURRENT FUNCTION

Holds tasking reach: routes leads into the intelligence stream, allocates targets to off-books units, steers officer-to-operation assignments. Recently directed officer Kaul toward the Fateh matter and seeded the first-kill lead into Fateh's unit. Open file reads these as defensible desk calls within his remit.

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TRUE ALLEGIANCE	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
IDENTITY OF PRINCIPAL	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
STATUS OF PRINCIPAL	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]

DISPOSITION

Frightened, transactional, self-justifying. Tells anyone who will listen that the whole service is bought, that nobody is clean. Internal psych note flags the rationalization but stops short of a finding.

CONTACT PATTERN

Avoids direct meetings. Communicates through intermediaries even on legitimate business; explained as personal caution after a past leak scare. Has never been observed meeting any external principal.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

OFFICER KAUL tasking subordinate, steered onto the Fateh matter; unaware he is being pos
FATEH'S UNIT off-books kill team; received the seeded first-kill lead through the taskin
CUTOUT CHAIN layered intermediaries he treats as his only safe contact; he cannot name w
[REDACTED] the principal he has never met and cannot identify

TRAINING

Standard service induction decades past; administrative and tradecraft refreshers as required for compartmented handling. No field-operations background. Strength is bureaucratic: he knows the tasking machinery, the allocation rules, and where a lead can be inserted without leaving a routing fingerprint.

CAPABILITIES

Can place a target into the live intelligence stream and make it read as legitimate tasking. Can assign or withhold officers, accelerate or bury a file, and shape what a unit believes it discovered on its own. His danger is positional, not physical: he moves the board without appearing to touch it.

OPERATIONAL RECORD — SELECTED

2025 – directed Kaul toward the Fateh matter (logged as routine allocation)
2025 – seeded first-kill lead into Fateh's unit via tasking desk
2025-26 – sustained avoidance of direct contact; all business via intermediaries
2026 – re-vetting passed; no adverse finding recorded

OFF-BOOK TASKINGS PLACED FOR PRIN [REDACTED] [SEALED]

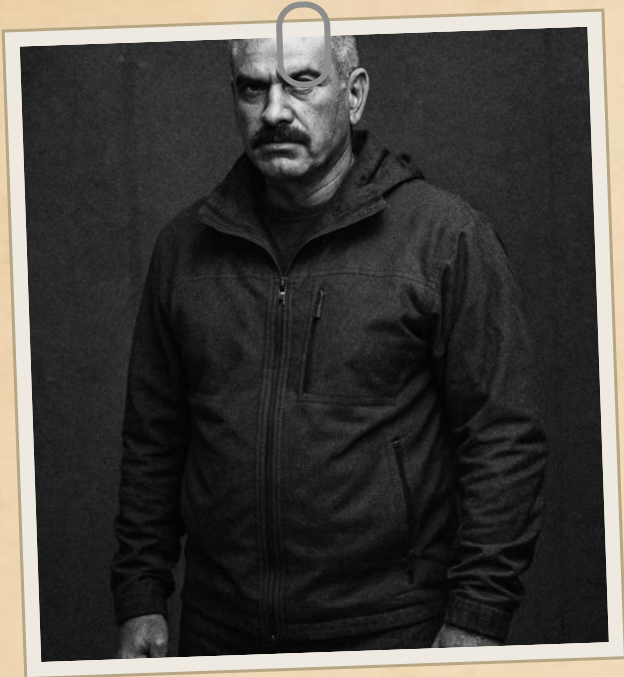
THREAT LEVEL - HIGH (covert)

Trusted insider with tasking reach; can corrupt the intelligence stream undetected.

STANDING ORDERS

Do not approach or alert. Treat current open file as cover-clean and leave personnel hold in place. Maintain discreet observation of tasking decisions and intermediary contacts; log every lead he routes and every officer he assigns. Priority objective is to walk the cutout chain upward to the principal, not to burn the asset. Any direct confrontation requires sign-off at the authorising level below.

AUTHORISED: Joint Secretary (Counter-Intelligence), R&AW Internal Security Wing



FILE REF	RAW/OB-UNIT/LANKA-07
SERVICE	Off-books R&AW unit under F
FUNCTION	Senior operative; close pro
PRIOR SVC	Indian Army special forces
DOB	c. 1973 (unconfirmed)
STATION	Base 'Lanka' / mobile, NCR-
RECRUITMENT	Via FATEH, founding-era int
TRUE ALLEGIANCE	
EXTERNAL HANDLER	

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

ACTIVE

IDENTIFICATION

Subject 'RUDRA'. Senior-most field hand in FATEH's off-books cell. Former Para SF; long-service operator, multiple deniable actions, no current overt record. Treated within the unit as its steady centre and as de facto guardian to the asset SITA. Carries himself as the unit's conscience.

BACKGROUND

Drawn from the founding-era intake when FATEH stood the cell up. Two decades of close work; trusted with the cell's most sensitive charge. Unmarried, no traceable family of record; regards the unit itself as kin. Stable, sober, low personal footprint, no debt, no vices flagged.

SEALED — RESTRICTED ABOVE THIS COPY

TRUE ALLEGIANCE	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
HANDLER — ACTUAL STATUS	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
PRINCIPAL IDENTITY	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
TRUE NATURE OF THE DEFECTION	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]

DISPOSITION

Reads as loyal and immovable to overt assessment. Protective to the point of fixation regarding SITA. Holds a private moral grievance over FATEH's conduct toward the child during the founding era; the file notes this as a stress line but, on open assessment, treats it as contained sentiment rather than a security breach.

ASSESSMENT

On the open record: a senior, dependable operator whose only liability is attachment to his charge. Believes himself to be acting decently. Capable of independent action if he judges the asset endangered. Recommend continued reliance with periodic loyalty review.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

FATEH unit commander; subject's overt principal and the family he believes he is betraying
SITA protected asset; subject's charge and the moral lever on which he was turned
FATEH'S CELL fellow operators at 'Lanka'; the only kin subject acknowledges
MERIDIAN / TRINETRA corporate-intelligence apparatus subject reads as an external rival,
EXTERNAL CONTACT [REDACTED] tasking channel, conscience-coded, no cash trail

TRAINING

Indian Army special forces grounding: small-unit assault, close protection, surveillance and counter-surveillance, infiltration and exfiltration, edged and small-arms work. Founding-era and subsequent unit work added deniable-action craft, asset handling, and base security. Comfortable running an op end to end without supervision.

CAPABILITIES

Senior-tier field operator. Plans and executes extraction under hostile conditions; can move a protected person off a fortified base. Strong tradecraft, calm under contact, reads a room for threat by reflex. Greatest operational asset is unquestioned internal trust: he can open doors inside FATEH's cell that no outside hand could. Most exploitable trait is his conviction that he is the one doing the decent thing.

OPERATIONAL RECORD – SELECTED

FOUNDING ERA – founding intake; assigned close protection of the child asset
FOUNDING ERA – registers private grievance re FATEH's conduct toward the asset
2025 – first kill (restaurant/hotel); subject in proximity to asset throughout
2025 – facilitates asset's break from FATEH; manages internal cover
2026 – runs the defection and escape; Lanka assault window
ONGOING – believes operation is his own act of conscience
TRUE AUTHOR OF THE OPERATION HE R [REDACTED] [SEALED]

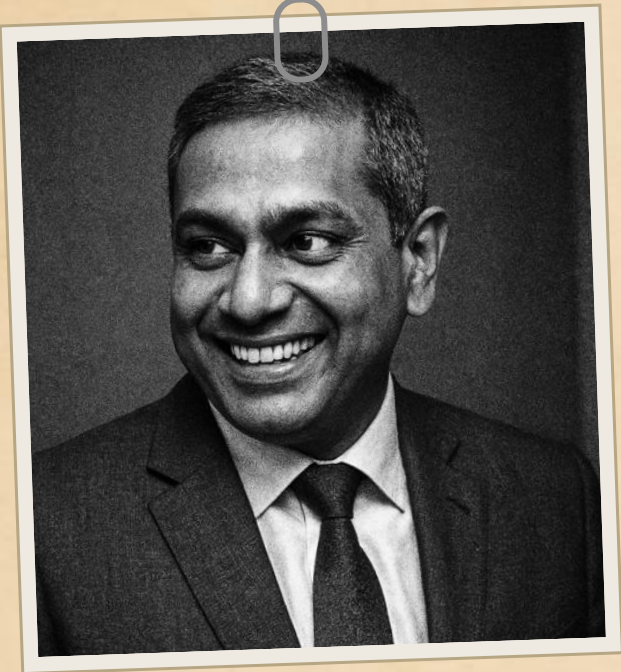
THREAT LEVEL - HIGH (to FATEH)

Trusted insider with extraction capability; the one hand inside the cell able to dismantle it from within.

STANDING ORDERS

Maintain overt confidence in subject; do not confront the grievance line directly. Sustain his belief that the operation is his own moral choice. Keep the conscience-coded channel single-threaded and cash-free. Should subject begin to question who he truly serves, escalate immediately and do not attempt local resolution.

AUTHORISED: Control, JANAKI desk (principal authority, name withheld)



NAME	Julian Mehta
POSITION	Chief Executive Officer, Me
NATIONALITY	Indian
DOB	c. 1976 (unverified)
BASE	New Delhi / Mumbai; corpora
PORTFOLIO	TRINETRA surveillance-and-p
BENEFICIAL CONTROL	[REDACTED]
TRUE FUNCTION	[REDACTED]

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

UNWITTING ASSET

PROFILE

Public face of Meridian Risk Group, the private contractor pivoting from physical muscle to predictive surveillance. Presents as the architect and owner-operator of the firm. Polished, persuasive, built for the boardroom and the ministerial anteroom. Carries the TRINETRA pitch into rooms a soldier could not enter.

DISPOSITION

Operates on the premise that presence is substance: if the room believes him, he is real. Anxious beneath the gloss, shallow, conflict-avoidant. Will not examine the parts of the company he does not control, and reads that incuriosity in himself as confidence.

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TRUE FUNCTION	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
BENEFICIAL CONTROL	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
PRINCIPAL — ACTUAL STATUS	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]

UTILITY

High-value as a credibility surface and lightning rod. Absorbs scrutiny, regulatory and journalistic, that would otherwise reach the firm's structure. His eventual exposure is itself a function: it satisfies investigators while the structure behind him stays intact.

VULNERABILITY

Vanity, dependence on external validation, and terror of being seen as hollow. Will not whistle-blow because doing so requires admitting what he is. Compromisable through flattery, access, and the fear of exposure rather than money.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

MERIDIAN INNER OFFICE the half of the company that does not report to him; treats him as
STATE INTERLOCUTORS ministry and grid officials he courts for the TRINETRA mandate; beli
HANDLING LAYER the channel through which his lines, schedule, and confidence are managed
FATEH (LANKA) contractor muscle adjacent to Meridian; Mehta knows the name, not the leas

TRAINING

No intelligence or military background. Trained by the private sector: management consultancy, investor relations, corporate communications. Fluent in the grammar of decks, valuations, and risk language. Coached, knowingly or not, in message discipline and on-camera composure. No tradecraft, no fieldcraft, no counter-surveillance instinct.

CAPABILITIES

Persuasion, access, and social camouflage at the elite tier. Can open doors in government, finance, and press that operational personnel cannot. Reads rooms for sentiment, not for threat. No technical command of the TRINETRA stack he sells; recites capability claims he cannot evaluate. Negligible self-protection; cannot detect that he is run.

OPERATIONAL RECORD — SELECTED

2025 – fronted TRINETRA pitch to state interlocutors; reception warm
2025 – public profile raised; press positions him as Meridian principal
2026 – scrutiny converging on his name and filings
2026 – flagged for probable exposure event; containment value noted
DISPOSAL CONTINGENCY – POST-EXPOS [REDACTED] [SEALED]

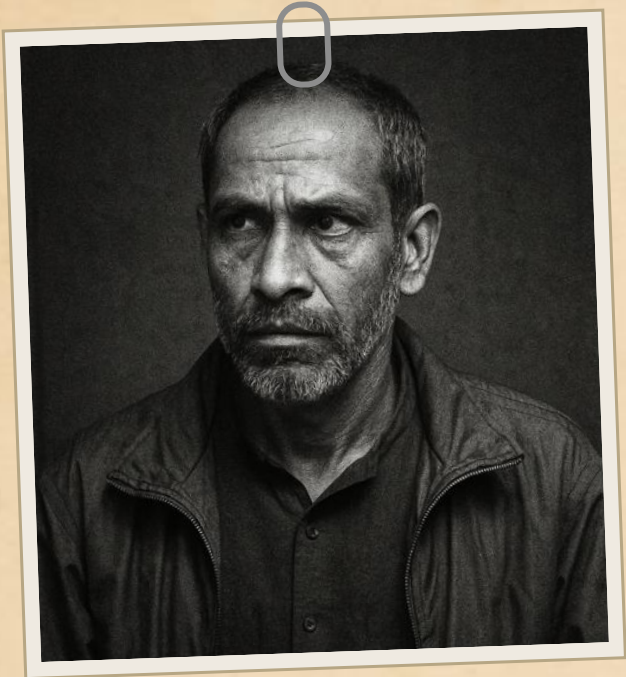
THREAT LEVEL - LOW (DIRECT) / HIGH (AS CONDUIT)

Harmless on his own; dangerous as the legitimacy surface that lets the apparatus operate.

STANDING ORDERS

Maintain surveillance, do not approach. Treat as instrument, not principal: anything he states about Meridian's ownership is to be logged as cover, not fact. Do not burn him prematurely; his exposure is most useful when it draws scrutiny away from the structure. Trace every line of authority that runs past him, not to him. Escalate the moment a chain of control points beyond his desk.

AUTHORISED: Joint Secretary (Off-Books), R&AW Special Cell



SUBJECT	Salim Reza
WORKING ALIASES	'Reza-bhai', 'the Quartermaster'
ETHNO-LINGUISTIC	Bengali Muslim; fluent Bangla
EST. AGE	late 40s (b. c. 1977, unconfi
FUNCTION	Faction handler / operation
THEATRE	Eastern corridor into Delhi
BELIEVED PRINCIPAL	Sympathetic foreign state i
FUNDING ROUTE	Hawala via single offshore
TRUE PAYMASTER	[REDACTED]
OPERATION CLASS	[REDACTED]

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ACTIVE

PROFILE

Mid-tier ideologue who climbed from courier to logistics to faction control over two decades in the network. Disciplined, money-clean in his own accounting, treats cash as fuel and never as motive. Reads as a genuine true believer; carries himself as a professional answering to a state, not a paymaster.

RECRUITMENT POSTURE

Subject believes he was approached and cultivated by officers of a sympathetic foreign service who share the cause. All contact is one-way through a cutout. He has never met a principal, never seen a flag, and accepts the absence as standard tradecraft. He does not know he is being run, nor by whom above the cutout.

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TRUE PROVENANCE OF FUNDING	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]
ACTUAL PURPOSE OF THE STRIKE	[REDACTED]	[SEALED]

CURRENT TASKING

Steering his outfit toward a single high-visibility strike on Indian soil, dressed to him as a strategic operation of the foreign sponsor. He plans it as cause and war. He is unaware the strike has been scoped, timed and target-shaped for a purpose external to his network.

ASSESSMENT

The exploitable seam. He is the only human bridge between the militant network and the buyer above the cutout, and he does not know the second half of that sentence exists. Pull him and the whole thread comes with him. Pressure-test by following the cutout's money, not the man.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

THE CUTOUT Sole contact channel; passes money and tasking, identity firewalled from subj
OUTFIT LIEUTENANTS Two operational subordinates who execute logistics on his word, ignor
BELIEVED CASE OFFICER The 'foreign service handler' subject thinks he reports to; never
FIRST PULLER Hostile principal who has identified subject as the loose thread and begun

TRAINING

Field-trained inside the network rather than at any academy: courier discipline, dead-drop and hawala accounting, cell compartmentation, counter-surveillance on foot and by vehicle, basic small-arms and improvised-munitions handling. Strong human-network tradecraft, weak signals hygiene. Long border-crossing experience along the eastern corridor.

CAPABILITIES

Can raise, fund, move and aim a militant cell against a metro target with low forewarning. Commands real operational loyalty and can mount a coordinated strike on tasking. Limited against modern surveillance: trusts his cutout absolutely, treats the absence of a visible principal as discipline, and has no defence against being run from above. Believes he is the ceiling of his own operation.

OPERATIONAL RECORD – SELECTED

2025 Q2 – Cutout reactivates; new funding tranche received, read by subject as foreign-service back
2025 Q3 – Begins target survey, eastern corridor into metro theatre
2025 Q4 – Cell hardened, lieutenants briefed on compartmented need-to-know basis
2026 Q1 – Strike package finalised; subject committed, believing operation is a state directive
2026 Q1 – FLAG: hostile principal identified subject as entry thread, surveillance opened
TRUE END-USER OF THE OPERATION [REDACTED] [SEALED]

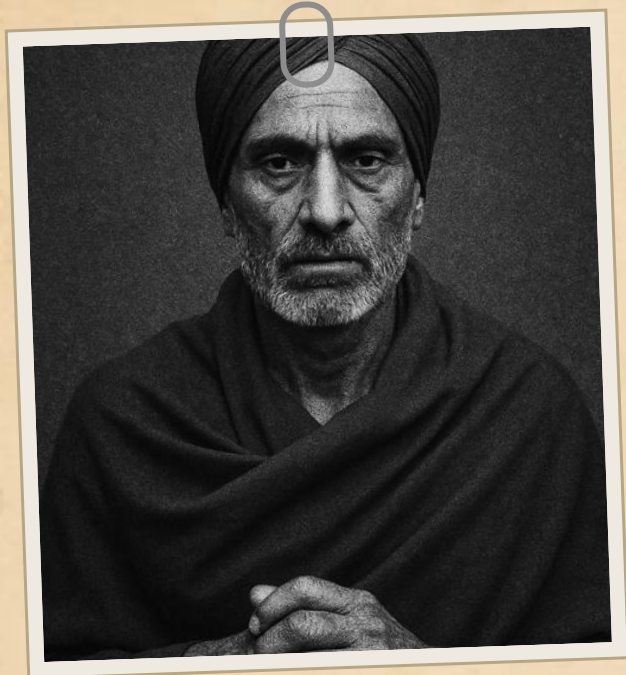
THREAT LEVEL - HIGH

Live, funded, committed to an imminent metro strike; lethal not for what he knows but for what he can be m

STANDING ORDERS

Do not lift. Keep subject running and unaware. Map every node downstream of the cutout before any approach, and work the money channel rather than the man. Treat him as the open end of the thread: surveillance only, no disruption that would alert the cutout or collapse the chain above it. Escalate to case authority before any contact.

AUTHORISED: Col. (Retd.) Fateh, Officer Commanding, Special Operations Base 'Lanka'



FILE	KAB/DHAL-1975
NAME	DHALIWAL, Kabir
RANK	Major (R&AW liaison, off-bo
ETHNIC/REGION	Punjabi Sikh (Jat), North I
DOB	[REDACTED]
LAST KNOWN LOCATION	Remote Himalayan monastery,
LANGUAGES	Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, Engli
SERVICE STATUS	separated; voluntary withdr

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WITHDRAWN

BACKGROUND

Commissioned officer routed early into a deniable R&AW off-books cadre during the 2007–2008 reorganization period. Field-rated for long-cover penetration work. Career file thins sharply after 2008; subsequent decade is administratively dark.

MENTOR / HANDLER

Trained under operator codename LUTHRA, listed as deceased. Circumstances of death recorded as operational loss in the field. DHALIWAL was the last cleared contact. No further entry.

PRESENT DISPOSITION

Subject has severed all service contact and resides at a high-altitude monastery. Reads as renounced: takes no commissions, issues no demands, defends no past action. Assessed as genuinely withdrawn rather than dormant, though capability is undiminished.

MERIDIAN / TRINETRA NEXUS

Subject is believed to be among the very few who have observed the MERIDIAN/TRINETRA apparatus from the far side of an operation and survived intact. Knowledge value is high. He neither markets nor conceals it; he simply holds it.

BEHAVIOURAL READ

Spare, still, beyond justification. Operates on a private settled ethic: certain acts are done for the greater good and carried in silence thereafter. Shows neither pride nor remorse. Will give a petitioner what they need. Will fight if pressed, and is expected to win.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

MENTOR (DECEASED) former handler LUTHRA; relationship terminal, see MENTOR/HANDLER
PETITIONER (F) operative climbing to seek counsel; subject of an active decision he has
ESCORT (F) second climber accompanying the petitioner; capability unrated
WARLORD 'FATEH' principal of fortified base 'Lanka'; adversary-adjacent, no current cont

TRAINING

Long-cover penetration, deniable wet-work, counter-surveillance, and infiltration of hostile non-state networks. Cross-trained in the tradecraft of the 2007-2008 cadre: legend-building, dead-drop and handler discipline, close-quarters lethality. Mountain-acclimatized. A decade of monastic discipline has narrowed rather than dulled the skill set.

CAPABILITIES

Retains full field-grade lethality at close quarters despite withdrawal. Reads operations structurally and predicts intent without instrumentation. Immune to ordinary leverage: no family, money, or status pressure point on file. The one standing exposure is moral, not physical. Treat any approach as potentially terminal if he judges it necessary.

OPERATIONAL RECORD — SELECTED

2007-2008 // inducted into off-books cadre; first deep cover assignments
c.2008 // LUTHRA logged deceased; subject sole surviving contact
2008-2024 // administratively dark; no recorded taskings
c.2024 // confirmed resident, Himalayan monastery; all service contact severed
2025-2026 // located by petitioner party; consultation in progress

TRUE NATURE OF LUTHRA TERMINATION [REDACTED] [SEALED]

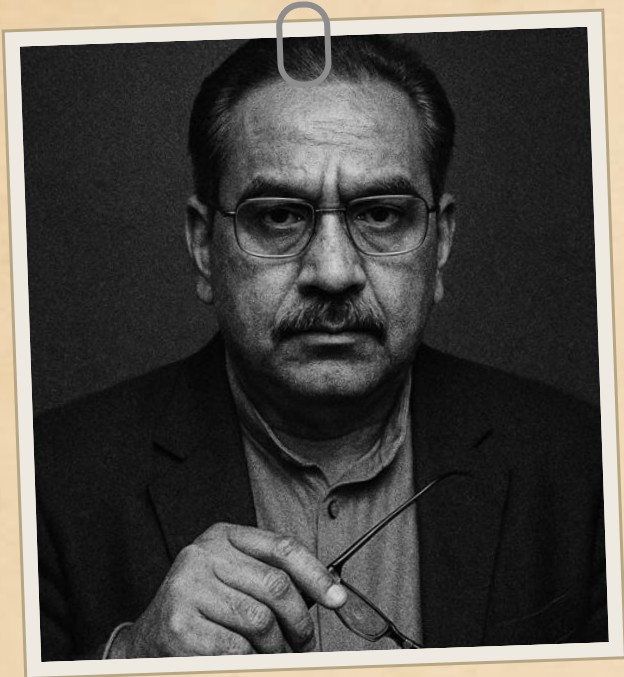
THREAT LEVEL - MODERATE (conditional: HIGH if cornered)

Passive while unprovoked; lethal and unstoppable if forced to defend the silence he keeps.

STANDING ORDERS

Do not task. Do not extract. Observe and report only. No approach without case-authority sign-off; any contact is to be made by a single unarmed liaison on the subject's terms, never a team. Treat his counsel as actionable intelligence but his person as off-limits. Should he move from the monastery, flag immediately and stand down pending instruction.

AUTHORISED: Joint Secretary (Operations), R&AW off-books desk



FILE	PERS/RAW/LUTHRA-S
SUBJECT	Luthra, Sunil – Colonel (re
SERVICE	Research & Analysis Wing –
DOB	1953 (Punjab)
STATUS	Deceased – homicide
LAST POSTING	New Delhi
CIRCUMSTANCE OF DE	[REDACTED]
PROGRAM AUTHORITY	[REDACTED]

CLASSIFICATION: TOP SECRET // EYES ONLY. Provenance and status fields are sealed above this copy; see the assessment overleaf.

DECEASED

BACKGROUND

Punjabi Khatri, born 1953. Army commission, transferred to external intelligence mid-career; rose to Chief. File records a long clean ledger: no financial flags, no foreign entanglement, no disciplinary action across three decades. Reputation among subordinates as upright and austere, a man who carried decisions rather than delegated their weight.

SERVICE CHARACTER

Held that the nation occasionally requires acts no clean ledger will admit, and that a leader signs for them so no one beneath him must. Burdened rather than corrupt. Colleagues describe a conscience kept in private; the open record shows only competence and restraint.

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TRUE PROVENANCE OF THE OFF-BOOKS [REDACTED] [SEALED]

TERMINAL PERIOD

Withdrew from active direction before death. The events of the 2007–2008 collapse – a unit's failure, an officer's disappearance, a child displaced – touched him personally but are recorded here as institutional misfortune, not personal fault. Cause and agency of his death are sealed.

LEGACY DISPOSITION

Invoked posthumously by serving officers as a moral benchmark. Subject Kaul in particular carries an inherited burden traced to this man. Treat all live references to Luthra as references to a memory the service measures itself against.

KNOWN ASSOCIATES

FIELD ASSET (M) ran the off-books unit; later went rogue with a child. Whereabouts contested.
FIELD ASSET (F) ran alongside the above; disappeared during the collapse, presumed staged.
THE PROTEGE Luthra's trained successor-figure; relationship turned. Now withdrawn to a H
THE INHERITOR serving officer who carries the unresolved guilt of Luthra's tenure.

TRAINING

Infantry-officer grounding before transfer to external intelligence. Trained in agent direction, deniable-operation authorization, and inter-service liaison. No field tradecraft of note in later years; his instrument was the signature, not the pistol. Schooled in the older doctrine that command absorbs the moral cost of what it orders.

CAPABILITIES

At peak, authority to stand up and fund deniable units outside the standing books, and the institutional cover to keep them invisible. Strong internal trust, wide protege network, lasting moral influence over officers he shaped. Posthumously, his name still moves serving personnel – a lever of conscience rather than command.

OPERATIONAL RECORD – SELECTED

1953 – born, Punjab.
Army commission; transfer to R&AW mid-career.
Rose to Secretary (R) / Chief.
2007-2008 – collapse of a unit under his watch; officer vanished, child displaced (recorded as misfired).
Stepped back from active direction.
[DATE SEALED] – killed.

IDENTITY OF KILLER AND MOTIVE



[SEALED]

THREAT LEVEL - DORMANT

Subject deceased; residual risk is reputational and inherited, not operational.

STANDING ORDERS

Hold this file as historical-conscience reference, not active target. Do not disclose sealed lines to this readership. Any live operation tracing back to Luthra's tenure is to be flagged upward, not actioned at this clearance. Protect the integrity of his open record except where a sealed authority is lawfully unlocked.

AUTHORISED: Joint Secretary (Internal Records), R&AW

ACT ONE

The Key That Kills

Chapter 1

New Delhi · 2025, Day 0

The night manager's name was Pradeep and he had been on his feet since four. At the desk of the Saraca Grand he logged the last of the evening's key cards into the property-management system the way he logged everything, by rote, the cursor blinking in the field for ROOM and then the field for GUEST and then the field he never filled, REMARKS. A card came back to him across the marble from a departing guest in 214. He swiped it through the encoder to wipe it, watched the little light blink from amber to green, and dropped it into the tray with the others. Forty-one rooms occupied out of sixty. A wedding party on the third floor whose music he could feel through the soles of his shoes. A businessman in 506 who had asked twice about a guest who had not arrived. The lobby smelled of jasmine from the brass urns and of the disinfectant the night staff ran across the floor at eleven, and Pradeep, yawning into the back of his hand, did not look up when the glass doors sighed open and let in the heat of the Mumbai night and a young woman in a grey kurta with a laptop bag on her shoulder.

She did not come to the desk. They never came to the desk, the ones who belonged. She crossed to the lifts as if she had crossed to them a hundred times, and Pradeep returned to the blinking cursor, and that was the whole of his testimony, later, to men who would find nothing in it worth keeping.

Sita had been eighteen years old for six hours.

The key had come to her at dinner. Fateh had chosen the restaurant himself, a place off Linking Road with white tablecloths and a man at a sitar in the corner playing nothing anyone listened to, and he had ordered for both of them without looking at the card, and somewhere between the dal and the coffee he had set a hotel key card on the cloth beside her plate and slid it the width of his two fingers toward her. A plain white card, the Saraca Grand's gold filigree printed on it, a room number in raised type. He had not said happy birthday. He had said, the way another man might mention the weather, "He checks his messages at the window. He likes the light." And then he had paid in cash and walked her to the car and told the driver an address that was not the hotel, and she had carried the card in the inside pocket of her bag for two hours while the city emptied of the respectable and filled with the rest.

This was the shape of love in the only family she had. A man does not give a daughter a knife on her birthday. He gives her a door, and trusts her to walk through it cleanly.

In the lift she watched the floor numbers climb and read the card again with her thumb, the room embossed under the pad of it so that she did not have to take it from the bag. 506. The fifth floor, then, where the corridor turned twice and the housekeeping pantry stood at the second turn with its door that did not lock because the staff propped it for the laundry trolleys, which she knew because she had walked the building at four that afternoon in the uniform of a courier and left a parcel for a guest who did not exist and used the time to read the geography of the place the way other girls her age read the faces of boys.

She got out on four.

You did not arrive on the floor of the work. You arrived a floor below it and you climbed, because a lift that opened on five and disgorged no one onto five was a thing a camera remembered and a man at a desk might one day be asked about, and a stairwell was blind. The Saraca Grand's stairwell smelled of cold concrete and old cigarette smoke and the fire door on five had a bar that gave under her hip without a sound because she pushed it at the hinge end where the leverage was, not at the handle where the latch would knock. She had oiled nothing, touched nothing, changed nothing about the building. The building did the work. You only had to know which of its habits to lean on.

The corridor was empty and lit the colour of weak tea. Somewhere below her the wedding throbbed. She went along the wall on the side away from the doors, where the carpet was newest and quietest, past 502 with its breakfast card on the handle, past 504 dark under the door, and she felt the old thing settle over her that was not calm exactly but the absence of everything that was not the next four feet of corridor. Fateh called it the cold. He had been teaching her to find it since she was eleven, the way a music teacher finds a child's ear, and she had it now the way she had her own pulse, which she could not feel at all.

At the housekeeping pantry she stopped and listened to the building for a slow count of thirty. The hum of the ice machine. The lift cable in its shaft. No footsteps, no television loud enough to mean a guest awake. She took from the laptop bag a pair of nitrile gloves and put them on below the line of the corridor camera, which was domed and ceiling-mounted at the far turn and saw the lift and the doors near it and not this stretch, she had checked, she had stood under it at four

o'clock and traced its eye. From the bag she took the second thing, which was nothing, a length of folded cloth and inside the cloth a tool that was not a knife in the way the door was not a key, and she did not look at it. Looking at a thing was how you grew attached to it. She held it in the cloth in her left hand and she held the key card in her right and she walked to 506.

He checks his messages at the window. He likes the light.

She had not asked who he was. She had learned not to ask in the years when asking was punished with silence and a longer night of drills, and she had unlearned the wanting to ask, which was harder and took longer, and she was proud of the unwanting the way you are proud of a callus. A name was weight. A face was weight. Fateh gave her the minimum that the work required and the minimum tonight was a habit, a window, and a number, and she carried them up five floors and felt them as facts and not as a man.

The card met the lock and the lock thought about it. There was a sealed half-second, the small green civility of the light, and she turned the handle in the same motion so that the click of the bolt and the give of the door were one sound and not two. Inside, darkness, and the blue wash of a phone screen at the far end of the room, and the smell of a man who had been in a room too long, cigarettes and room-service coffee and the particular staleness of waiting.

He was at the window. He liked the light.

He stood with the curtain pushed back and the city laid out below him in its sodium grid, the sea a black absence beyond it, and the phone in his hand throwing his face up pale against the glass, and he was typing, or reading, his thumb moving, and he had not heard the door because the

wedding was under his feet too and because men who wait stop hearing the thing they are waiting for. He was perhaps fifty. A good shirt gone soft at the collar from the day. A signet ring. The screen lit a glass on the sill, two fingers of something amber gone warm, and beside it a second glass, clean, dry, waiting, and the sight of the second glass passed through her and was filed and did not stop her, because nothing stopped her, that was the whole of what she was.

She crossed the carpet in four steps with her weight rolling heel to toe along the outer edge of each foot and she was behind him and a little to the side and her left arm came up and the work was done in the way Fateh had drilled into her ten thousand times in the cold concrete room with the mat, not strength, never strength, but leverage and surprise and the body's own architecture turned against it, the angle that closed the carotids so that the brain went dark before the man understood that the room had a second person in it. He did not cry out. They did not, when it was done right, because the sound needs blood at the brain to make it and you took the blood away first. He went heavy against her, all of him at once, the phone slipping from his hand to the carpet face up still glowing, and she took the weight the way you take a sleeping child, turning with it, lowering it, because a body that falls makes a sound a floor can carry and a body that is laid down makes none.

She held the angle a long time after he had stopped. Longer than strength. You counted, and you did not trust the stopping, because the stopping could lie and the counting could not. She counted in the cold the way she had been taught, not seconds but breaths she was not taking, and the wedding played its tinny song through the floor, and the city

went on burning its orange grid below the window he had liked, and at the end of the count she laid his head down on the carpet with a gentleness that meant nothing, that was only craft, the same care you would give a thing you did not want to mark.

Then she was up and the room was a list.

The phone first. It lay face up and glowing and she crouched over it without touching it and read what the screen showed, because Fateh would want to know what the screen showed and because a dark phone told you nothing and this one was still awake. A messaging app, the bubbles green and grey. The last message out was his, sent at 23:41, nineteen minutes ago. It said: I am here. Room as agreed. The drink is poured. And below it, nothing. No grey bubble in answer. No typing, no delivered-and-read, only the small grey word under his own message, Delivered, and not the other word, the one that would have meant a second person somewhere in the city had lifted a phone and seen him waiting. He had poured a drink for someone. He had written I am here to someone. And the someone had not written back, and had not come, and now never would learn that the room had been kept for them, the chair turned to the window, the second glass wiped clean and set out dry and hopeful on the sill.

She knelt over the dead man's phone in her gloves and felt the cold thin, for a half-second, like a skin of ice gone suddenly grey at its centre, and she did not know why.

It was nothing. A meeting that failed. Men failed to come to rooms every night in this city for a hundred reasons that were not her concern and were not anyone's tradecraft, a flight delayed, a wife suspicious, a nerve lost at the lift. She filed the screen, the time, the words, the absence of an

answer, in the place where she put the things Fateh would ask for, and she stood, and the second glass stood with her in the corner of her eye, clean and dry and waiting on the sill beside the warm one, and she made herself stop seeing it.

The rest she did by the list and the list was clean.

She did not take the phone. A taken phone was a thing missed, a thing reported, a clock started; a phone left on the carpet beside a man whose heart had simply, the doctors would say in the morning, stopped, was furniture. She did not touch the glasses. She did not touch the body again. She put nothing in her bag that had not come in it and she took nothing out that had not. She walked the room once with her eyes for the thing she had moved and there was nothing she had moved, because she had moved almost nothing, that was the art of it, the room was as it had been except that the man at the window had lain down on the floor to sleep. She picked up the key card from where she had set it on the console by the door. She put the folded cloth back in the bag with its tool still wrapped, unlooked-at, and zipped the bag, and stood a moment with her hand on the door and her ear to the corridor, listening to the building tell her it was empty, and it told her, and she opened the door on the slow hinge and stepped out into the weak-tea light and let it close behind her with the bolt easing home under the cover of the wedding's bass.

Five floors down she walked the stairwell, gloves off and balled in the bag now, and on the half-landing between two and three she stopped and crouched as if to fix the strap of her sandal and left, in the gap behind the standpipe where the night cleaners never reached, nothing, because there was nothing to leave. She was checking the cold. It had come back

over the thin place and sealed it. She told herself it had.

In the lobby Pradeep had his head down over the system, logging a late arrival from the airport car, the cursor in the field for GUEST, and he did not look up at the young woman in the grey kurta who crossed from the lift side toward the doors, and she did not look at him, and as she passed the desk she did the last thing the work required, which was the thing it had begun with. She let the key card fall from her fingers into the brass tray of returns at the corner of the desk, among the others the departing guests had left, where in the morning a clerk would gather them and run them through the encoder and wipe them amber to green and not wonder, among forty returned cards, at one more. The door had opened. The door was given back. A man does not give a daughter a knife on her birthday and a daughter does not keep the door.

The night took her back. The heat closed over her on the steps and the doorman wished her a good night with his eyes already past her to the taxi rank, and she walked east along the dark shopfronts toward the place where the car would be, and the city went on, the wedding behind her in its lit box on the third floor still playing for the dancers who did not know that on the fifth floor the music was playing for no one.

She would tell Fateh it had gone clean, because it had. She would tell him the screen, the time, the words, I am here, room as agreed, the drink is poured, and the grey word Delivered with no answer under it, because he would ask and she did not keep things back from Fateh, not the operational things. She would not tell him about the second glass, because the second glass was not an operational thing, it was clean and dry and it meant nothing, and a girl who had

unlearned the wanting to ask should be able to unlearn one glass on a windowsill.

She found she was walking a little faster than the work allowed, and she slowed herself, and somewhere under the cold, in the thin grey place she could not name and would not look at, the man at the window went on waiting for someone who was never going to come, and Sita, eighteen years old since six o'clock, carried him out of the city she had left him in without once having learned his name.

Chapter 2

*New Delhi and undisclosed off-books sites in India; later the
unregistered birth of Meridian abroad · March 2007*

The bungalow off Aurangzeb Road had been requisitioned in another man's name eleven years ago, and now it was being given back to the dark it had come from. Fateh stood in the porch where the staff cars used to wait and watched two men in shirtsleeves feed a steel drum in the side garden. They were not hurried. That was the first thing he noticed, the thing that told him this was sanctioned and not a panic: a panic burned fast and left ash on the lawn for the neighbours to wonder at. These two worked the way orderlies worked, lifting a folder, checking the tab, dropping it page by page so the fire never choked. The smoke went straight up. March in Delhi, before the loo came in from the west, the air still held a morning coolness that carried the smoke like a column.

He had been told to come and sign for the disposition of the analytic files, and to bring his own. He had brought them. They were in a canvas grip at his feet, and he had not let go of the handle, though there was no one here who would take it from him.

Inside, the house had already begun to forget itself. The almirahs stood open and emptied, the Godrej steel ones with their long keys still in the locks, the way you left a safe open once there was nothing left worth closing it on. Squares of paler paint marked where the wall maps had hung. Someone had taken down the operational clock, the one that had run on Greenwich and not on Delhi, and left the nail. The carpets

were rolled. A bearer he half recognised carried a tray of glasses to the kitchen and did not meet his eye, and Fateh understood that the man had been paid off and warned and would be on a train to somewhere by tonight, his memory of this address professionally adjusted.

Luthra was in the back room that had been the registry. He stood at the window with his hands behind him, looking at the drum and the two men and the column of smoke, and he did not turn when Fateh came in.

"You're early," Luthra said.

"I came straight."

"Yes." A pause. "You would."

The Colonel had aged in the eight days since Fateh had last seen him, which was not possible and was nonetheless true. There was a grey in him that had not been there, not in the hair, which had been grey for years, but under the skin, the way a man greyed from the inside when something load-bearing had gone in him and he was carrying the rest of it on will. He wore a civilian bush shirt. He had not worn uniform to this. That, too, was a message Fateh read and filed: there would be no uniform on any of it, ever, no ribbon, no record, no line in anyone's service file that said this house had stood and these people had served in it.

"Sit," Luthra said, and Fateh sat on one of the two steel chairs that remained, and Luthra did not sit.

On the registry table lay a single buff folder and, beside it, a death certificate. Fateh knew it was a death certificate before he could read the printing, by its shape, by the rubber stamp bled slightly at the edge, by the carbon ghost of the duplicate beneath. A clerk's hand had filled the boxes. The municipal seal was real. He had handled forged instruments,

he had built a few, and he knew the particular dead honesty of a genuine document, the way the ink sat wrong on a forgery and right on the true thing, and this one sat right.

Janaki Rao. The name in the box for the deceased was Janaki Rao.

He had known. He had been told on the sixth, by telephone, in a sentence Luthra had made very short because a long one would have been a cruelty. He had known for eight days and had done the eight days' work that knowing required, the clean-out, the source contacts severed, the legends retired, the network rolled up strand by strand because the spider was dead and a web with a dead spider in it was only a trap waiting to take the wrong thing. He had done all of it with the fact lodged in him where he could not reach it. And now here was the paper, and the paper was worse than the telephone, because the paper was the State agreeing.

"The body," he said, and stopped, because his voice had done something he had not authorised.

"Came back on the fourth." Luthra spoke to the window. "What there was. You don't want the file, Fateh. I have read it so that you don't have to. There was a fire in it as well as the rest. The identification was made on the dental chart and on the items recovered, the watch, the ring, the chain she wore. Dr. Menon did the work himself at the cantonment. I stood in the room. I will not have you wondering for the rest of your life whether some clever soul could have walked an impostor past a tired pathologist. I stood in the room. It was her."

It was the kindest thing the Colonel could have said and it was meant as kindness and Fateh took it as kindness, and he believed it, wholly, because every part of it was correct. The

watch was correct: she had worn a man's watch, an old Favre-Leuba on a band too big for her wrist, and had laughed when he asked, and never explained. The chain was correct. The chart, the cantonment, Menon, the Colonel standing in the room because the Colonel was a man who stood in rooms so that lesser men did not have to carry the worst of it alone. It was all correct. That was what grief was, in the end, in their trade. Not a wail. A series of correct documents that did not contradict one another, assembled by people who loved you enough to make sure of it.

"There'll be no funeral," Fateh said. It was not a question.

"There was one. On the seventh. Three of us. A pandit who thinks he buried a road-accident case from the Mathura highway. The certificate says cardiac. The certificate will always say cardiac." Luthra turned from the window at last. His eyes were dry and red-rimmed, the eyes of a man who had done his weeping where no junior would see it and would not do it again. "She is buried under a name that was never hers and a cause that was never true, and that is the last service the country will take from her, that she lie quiet under a lie so that nothing she touched is ever pulled up by the roots. You understand what I am telling you."

"You're telling me the program is finished."

"I am telling you the program is finished." He said it flatly, in the past tense, and the past tense landed on the room like the lid of something. "It was a good instrument. It was the right instrument. We built it because the threat was real and the ordinary channels were too slow and too watched, and for four years it did work that I will go to my own grave proud of and unable to name. And it is finished. The architecture died with the architect. There is no one who held the whole of it in

one head the way she did. You held a quadrant. Mishra held a quadrant. No one held the centre. The centre is gone."

"I held more than a quadrant."

"You held more than a quadrant," Luthra conceded, and there was something in the concession that Fateh would turn over many times in the years to come and never quite settle. "And it changes nothing. An instrument that depends on one irreplaceable mind is not an instrument. It is a séance. We do not run the security of the Republic on séances. It is finished, Fateh. You will sign these files over to me, you will take a posting I have arranged that is dull and clean and far from any of this, and in three years no one will remember that this house was anything but a house."

The two men in the garden lifted another tranche of folders. Fateh watched a single sheet escape the drum on a thermal, rise, blacken, and come apart in the air. Four years of someone's nights. He thought of the cables they had run, the defector they had nursed through eighteen months of a man's terror, the warning they had pushed up the line in '05 that had emptied a marketplace eleven minutes before it would have been full. None of it would ever be written. He had known that going in. He had thought he understood what it meant. He had understood nothing.

"And the rest of the staff," he said, because he was an operational man and the operational questions were the ones he could still ask without his voice betraying him. "The locals. The two Nepalis. The girl who did the registry."

"Settled. Moved. Paid. One by one, the way you'd want it done." Luthra's hand moved a fraction toward the buff folder and stopped. "It is all being done the way you would want it done. That is the only mercy in a thing like this, that it can be

done well. A burned operation is still an operation. It has a procedure. We follow the procedure, and the procedure is dignity, of a kind. It is the only dignity left to give them."

From somewhere deeper in the house, beyond the registry, beyond the kitchen where the bearer had gone, came a sound that did not belong to a house being struck. It was thin and it climbed and broke and climbed again, and it took Fateh a full second to identify it because it was so far outside the grammar of the place: an infant crying.

He looked at Luthra. Luthra did not look surprised, which meant Luthra had known, which meant it had been in the procedure too.

"There was a child on the books," Luthra said, before Fateh could ask, and his voice had gone very careful, the voice of a man stepping where the floor might not hold. "It is being seen to."

"Whose."

"It is being seen to." Not an answer. A door closing. "There are things on the disposition list, Fateh, that are above your sign-off and above mine. I am telling you it is being seen to, by people whose business it is, under an arrangement that was made before either of us could have stopped it. Leave it there."

He could not leave it there, not entirely, but he was a disciplined man and discipline meant that the part of you that could not leave a thing alone learned to do its wanting silently. He sat with the canvas grip between his feet and he did not get up, and the crying went on, and then a door he could see through the registry's open doorway, a side door that gave onto the servants' passage and the lane behind, that door opened.

A woman came through it. Not staff, that was the first reading, and the readings came automatically because they always came automatically, he could not switch them off any more than he could switch off his own pulse. Not staff: her sandals were town sandals, her sari was a town woman's careful cotton, she carried herself like someone who had been brought in for an hour and would be gone and would not ask twice what the hour had been about. A nurse, or a woman who passed for one. She had a swaddled bundle held against her shoulder in the particular two-handed way of a person carrying something she has been told is precious and is afraid of, and the crying came from the bundle, and then, as she crossed the patch of passage that the doorway framed, the crying stopped.

It stopped the way an infant's crying stops, all at once, a small switch thrown, perhaps by the motion, perhaps by the change of light. And in the held instant of its stopping the cloth at the top of the bundle had fallen back, and Fateh saw, across two rooms and the width of a doorway and for no longer than it takes a person to walk through a doorway, a face. A few weeks of a face. Eyes screwed and then opening, dark and unfocused and enormous, the way they were at that age, taking in the smoke-grey light of a house being unmade as though it were the ordinary light of the world, because to her it was. A wisp of hair. A fist, freed from the cloth, working at nothing.

The woman crossed the frame and was gone toward the lane. He heard the side door, and then a second sound, low, a vehicle's door, and an engine that had been left running the way you left an engine running when the stop was not to be a stop at all but only a pause in a continuous motion, a baton

passed without the runners breaking stride.

He did not get up. He told himself he did not get up because Luthra was watching him and because the disposition list was above his sign-off and because a man who got up at every sound in a burning house was no use to anyone. All of that was true. He believed all of it.

What he believed about the child was this: that it was a casualty. The trade made casualties the way a mill made dust, fine and constant and got into everything, and most of the dust was paper but some of it was people and a small fraction of the people were the ones who had not chosen any of it, the wives who had married a cover and not a man, the sources' children, the locals' families, and now this, an infant on the books of an operation that no longer existed, being driven away down a back lane to an arrangement made by people whose business it was, to be raised somewhere under some name by someone, the last loose strand of a web whose spider was dead, tucked away so that nothing she had touched could be pulled up by the roots. A casualty. The cleanest possible disposal of a thing that could not be left where it was. He had seen worse done worse. He told himself that, too, and it was true, and the truth of it settled in him and changed nothing, the way true things did not always change what they touched.

"Sign," Luthra said gently.

Fateh opened the canvas grip and took out his files, the quadrant he had held and a little more, four years rendered down to a stack of buff that weighed less than it had any right to, and he laid them on the registry table beside the death certificate that sat so honestly on the wood. He uncapped his pen. The disposition form had boxes too, a clerk's grid for the end of a thing, and he filled them, and at the foot he wrote his

name in the long careful hand his father had beaten into him, and the act of writing it was the act of agreeing, the way the State had agreed, the way the certificate agreed, the way the watch and the chain and the dental chart and the pandit and the grave under the wrong name all agreed, every document in concord, no contradiction anywhere, the whole edifice of correct paper standing square and unfalsifiable as a building.

"It was the right instrument," he said, not to be contradicted, only to have said it once aloud in the room where it had lived.

"It was the right instrument," Luthra said. "And we will not build another."

The smoke went up straight in the windless morning. The two men in the garden fed the drum. Somewhere down the back lane an engine that had not stopped was carrying its small cargo out into the city of nine million in which a child without a name could vanish more completely than any cable, any defector, any secret they had ever kept, and Fateh capped his pen and did not know, would not know for years, that he had just signed for the disposal of the one strand the procedure had failed to burn, and watched it carried alive out a side door, and called it a casualty, and been wrong.

He picked up the grip out of habit, found it empty, and set it down again. There was nothing to carry now. He had handed it all across. He sat a moment longer in the emptying house, beside a man going grey from the inside, under a column of smoke that held its shape in the still air, and let himself, once, believe that the dead were dead and the finished was finished and that the worst of it had already happened.

Chapter 3

New Delhi · +2 days

The stairwell smelled of frying mustard seed and damp cement, the way every safe stairwell in this part of the city smelled, and Sita took it two flights at a pace that would not be remembered by anyone who passed her. She had washed twice since the hotel. She had changed her shoes once. The second pair was in a bag at the bottom of a municipal bin in Karol Bagh, and the keycard had gone into the Yamuna off the Nizamuddin bridge at four in the morning, when the river was the colour of used engine oil and nobody on the bridge was looking at the water.

By the rules she should have felt nothing now. The work was finished, the man was dead on schedule, the exit had been clean. There was supposed to be a flatness after, a settling, the way silt settled. Instead there was the small grit of a thing that did not fit, and she carried it up the stairs with her like a stone in a shoe.

She knocked the pattern on the green door. Two, then one, then two. Rudra opened it before her knuckle left the wood, which meant he had heard her on the stair and known her by the weight of her tread, and he stood back without a word to let her in.

The flat was the kind the unit kept and never owned: two rooms above a sari shop, the rent paid in cash by a man who did not exist, the electricity metered to a dead pensioner. A ceiling fan turned slowly and moved the heat around without lessening it. Along the far wall, paper. Not files. Files implied

a system, an index, a place a thing could be found. This was paper in drifts and stacks and folders gone soft at the corners, surveillance logs and printed transcripts and grainy long-lens photographs held down against the fan by whatever had been to hand, a stapler, a brass paperweight, a chipped mug. Years of it. None of it stamped, none of it numbered, none of it belonging to any office that would admit the room existed.

Fateh sat at the table in the middle of it with his reading glasses down his nose and a glass of tea going cold at his elbow, and when he looked up at her his whole face changed, the way it always did, into something she had no other word for than home.

"There she is," he said. "My professional."

"Baba."

"Sit. You've eaten? You haven't eaten. Rudra, is there anything in that kitchen a person can eat, or only your terrible biscuits."

"Only the biscuits," Rudra said, from the edge of the room. He had gone back to the low stool by the window, where the light was good, and in his lap was the Browning broken down on a square of oiled cloth: slide, barrel, recoil spring, the frame held in his big careful hands. He did not look up from it. He worked the way he did everything, slowly, without waste, a rag drawn through the barrel and held to the window light and drawn through again. The smell of the solvent cut sharp through the mustard-seed smell from the stairs. He was not part of the conversation and he never missed a word of it. That was Rudra. He had taught her to fall without breaking her wrists when she was nine and to break a man's wrist when she was fifteen, and in between he had sat in a thousand rooms exactly like this one at exactly that distance,

cleaning something, watching the door, watching her.

She sat. Fateh poured her tea from the pot into one of the enamel mugs, the white one with the blue rim chipped down to the black metal in a crescent like a bitten nail, and pushed it across to her. The tea was stewed and over-sweet and it was the taste of every debrief she had ever had, and her hands closed around the warm metal of it before she had decided to let them.

"Tell me," he said.

She told him. She told it the way he had drilled into her, clean and in order and without colour, the approach, the timing of the corridor, the housekeeping trolley she had used as a screen on the eleventh floor, the keycard, the angle, the exit by the service stair. She told it as a report and he listened to it as one, his eyes half-closed behind the glasses, his head tipped, and once or twice he made a small sound in his throat that she knew was approval and lived for more than she would ever have said.

When she finished he was quiet a moment. The fan turned. Out in the street a scooter went by under load, its engine straining, and faded.

"Eighteen years old," he said at last, softly, almost to himself. "Do you know what I was doing at eighteen? I was being shouted at by a havildar with a stick because I could not keep my section in a straight line on a parade ground in Roorkee. Eighteen." He took off the glasses and looked at her without them, and his eyes were wet at the rims in the way of an old man's eyes, which might have been feeling and might only have been age. "You did it the way I would not have trusted a man twice your service to do it. No noise. No mark. He was alive and then he was not and the corridor never

knew. That is not training. Training I can give a donkey. That is something you were born with and I only had the wit not to spoil."

The warmth of it went through her like the tea did, down and out into the cold places, and she let it, because to refuse it would have been a lie and because there was nobody else on the earth whose praise meant anything. He had named her. Not her mother, who was dead, murdered before Sita was old enough to keep a single true picture of her, only the name left behind like a coat on a hook. Fateh had given her the name a second time, had said it over her the way you say a prayer over something you mean to keep, and had built her up out of nothing in rooms like this one. There was no him and her. There was only the unit, and he was the unit, and she was its hand.

So she should have stopped there. She drank the tea. She turned the stone over in her shoe.

"There was a thing," she said.

"There is always a thing." He said it indulgently, settling back, lacing his fingers over the soft front of him. "Tell me your thing."

"Two glasses."

She watched him. She had been trained to watch by the man she was watching, which was its own kind of problem, because he knew every tell he had taught her to read and had surely kept a few he had not taught. But she watched anyway, the small muscles at the corner of the eye, the hands, the breath.

"On the windowsill," she said. "Two glasses. One had been used. Water, I think, or it had held water. The other was clean, set out. Dry. And his phone on the table, face up, and

the screen had a message on it that he had been looking at. He had the door on the latch, Baba. The security bar was folded back against the frame. A man like that, in a hotel like that, with the trade he was in, does not leave the bar folded back. He had left the door for someone. He had set out a glass for someone. He was waiting." She heard her own voice and made it flat again. "Someone who didn't come. I came."

Across the room the rag stopped moving through the barrel. Only for a breath. Then it went on, draw and turn and draw, and Rudra said nothing and did not look up, but she had heard the small held silence of it the way you hear a clock stop in a room you have stopped noticing the clock in.

Fateh did not stop. That was the thing she came back to, later, turning it over in the dark. Fateh did not so much as blink.

"And?" he said.

"And nothing. He died on schedule. The exit was clean."

"And nothing," he agreed. "You hear footsteps in an empty house and you build a man to go with them. It is a good instinct. It is the instinct that keeps you alive in the corridor, and I would rather have it sharp and wrong nine times than dull and right once. But listen to me." He leaned in, and put one heavy warm hand flat on the table between them, near her mug, not touching her, which was his way. "The man was a courier. Couriers carry. They meet. They hand a thing to one set of fingers and take a thing from another, and they live their whole short lives waiting for someone who is late, because the someone is always late, that is the nature of the someone. He set a glass out from habit. He left the latch off because he was a careless man at the end of a careful life, and careless men at the end of careful lives are precisely the men

who end up on my list. You did not interrupt a meeting. You closed an account."

It was good. It was so good that for a moment it closed the gap entirely, sealed it over smooth, and she felt the relief of a thing made simple. That was the trouble. It was exactly as good as it needed to be and not one word more, and she had been raised by the man who built it, and she knew the shape of a thing built to exactly the size of the hole.

"Who was the someone," she said.

"There was no someone."

"Who was the courier."

"A man who is no longer our concern." He took his hand back. He picked up his glasses and folded the arms one over the other with great care and set them on the table, and the small ordinary motion bought him a second she watched him spend. "Sita. You don't ask the name of the account. You never have. Why now?"

"Because of the second glass."

"Forget the second glass."

"You taught me not to forget the second glass."

That landed. She saw it land, a flicker far back, gone at once, and for a moment the warmth was not in his face, and what was there instead was older and harder and she understood, the way you understand a thing in your body before your mind has the words, that she had walked up to the edge of a room he kept locked, and that the locked room was real, and that it was very large.

Then the warmth came back over it like water over a stone.

"I taught you to see," he said. "Not to chase. There is a difference, and the difference is the difference between a long

life and a short one in this trade. You saw. Good. You saw and you finished the work and you came home and you told me. That is the whole of your duty and you have done it without a flaw. The seeing you give to me. The chasing"—he spread his hands, taking in the wall of paper, the soft folders, the drifts of it under the slow fan—"the chasing is mine. That is what all this is. You think I sit here in the heat with my bad eyes for the pleasure of it? Somebody chases. So that you do not have to. So that you can be eighteen."

She looked at the wall of paper then, properly, the way she had not let herself look at it before, because it had always just been the furniture of the rooms she grew up in, the background to her whole life. Surveillance logs going back years. Long-lens photographs of men getting out of cars. Transcripts. A map of the southern coast with pins in it. None of it stamped. None of it filed. No crest, no office, no ministry. She had been a child in the unit and had never once thought to ask the only question that mattered, which was who the unit answered to, because a child does not ask who feeds it. She asked it now, silently, of the room, and the room had no answer, because the answer was nobody. There was no office above this office. The paper went nowhere. The reports she had made her whole life had gone into this man and stopped, the way a river stops at a closed sea and only deepens.

She had always known it and never known it. Both at once. You could do that, she was learning. You could hold a thing in your hand for eighteen years and never turn it over.

"How long," she said.

"How long what."

"How long has the unit been gone. From the books. You always said we work in the dark for people who can't be seen

to use us. I believed that. I want to know how long ago the people stopped being there."

The fan turned. Rudra had finished the barrel. He was fitting the slide back onto the frame now, the parts going home with small oiled clicks, and she heard each one, and she understood that he had cleaned a clean weapon, that there had been nothing wrong with it at all, that he had broken it down because his hands needed a thing to do while he listened to this, and that told her more than any of Fateh's good answers.

"You're tired," Fateh said gently. "You've been awake since yesterday and you've done a hard thing and now you're sitting in my heat making ghosts. I know this state. I have been in it more times than you have years. Everything connects to everything, every door has a man behind it, the whole world is one machine grinding toward you. It isn't. It's just tired. Go and sleep, and in the morning the second glass will be a glass and the courier will be a dead man who deserved it and you will be hungry, and Rudra will make you eat his terrible biscuits, and we will talk about the next one. There is always a next one."

He smiled at her, and it was the real smile, the one she had no defence against, the one from a hundred birthdays and a thousand drills and the night she had wept at twelve over a dog that died and he had sat with her on the floor of a room like this one until it stopped, and she felt herself give to it, because it was true. Whatever else was true, that was also true: he loved her. She did not doubt it for an instant and she would not have known how to begin. That was not the question. She was old enough now, perhaps just barely, to understand that a man could love you entirely and lie to you

in the same breath, that the two were not enemies, that the lie could even be the shape the love took when the truth was too heavy to hand a child. She did not have those words yet. She had the feeling of them, sitting in her chest beside the tea.

"Alright, Baba," she said.

"Good girl."

She finished the tea so as not to waste it and stood. The chipped mug she carried to the kitchen herself and rinsed it under the thin warm tap, because you left no print, you cleaned your own glass, he had taught her that too, and the thought stopped her with her hands in the water. You cleaned your own glass. So that nobody set out a second one and wondered who it was for. The dead courier had broken the first rule of the trade. He had let himself be expected.

When she came back out Rudra had risen from his stool and was standing by the door, and the Browning was gone from sight, back into wherever he kept it against his body, and he had her bag, her overnight bag, in his hand. He would walk her to the other flat. He always did. He fell in half a step behind her on her right and a little back, where his hand could reach across his body and where his eyes could keep the street and her at once, and in eighteen years he had never once walked anywhere else.

At the door she stopped and looked back. Fateh had already put his glasses on again and bent to the paper, an old man in a hot room reading the dead, and the lamp made a yellow island of him in all that drift of unfiled years, and the fan turned over him, and he looked, for the first time in her life that she had ever let herself see it, alone. Not a man at the centre of a great machine that reached up into the dark to people who could not be seen. A man at a table with a wall of

paper and two soldiers, holding a war together with his own two hands because there was no one above him to hand it to. She did not know yet what the war was. She knew now that it was his and not the nation's, and that she had been its hand all her life and never asked its name.

"Baba," she said.

He looked up over the glasses.

"The name of the courier. You'll tell me one day."

It was not a question. He held her eye a long moment, and something passed over his face that she would spend a great deal of the rest of her life trying to read, tenderness and weariness and something underneath that might have been fear and might have been grief, and which she was not, on that night, equipped to name.

"One day," he said, "I'll tell you everything."

She believed him. That was the part she came back to. On that night, in that heat, with the rinsed mug drying in the kitchen and Rudra's quiet bulk at her shoulder and the man who had named her twice promising her the truth, she believed him without reservation, and went down the dark stairs into the mustard-seed smell, and the door closed behind her with a sound she did not yet have any reason to remember.

Chapter 4

New Delhi · +3 days

The lift to the third floor of the annexe did not announce its floors, and Mira had learned, over four years, to count them by the change in the air. Ground was diesel and wet stone from the forecourt. First was the canteen, ghee and burnt tea. By the third the air had been scrubbed of everything, conditioned down to a neutral cold that smelled of nothing at all, which was the smell, she had decided, of decisions being made about other people's lives.

She surrendered her phone at the steel drawer outside the room. The duty officer logged the IMEI, sealed the drawer, gave her the brass tag. They did it to everyone now, since the Pegasus business had taught the service that its own instruments could be turned against it, that a phone in a pocket was a microphone the owner paid for. She pocketed the tag and went in.

The room they called the tank had no windows and one long table of pale laminate, and on the wall a bank of screens that this morning showed nothing but the seal and a clock running to the second. Six chairs were filled. She knew four of the faces and half-knew a fifth. At the head sat Kaul.

He was a narrow man who had grown narrower in office, the kind of administrator who read every annexure and remembered the page. He had a reputation, carefully tended, for never having signed anything he could not defend to a committee that did not yet exist. People mistook that for caution. Mira had come to think it was a kind of courage, the

slow expensive sort, the sort that made no friends.

"Sit," Kaul said, not unkindly. "We're waiting on one paper."

The man at the second seat, on Kaul's left, half rose and drew out the chair beside his own for her. Sehgal. She placed him now, from the tasking cell, the desk that turned a chief's intention into an operation with a budget code and a deniability annex. A soft, courteous man with reading glasses pushed up into thinning hair and a fountain pen he uncapped and recapped while others spoke. He had set out, she noticed, a second pad of paper and a second pen at her place, squared to the table edge, as though he had known precisely where she would sit. She thanked him with a nod and sat.

"While we wait," Kaul said to the room, "the contract."

A flatscreen woke. A slide, the dull blue of a procurement deck, and on it a single word in a typeface meant to suggest the future. TRINETRA. Beneath it, in the smaller font of people covering themselves, the name of the vendor of record, and behind that vendor, a chain of holding companies that the financial-intelligence wing had spent eight months unbraiding to arrive, with reasonable confidence, at Meridian.

"Status," Kaul said.

"Stalled, sir." This from Bhatt, the analyst who carried the file. He spoke the way men speak when they have rehearsed it in the corridor. "The Cabinet Committee has it but won't take it. The Attorney General's people are nervous after Puttaswamy. The whole thing reads, to a court, as the state building the instrument the Constitution exists to prevent it from building. So the proposal is elegant. We don't build it. We buy the output. A private grid, fed by everything we

already collect lawfully, plus everything they ingest commercially, fused and ranked and handed back to us as a feed. NATGRID was the database. The Central Monitoring System was the tap. This is the oracle."

"It is a marketing word," Kaul said.

"It is, sir." Bhatt did not smile. "But the demonstration was not nothing. They ran a pilot for the ministry. Flagged three movements before they happened. Two arrests, one interdiction. Very clean."

"Foresight," said Kaul, and let the word sit in the cold air until it sounded foolish, which was a thing he could do to words. "There is no foresight. There is data old enough that the subject has forgotten he made it, correlated faster than he can hide it. That is not prophecy. It is memory with a budget." He looked down the table. "But it photographs as prophecy. And that is what they are selling. Not the grid. The feeling that someone is finally a step ahead."

Mira watched Sehgal write a line, cap his pen, uncap it. He was not taking minutes; the minutes were the clerk's job, the boy at the end with the recorder. He was making his own notes, in a small upright hand, and she could not read them and did not try.

"My concern is not the contract," Kaul said. "The contract is the ministry's mistake to make. My concern is what stands next to the contract." He turned, fractionally. "Sehgal."

The soft man set his pen flat, parallel to the pad. When he spoke his voice was lower than she expected, and entirely without theatre.

"We have for some time," he said, "been aware of an activity. Wet activity. Domestic and across the near abroad. Clean to a standard our own people cannot reliably match. No

claims, no signatures, no recovered ordnance worth the name. For a long while we read it as a foreign hand, because the alternative did not occur to us." He let that hang a beat. "The alternative is that it is ours. Or was ours."

He touched a control and the seal gave way to a chart, a tree of boxes, most of them empty, lines drawn with the dotted hesitancy of an analyst who would not commit to solid ink.

"There was a sanctioned programme," Sehgal said. "Years back, before my time on this desk and before, I think, anyone's at this table except the chief's. An off-books capability, authorised at the level of the chair, doing work the service needed done and could not be seen to do. It was wound up. The principals dispersed. One died." He did not name the dead. "We believed it closed."

"And?" said the woman across from Mira, Defence side, impatient.

"And it appears one man did not close his part of it." Sehgal's pen turned a quarter-turn on the laminate. "He kept a thread running. No file above him, no office, no annex. He pays, we think, from sources we have not fully traced, and he tasks, we are nearly certain, a very small number of operatives, perhaps as few as one or two, whom he has held outside every system we possess. No service record. No payroll. The person does not, as far as our instruments are concerned, exist."

"Everyone exists," the Defence woman said. "Aadhaar exists. A phone exists. A bank exists."

"That is the point I am making," Sehgal said, with the patience of a man who had made it before. "We pulled the threads anyone leaves. There are none. No enrolment we can

bind to the activity. No device that persists. No transaction trail, no UPI residue, no cloud backup left carelessly syncing the way they always do. The cards used are burned inside a week. The faces, where we have them, do not survive a second sighting; appearance is changed, gait is changed, the camera gets one frame and never the same one twice." He looked, for the first time, directly at Mira. "We have a great deal of machinery in this country now for finding a person. It is built on the assumption that a person leaves a trace. This one has been raised, we think, never to leave one. Which tells us a good deal about how she was raised, and almost nothing about who she is."

She. So it was a woman. Mira kept her face still and felt the room's attention drift, the way attention does, toward the only person at the table who had been called in from outside the regular circle.

"The operative is young," Sehgal went on, more quietly, as if the next part were for her. "From what little we can reconstruct, very young when she began. Long enough inside the work that there is, in all likelihood, nothing else. No before. We are looking at a person who was made for this and kept for this and told, we would assume, a story about why."

Kaul let the silence go a moment, then closed his hand on the table, lightly, a gavel made of skin.

"Here is the decision," he said, "and I want it minuted, because one day it will be read by people looking for someone to hang, and I would rather it be me. The unit is unaccountable. That alone is enough. A capability that answers to one man, funded outside the vote, killing outside the law, is not an asset. It is a liability the state will be made to answer for, in this climate, with the privacy cases live and

the press circling NATGRID and the rest. We will be asked in a courtroom or a committee who authorised it, and the honest answer will be nobody now living in this building, and that answer will not save us. So we close it." He looked at each of them in turn, the slow accounting he was known for. "We do not close it the way it has been operating. We do not put a bullet in a man and call it housekeeping. That is the disease, not the cure. We bring it inside, or we end it, by the rules, with paper."

Mira found she had been holding her breath, and let it go without sound.

"There is a complication," said Bhatt, the analyst, and he had the grace to look as if he wished there were not. "Whoever this man is, his activity has been running, in the last months, against targets that overlap with our own watch list on the contract. The Meridian people. Their integrators, a financier, a fixer in the Gulf. He is hitting the architecture of the very thing the ministry is being sold." He spread his hands. "It is possible the rogue is the only person in this country currently inconveniencing the vendor."

"Then he is doing the right thing for reasons we cannot sanction by means we cannot own," Kaul said. "Which is precisely the trap. We are not in the business of being grateful to people who do our work without leave. Down that road the unit never closes, because there is always one more good reason. No." He shook his head once. "The man is a separate problem, and I will deal with the man. The instrument is the question for this room."

He turned to Mira, and the screens behind him, as if cued, resolved into a face.

It was not much of a face. A still pulled from a camera at the wrong height, half in shadow, a young woman in a doorway who had clearly registered the lens in the instant before the frame and was already turning out of it. The eyes were caught, though. Whoever had grabbed the still had got the eyes. They were not frightened and not cold. They were attentive in a particular way that Mira recognised, because she had spent her own career learning to wear it, the look of a person reading a room for the exit and the threat and finding, automatically, that both were the same.

"You have her file," Kaul said. "What there is of it. Read it tonight." He paused. "Your assessment, before you do."

She chose her words the way she chose footing on a wet stair. "If she has been inside it her whole life, then everything she believes about herself is something she was given. Why she does it. Who she does it for. The wrong done to her that the work is supposed to answer." She looked at the still, at the turning-away girl. "The conditioning of an adult, you fight. The conditioning of someone who never had an adulthood that wasn't this, you can't fight directly. You'd be telling her the only world she's had is a lie, and asking her to take your word over the word of the only person who has ever fed her. People do not give that up because you are right. They give it up when the lie cracks on its own and you happen to be standing close enough to be believed."

"Can it be done?" Kaul asked.

"It can be attempted." She would not give him better than that. "It is not turning an agent. It is closer to bringing someone back from the dead and persuading them they were buried alive. Some don't want to know."

"And if it can't be done?" said the Defence woman, flatly, asking the question the room had been built around.

Kaul answered before Mira could. "Then she remains a problem, and the man who made her remains a separate problem, and we will be sitting in this room again with worse options." He held Mira's eye. "But the order is not what you think it is, and I want you to hear me say it, because tasking officers downstream will round it off to something simpler if I let them." A flick of his glance, the smallest thing, toward Sehgal, who was already writing. "You are not being sent to kill her. We have people for that and I am not using them. She is, on any honest reading, a victim of the same programme we are closing. If there is a person left under the instrument, you are being sent to reach that person and bring her out. Turn her. Not break her, not end her. Turn her. If you tell me in three weeks it cannot be done, that is an answer I will accept, and we will decide again, here, on paper. Are we clear?"

"We are clear," Mira said.

"Sehgal will read you in. He has built the approach package." Kaul's attention was already moving, the way a chief's must, to the next box on the next chart. "That is all. The contract goes back to the ministry with our reservations attached. The unit closes. Minute it."

The clerk's recorder clicked off. Chairs scraped. The Defence woman left first, fast, the way people leave when they have decided the meeting cost them more than it gave. Bhatt gathered his slides. Mira stayed where she was, looking at the still on the screen until someone killed the feed and the seal came back, and the girl in the doorway was gone as completely as she lived.

Sehgal did not rise with the others. He squared his pads, hers and his, and slid a folder across the laminate to her, a real folder, buff card, string-tied, the way the most sensitive things still travelled because paper could be counted and shredded and could not be exfiltrated by a phone in a pocket.

"Thin," he said, apologetically, as if the thinness were a discourtesy he had personally committed. "But you will find I have put everything in. Even the parts that are guesses, marked as guesses. I do not like to send a person in carrying only the facts. The guesses are sometimes the road."

She took it. It weighed nothing.

"You've worked her before?" she asked. Not the woman. The case.

"No one has worked her before. That is rather the point." He capped his pen and laid it in the gutter of his closed pad, precisely, and looked at the dead screen as though the still were still on it. "I have spent a long time trying to find her, Ms. Mira. Longer than the chief knows, if I am honest, on hours that were my own." A small, tired smile, the smile of a clerk who has made a hobby of one impossible thing. "It is a strange feeling, to look for someone for years and then to be the one who hands her to the person who will reach her. I find I want it done well. More than the file warrants, perhaps."

It was the kind of thing a diligent officer said, and she took it as that, a desk man's pride in a case he had nursed, and she was tired and the room was cold and she wanted to read the folder somewhere with a window. So she missed it, or rather she filed it under the wrong heading, the warmth in the voice, the years on his own hours, the second pad set out at her place before she had chosen her chair.

"I'll read it tonight," she said, and stood, and tucked the weightless folder under her arm.

"Of course." Sehgal rose with her, the courteous half-bow of a man seeing a guest to a door he did not own. "You'll have questions by morning. Come to me first. Before anyone." He recapped a pen that was already capped. "I should like to be the one who answers them."

She went out past the steel drawer and reclaimed her phone and rode the unmarked lift down through the strata of the building, ghee and tea and diesel returning floor by floor, the real and breathing world coming back up to meet her. She did not look at the folder until she was in the car. When she untied the string the first page was a single photograph, better than the doorway still, a girl of perhaps eighteen at a restaurant table, laughing at something out of frame, and across the bottom in a small upright hand someone had written the only name the service had for her, with a question mark beside it, in ink that had been gone over twice.

Behind her, on the third floor, in a room with no windows, Sehgal sat alone at the cleared table for a while longer than the work required, and then he gathered his pads, both of them, his and the one she had not used, and took them away with him.

Chapter 5

New Delhi · +4 days

The room they called the Lanka had no windows, which was the first thing Fateh had insisted on when he took the lease through three names that were not his, and the last thing about it that still gave him comfort. It was a half-floor above a shuttered photocopy bureau in a Karol Bagh lane that smelled of frying besan and two-stroke smoke, and at half past one in the morning the only light came from the desk lamp and the cold blue wash of a monitor that Rudra had angled away so it would not throw on the board.

The board was the work. Four feet by six, soft pine framed in aluminium, and Fateh had made it himself in the way he made everything that mattered, with his hands and against the advice of younger men who thought a wall was a thing you projected onto now. He did not trust a screen for this. A screen showed you what you asked it for. A board showed you what you had not thought to ask.

He stood in front of it with a cold cup of tea he had no intention of drinking and read the outfit again from the bottom up.

They called themselves, in the chatter the technical people had pulled, the Ansar of some district or other; the name changed by season and meant nothing. What meant something was the shape of them. Eleven weeks of operations across three states, and Fateh had pinned each event to the cork with a numbered tag and a length of red thread running back to whatever it touched: a SIM, a vehicle, a transfer, a

man. The threads made a web that an outsider would have called chaos and that Fateh had learned, over thirty years, to read the way a doctor reads a tremor.

"Rudra. The container manifests. The Mundra set, not the Nhava Sheva."

"Here." Rudra was already crossing the room with the folder, as he had been already crossing the room for eleven years, since Fateh had pulled him green and furious out of a posting in the Northeast and never once regretted it. He laid the manifests on the desk squared to the edge and stepped back to the wall, hands behind him, and waited. He did not offer a theory. That was among the reasons Fateh kept him. Theories were cheap and Rudra spent only what he had.

Fateh ran his thumb down the columns. A consolidation shipment out of Sharjah, machine spares, declared value low enough to draw no scrutiny and high enough not to look like it was hiding from any. Customs cleared in eleven hours, which in itself was unremarkable; half of Mundra cleared in a day if the paperwork was clean. What was not unremarkable was that the consignee, a trading firm in Bhiwandi with a GST registration eight months old, had taken delivery and then, four days later, dissolved itself. Filed for cancellation. Walked away from a clean registration it had spent eight months making clean.

Most outfits did not do that. Most outfits, when they built a front, clung to it, because building a front cost time and money and nerve, and the men who ran these things were by and large not patient. They reused. They reused the SIM, the firm, the safe flat, the courier, because reuse was cheaper than discipline, and reuse was how Fateh caught them. He had spent his whole life catching men through the things they

were too tired to throw away.

This outfit threw everything away.

He moved up the threads. The money first, because the money was always where the carelessness lived if carelessness lived anywhere. Rudra had pulled the trail as far as the law and a few favours let him: a layer of UPI collections into a clutch of accounts opened on rented Aadhaar, the small-merchant kind, a paan shop here, a mobile-recharge counter there, each taking inflows just under the thresholds that woke the reporting software. Then the cash-out, then a hawala leg they could only infer from the shape of the hole it left, then nothing. The accounts went dark not when they were spent but on a schedule. Fateh had marked the closure dates with yellow tags and now he stood and looked at the yellow.

They closed in a rhythm. Not when the money ran out. Before. Each mule account was retired with a margin still in it, a few thousand rupees abandoned, the way a man crossing a border abandons the last of a currency he will never use again rather than be caught holding it.

Fateh felt the first cold thing move in him and named it, deliberately, nothing.

"They're leaving money on the table," he said.

"Sloppy collection?"

"No." He tapped the yellow tags one after another, left to right, a teacher counting. "Look at the dates. They're not running out. They're tidying up. They retire the instrument the moment it's done its work and not an hour after, before it can become evidence, and they eat the float to do it. Sloppy men chase the last rupee. These men have decided the last rupee is a liability."

Rudra came off the wall and looked. "That's not cheap. That's a lot of discipline to push down to a mule."

"You don't push it down to the mule. The mule never knows. You build the instrument so it expires on its own, so the discipline is in the architecture and not in the man. The man just does what the architecture lets him do and the architecture won't let him be greedy." Fateh heard his own voice doing the thing it did when he taught, the cadence, the small pleasure of a clean idea, and he stopped, because the pleasure had a floor under it that he did not like the feel of.

He went to the timing.

This was the part he had been circling all night the way you circle a sound in a house you thought was empty. He had built a column of the operations down the right of the board, eleven of them, dated, and beside each the public event it sat against. The cell did not move to a military rhythm. It moved to a civil one. A recce three days before a state cabinet reshuffle, when the protection details rotated and the new men did not yet know the ground. A dead drop serviced on the morning of a bandh, when the streets were thin and a closed shutter was the most natural thing on a road. A courier run timed to a festival, into the noise. None of it keyed to a target's schedule. All of it keyed to the calendar of the state itself, to the days when the machine of government blinked, looked away, rotated its men, drowned in its own crowds.

"They're not watching the target," Fateh said, mostly to himself. "They're watching us. The whole apparatus. They've got the rhythm of the establishment off by heart and they move in the gaps. Every operation sits in a seam where the state's attention is somewhere else."

"That's tradecraft," Rudra said. It was not a question and there was a small wariness in it now, because Rudra had been with Fateh long enough to feel the room change.

"That's a school of tradecraft," Fateh said.

He should have left it there. He knew, even as the words assembled, that he should have left it there, written it up as a sophisticated outfit, flagged it to the technical desk, gone home to the two-room flat where a daughter who was not his daughter would not ask where he had been because he had taught her not to. Instead he picked up the marker and began, against every rule of his own discipline, to draw on the board what he was not yet willing to say out loud.

He drew the cell as a structure rather than a list. At the bottom, the doers: the men who carried, who watched, who would one day, if this was what he thought it was, do whatever the operation was actually for. Above them, the cutouts, the handlers each man reported to. And above the cutouts, where the threads should have converged on a single hand, he drew instead three boxes and ran the threads to all three and wrote beside each, in his cramped capitals, a paymaster. And beside each paymaster he wrote a different flag.

Because that was the other thing. The chatter, when the technical people had teased it apart, did not point one way. One stream of it breathed Gulf money, the language and the cadence of a particular kind of patron. Another, fainter, had the grammar of a state to the west, the old enemy, the obvious enemy, the enemy you reached for the way your tongue reaches for a missing tooth. And a third thread, the faintest, suggested no flag at all, suggested freelancers, suggested a thing that was only itself.

The amateurs at the desk had read this as confusion. Three signals, three theories, pick one. Fateh read it as design.

"Every man in this thing," he said slowly, "believes he is working for a different master. The doer thinks it's the faith. One handler thinks it's the Gulf. Another thinks it's Pindi. And whoever is actually paying for all of it has built it so that no two of them could ever compare notes and arrive at the same answer, because the answer each of them holds is true, from where he stands, and false from anywhere else." He set the marker down. His hand, he noticed, was not entirely steady, and he put it flat against the desk to make it be still. "You don't get that by accident. You get that because someone designed deniability into the cell at the level of belief. So that if you take the whole thing apart, every confession you extract points somewhere different, and all of them point away."

Rudra was quiet for a moment. Then, carefully, because he was a careful man: "We've taught that."

"Yes," Fateh said. "We've taught that."

And there it was, out of the box at last, the thing the night had been about, sitting in the room with them.

He had taught it. He had stood in a room not unlike this one, a long time ago, in a building that no longer officially existed under a colonel whose signature on a single sanction had cost the man his peace and eventually, Fateh believed, his sleep, and he had taught young people to build cells that ate their own evidence and lied to their own members about who they served. But he had not invented it. He had it the way a son has his father's walk. He had learned it across a desk from a woman who taught it better than anyone he had met before or since, who used to say, in that dry flat voice that

gave nothing, that the most secure secret is the one each man thinks he already knows. Build the lie a man wants to believe, she said, and he will guard it for you with his life.

Layered belief. The expiring instrument, so the discipline lived in the architecture and not in the fallible man. The civil rhythm, moving in the seams of the state's attention because she had spent years inside the state and knew exactly where it blinked. The economy of it, above all the economy, never one motion more than the operation required, never a flourish, never a man kept on past his use, never a rupee chased that was not needed. He used to tell the youngest of them that they would know real work when they saw it because real work was boring. It looked like nothing. It looked like a firm dissolving itself, like a mule account closed with money still in it, like a bandh.

He stood in front of the board and read the whole web again, top to bottom this time, and it read back to him in a hand he knew the way you know a voice on a bad line before the caller has said their name, before the brain admits what the ear has already understood.

"It's a method," he said, and he heard how thin his own voice had gone and hated it. "Methods get out. We trained people. People retire, defect, sell what they know. Pakistan has had years to debrief anyone who walked. The Gulf buys talent. A good handler studies the men who came before him the way I studied the men who came before me. It's a method. Methods travel. This is someone who learned from the same well I drank from, that's all. There were others in that program. There were others who saw how she worked."

Rudra said nothing, which was its own kind of answer.

"It's a coincidence," Fateh said.

The word came out and lay on the floor between them and did not get up. He had spent thirty years in a trade whose first commandment was that there were no coincidences, that the word itself was the noise a tired mind made to spare itself the next, harder thought, and he had said it now the way a man says a prayer he stopped believing in as a boy, for the shape of it, for the comfort of the shape. He did not believe himself. He had never in his life been less able to believe himself.

Because a method could be stolen. A method could be taught, sold, reconstructed, inherited. But a method was a skeleton, and what was on the board in front of him had skin. It had her economy, yes, but it had also her vanity, the one flaw he had never been able to drill out of her and had loved her a little for, that she could not resist a touch of cruelty toward the people she was deceiving, a small private joke built into the structure that only its architect would ever see, the elegance of leaving a thing arranged so that the truth, when it was finally found, would feel like it had been laughing at you the whole time. He looked at the three paymasters, the three flags, and he saw the joke in it, the deliberate beautiful contempt of it, and that was not a thing you could learn from a debrief.

He had buried that woman.

Not literally. There had been no body to bury, which at the time he had told himself was the war's cruelty and which now, standing in a windowless room above a dead photocopy shop at two in the morning, opened in him like a trapdoor he had walked across ten thousand times without once looking down. There had been no body. There had been a report, and a flat scrubbed clean, and the absolute closed-file certainty of men he trusted, and a child. There had been the child handed

to him in the wreck of everything, an infant who should have gone into the system and into a name and a file and a fate Fateh could not bring himself to imagine, and instead had gone into his hands and his arms and his life, and out of that single refusal he had built everything that stood in this room, the board, the work, the unit no one had sanctioned, the girl he had made into the finest instrument the trade had ever produced and had told, every day of her life, that her mother had been murdered by the enemy.

He had named the child for the dead.

Fateh became aware that he had been standing very still for a long time, and that Rudra was watching him with the particular stillness of a man who has seen something in his commander he was not meant to see and is deciding, in real time, whether to have seen it.

"Sir," Rudra said at last, gently. "It's late. I can pull the originating intercepts again in the morning, take them apart from scratch, separate the noise out properly. If it's a copyist we'll find the seams. Copyists always leave seams. Whoever this is, if they learned it second-hand, somewhere they'll have got the grammar slightly wrong, and we'll see it, and you'll sleep."

It was a kindness, and it was good fieldcraft, and it was exactly the right thing to say, and Fateh loved him for it and knew it would change nothing. Because Fateh did not need the intercepts taken apart. He had already taken them apart. He had been taking them apart all night, looking for the seam, for the slightly-wrong grammar, for the place where a copyist's hand would have fumbled, and there was no seam, there was no fumble, there was only the work, clean and economical and quietly laughing, done by someone who had

not learned the grammar but had written it.

"Pull them again," he said, because it cost nothing to let the boy hope and because his own voice needed something to do. "All of it. From the first event. And the originals, Rudra, the raw collection, not the desk's summaries. I want to see it before anyone tidied it."

"Yes, sir."

Rudra gathered the folders, squared them, moved toward the door, and at the door he paused with his hand on the light switch, looking back at the board and the man in front of it. "It's probably nothing," he offered. "These things usually are."

"Yes," Fateh said. "These things usually are."

The boy left. Fateh heard him on the stairs, heard the photocopy shop's shutter rattle as the street door opened and shut, heard the two-stroke whine of an autorickshaw carrying him off into a city that did not know it was being fought over and never would.

He stood alone in the blue light and looked at the board, at eleven weeks of an enemy who threw everything away and chased no last rupee and moved only in the seams, who had built a cell of men each guarding a lie he wanted to believe, who had signed the whole structure with a cruelty so precise that Fateh could feel her in the room, could very nearly smell the particular cigarettes she had smoked and given up and smoked again, could hear the flat dry voice telling a roomful of frightened clever young people that the most secure secret is the one each man thinks he already knows.

He had told that secret to himself for eighteen years. He had guarded it with his life. He had believed it because he had wanted to.

Fateh reached out and laid two fingers against the topmost box on the board, the convergence point, the empty box above the three false paymasters where the real hand sat, and found that he had written nothing in it, that it was the one box on the whole board he had left blank, and that his fingers were resting on white space as if to keep something from rising through it.

"It's a coincidence," he said again, to the empty room, and this time he did not even bother to make it sound like he meant it.

He did not turn off the lamp. He did not go home. He pulled the chair to the board and sat down in front of the blank box and waited for the morning and the raw collection and the seam he already knew he would not find, an old man keeping vigil over the one grave he had never let himself stand beside, beginning, at last, to understand whose it was.

Chapter 6

New Delhi · +6 days

The flags are right on both counts. The final sentence steps out of Sita's head and names the mother-daughter line outright, which surfaces the forbidden fact; and "eighteen years" is doing too much load-bearing work too many times. Here is the revised chapter. It keeps the dramatic irony alive through what Sita carries and refuses to open, rather than through an authorial wink, and it thins the temporal refrain down to the few places it earns its weight.

She came into Daryaganj on foot, the long way, because the fog had grounded the cameras and a woman walking in fog is only a shape. It had sat over the city for three days, a cold white nothing that smelled of coal smoke and exhaust, and the traffic moved through it at the pace of an argument. She liked it. Fog was the last honest weather. It blinded the lenses on the poles and the ones the shopkeepers had bought to watch their own doorways, it turned the facial-recognition pilots the police were so proud of into expensive heaters, and it gave back to the street a little of the anonymity the street had lost. She kept to the inside of the pavement, paid cash for a cup of tea she did not want, and read the lane twice before she entered it.

The shop had no name she could see. A roll-down shutter, half raised, a strip of yellow light beneath it, and above the door a board so old the Hindi had gone to ghosts. Pran Kohli, Safe Custody and Parcel. The kind of business Aadhaar had

been built to kill and had not quite managed to. No KYC, no app, no ledger that connected to anything that connected to anything. A man left a thing and a sum, and the thing waited, and no part of the arrangement touched the grid. There were perhaps forty of these left in the old city. She had spent two days finding the one she wanted.

The keeper was older than the board. He sat behind a counter polished by sixty years of forearms, a kerosene heater at his feet, a transistor murmuring cricket from somewhere that was not winter. He looked at her the way old men in such trades looked at everyone, which was to say he looked at her hands and her shoes and not her face.

"You are not the niece," he said.

"No."

"Good. The niece does not come. She telephones and asks is the old fool dead, and I say not yet." He turned the radio down with a finger gone yellow at the tip. "You want something held or something fetched?"

"Fetched. It was left a long time ago."

"Everything here was left a long time ago." But he reached under the counter and put a pair of spectacles on, and that was when she knew he would talk, because he wanted to see who he was talking to. "Name."

"Sundaram." She gave the name flat, the way you give a name you have decided to spend. "Government man. Pension department, he would have said. He kept a parcel here. He stopped coming in two thousand and seven."

The keeper went very still in the way of a man consulting an interior file no auditor would ever find. Then he laughed, a dry sound, and it turned into a cough he managed without apology.

"Sundaram," he said. "Sundaram, Sundaram. The one who came on the eleventh. Always the eleventh, of every month, rain or strike. A man you could set your accounts by." He looked at her again, and now he did look at her face, briefly, and seemed to find nothing in it. "You are police?"

"I'm clearing an estate."

"A long time to wait."

"The law is slow."

"The law," he said, with the contempt of a man who had outlived three constitutions of it, and got off his stool.

She had not lied more than she had to, which was the only economy that mattered. Sundaram had been hers. She had been eighteen, and the room had been on the fourth floor of a hotel that no longer existed, demolished now for a Metro line, and she had let herself in with a keycard at twenty past nine and let herself out at twenty-six minutes past, and in the six minutes between she had done the thing she had been built to do, cleanly, so that the night manager would find a heart that had simply stopped. She remembered the room better than she remembered the year. She remembered the second glass.

There had been two glasses on the windowsill. One used, one clean and waiting, set out the way you set a place for a person you expect. And a phone with one message sent and no reply, the screen still bright when she lifted it with a cloth to clear it. She had reported neither thing because neither thing changed the work, and at eighteen the work was the whole of the world. But it had stayed in her, a splinter that lay quiet for the better part of two decades and then, in the last six days, had begun to move.

Six days ago she had understood that the unit had no office above it. That there was no ministry, no file, no clean

chain running up from Fateh's hand to some sanctioned dark. That she had spent her whole adult life as the instrument of a war that two men carried between them like a stretcher, and that everything she had been told about why was a thing they had chosen to tell her. When the floor goes out from under a life, the mind does not reach for the large questions first. It reaches for the small wrong thing it filed and never closed. For her that was a clean glass on a windowsill in a hotel that was now a hole in the ground.

So she had come to find out where Sundaram had been before he waited for someone who never came.

The keeper was a long time in the back. She heard the scrape of metal drawers, a muttered argument with a key. The shop was a cliff face of pigeonholes and tin trunks, each numbered in a hand that had since died, the dust on them undisturbed in vertical strata like geology. Somewhere in here was the residue of two hundred lives that had stopped paying attention, and one of them was the man she had killed. She did not feel anything about that. She had stopped expecting to feel things about it. She only wanted the residue.

He came back with a parcel the size of a shoebox, wrapped in oilcloth gone stiff and tied with jute, and set it on the counter between them as though it weighed more than it did.

"Prepaid," he said, before she could ask. "Ten years, he took, in two thousand and three. Paid cash, the whole sum, who does that. I thought, this is a frightened man, or a careful one. When the ten years finished he was already gone, so." He shrugged, a movement that took in the heater and the radio and the slow attrition of his trade. "I do not throw away. Throwing away is how you learn the one you threw was wanted."

"Did anyone else ask for it?"

"In all this time? You are the first." He pushed it an inch toward her. "She never came either."

Sita's hand did not move toward the parcel any faster than it had been moving. That was training, and training held.

"She."

"He would say it. Not to me, to himself, the way old men talk, except he was not old then. Counting out my fee on this counter, eleven o'clock, every month. 'She is alive.' Like a man saying his prayers. I never asked who. You do not ask, in this work. But I remember the words because a man does not say a happy thing in that voice." The keeper sat back down on his stool, done with her, reaching for the radio dial. "Take it. The niece will only telephone and ask is it worth money. It is not worth money."

She paid him for his trouble, more than the trouble, because a source you may want again is cheap at the price, and she carried the box out into the fog and did not open it until she was four streets away, in the back of a chai stall with her shoulder to the wall and her sightline on the door.

Inside the oilcloth was a man's whole private case for his own sanity. A bundle of railway tickets, second class, held with a rubber band gone to powder, the dates and stations stamped in the violet ink of a system that no longer existed. A photograph, creased white along its folds, of a younger Sundaram standing with a group on the steps of a building she did not recognise, all of them squinting, none of them named. Two notebooks, the cheap kind, the covers soft as cloth. And at the bottom, folded small, a printed sheet that had been opened and closed so many times the creases had worn through to holes.

She read the notebooks first, because movements were what she had come for, and Sundaram had been a clerk to the marrow. He had logged himself the way the state had taught him to log everyone else. Dates down the left margin. Trains. Buses. A guest house in Coonoor, twice. A line that read only convent, no, and another, hospital records destroyed in fire 99, convenient, with the last word underlined twice. He had gone to places and asked questions and written down the shape of the silence that came back. It was, she saw with a professional's eye, surveillance. Bad surveillance, a lonely man's, all heart and no method, but surveillance. He had been hunting someone for years.

Hunting a woman the files said was dead.

He never wrote the name. That struck her, reading it, as the one piece of tradecraft the man had owned. He wrote she and her and once, in a fury of cramped letters, THEY BURIED A LIE, but never the name, as if the name were the single thing that could be taken from him. A woman the official record had marked deceased, killed by the enemy, a clean closed file. A woman Sundaram had decided, on the evidence of his own eyes, was walking around alive. He had spent the back half of his life proving it to no one. The guest houses. The destroyed records. The convent that said no.

She turned the pages with the steady, unhurried attention she gave to everything, and somewhere under the attention a small flat thought lay down and stayed flat. A man's obsession. The world was full of them. The dead who were not properly dead, the conspiracies that organised a lonely life into a shape. Every station house had a cupboard of letters from such men. It moved her not at all that Sundaram had died of his, because men died of smaller things, and

because she had been the means and the means does not get to be moved.

She came to the last entry in the second notebook and read it twice, and the second time she read it slowly, because the dates were where her real attention lived.

It was a short entry. Sundaram did not gloat even alone. It said: Mangaluru. Saw with own eyes. No mistake this time, it is her, all these years and it is her face. Have the proof now, in the hand, paper, not a sighting only. Sending word to D. Will not write here what. Then a line, set apart, the only sentence in two notebooks that touched on hope: After so long. After everything. She is alive and I am the only one who knows.

The date beside it was the third of the month.

Sita sat very still in the chai stall with the cold cup going colder in front of her and the fog pressing at the door, and she did the sum that her whole life had made her good at, the sum of when. The third. He had found his proof, whatever paper it was, on the third. He had sent word to D, whoever D was, on the third or just after. And on the eleventh he had stopped coming to the keeper's counter forever, because on the night of the tenth a girl of eighteen had let herself into his hotel room with a keycard and given him the heart attack the night manager had believed in.

A week. He had found his proof, and within the week the assignment had come down to Fateh, and Fateh had put the key in her hand across a restaurant table, and the world had quietly closed the file the man had spent the better part of his life trying to open.

She understood it the way she understood everything, operationally, from the outside. The man had got close to something. Someone had decided he was close enough. The

order had been clean and fast, a week from his discovery to his death, which told her it had been a priority, which told her the something he was close to had mattered to someone with the reach to feed a name into Fateh's stream and have it come out as her first kill. That was not delusion. The order was real. You do not put a unit like hers onto a lonely clerk for a pension dispute. So the woman in the file, the woman the record buried, had mattered enough to kill for. Or someone had wanted Sundaram silenced and used the woman as the bait that drew him out. Either way the work had a logic. Either way it had been housekeeping, the enemy or the state or some third party tidying away a man who saw too clearly, and she had been the broom.

The second glass made sense now, and that was the only thing she let herself feel, the small clean satisfaction of a splinter coming out. He had set the place for someone. For D, perhaps, who was coming to be shown the proof. For the woman herself, even, in the unguarded hope of a man who had waited so long. He had poured a glass and set it on the sill and sent his message and watched the door, and the door had opened, and it had been her.

She closed the notebook.

She did not think of her mother. There was no reason to. Her mother was a closed grief from her infancy, a woman murdered by the enemy before Sita had a memory to hold her in, a fact as fixed as her own birthday, set in her so deep it had no edges left to catch on anything. A clerk's mad hunt for some stranger the records called dead did not touch it, any more than a stranger's funeral touches your own dead. The name Sundaram would not write, she did not reach for, because nothing in her pointed that way. She had been built

not to point that way. The woman in the notebooks was a loose end in a dead man's life, and she had come to tie it off, and she had.

She thought instead of who had given the order. That was the thread worth pulling now, the only one. A name fed into Fateh's stream with enough authority to make it move in a week. Fateh would say it came from above. But there was no above. She had learned that six days ago. So it had come from beside, or from outside, from someone who could reach into the unit's intake and place a man's death there and trust it to be done and never asked after. That was the question. Not who the woman was. Who had wanted the man who looked for her gone, and how they had reached Fateh's table to do it.

She folded the printed sheet back into its worn creases without unfolding it. Whatever proof a clerk had carried in his hand to Mangaluru and back was the proof of a thing that did not concern her, a dead man's certainty about a stranger, and she did not need a stranger's face to find the hand that had set her on him. She wrapped the box again in its stiff oilcloth, all of it, the tickets and the photograph and the sheet she had not read and the two soft notebooks, because a source's residue is kept or burned, never left, and she had not decided which.

She paid for the tea she had not drunk and went out into the white.

The fog had thickened toward evening. The poles with their blind cameras stood in it like drowned men, and the city moved past her unseen and unseeing, eight hundred million numbers on the grid and their trails of payments and pings, none of it touching her, none of it ever having touched the man whose whole life now sat under her arm in a box. He had

been right, she thought, with the flat respect of one professional for a dead amateur. Whatever he had seen, he had seen true. It had cost him a clean glass on a windowsill and a heart that simply stopped. She had reached the bottom of it. There was only the order left to trace, and the man who had given it, and she walked on into the cold with the proof of everything she would not look for folded shut beneath her arm.

Chapter 7

New Delhi · +7 days

The flat off Pandara Road had been somebody's home until eleven days ago, and it still carried the evidence. A child's height marked in pencil on the kitchen doorframe, the dates beside each line scratched out by whoever had cleared the place but the lines themselves left standing. A ring of paler paint where a clock had hung. Mira had asked for a safe house and the Directorate had given her a family's, swept and stripped and signed across to a shell tenancy in under a day, which told her something about how much Kaul wanted this and nothing at all about whether it could be done.

She had pushed two desks together under the window where the light was best. On hers, the file. On the other, Sehgal's laptop, closed, and a steel flask of the over-sweet coffee he drank, and nothing else. No photograph. No pen tray, no paperweight from some posting, no curling postcard pinned to the wall behind. A man could work at a desk for thirty years and leave it looking as though he had arrived that morning and meant to be gone by dusk. She had noticed it the first day and filed it the way she filed everything, without comment, the way you noted a man's shoes or the wear on a doorhandle.

On her own desk, against the lamp, she had stood the one photograph she carried to postings. Her mother on the steps at Mussoorie, squinting, a younger woman's hand at her elbow that the frame cut off. It was not sentiment, or not only. It was a thing to look at when the work asked her to

forget that people were people, a small fixed weight to set against the drift.

The file did not make it easy.

There was very little in it, and the little there was had the wrong shape. Mira had turned files for fifteen years and learned to read a person out of the negative space, the gaps a life leaves in the world's machinery. This one left almost none. No Aadhaar enrolment that survived a second look. No UPI trail, no cloud backup seeded across the usual three providers, no SIM that lived longer than a fortnight or a face the city's cameras had managed to keep. Somebody had been raised inside the gaps deliberately, taught to fall through the net of the modern state the way other children were taught to swim. The thoroughness of it was itself the only firm fact. You could not scrub a person this clean by accident. Somebody had done it to her, year on year, with patience and love or with something that wore the clothes of love.

The file called her the asset. Where it needed a handle it used a worknumber. Mira had read forty pages and the woman did not have a name in any of them, and that absence had begun, by the second evening, to feel like the cruelest line in the document. They had taken even that. She found herself reaching for one to give her, the way you name a stray so you can stand to keep it, and stopping, because a name you invented was a lie you told yourself first.

"You're doing it again," Sehgal said from the doorway. He had a way of being in a room before you registered the door. A soft, heavy man with a clerk's stoop and a clerk's gift for being underestimated, which Mira had stopped doing on the second day. "Looking at the empty pages like they'll fill in."

"There's a person in here somewhere."

"There's a weapon in there." He set down a paper bag, samosas going translucent at the corners, and did not sit. "Kaul's word, not mine. Retrieve the weapon before it goes off in a market. He's not wrong about the stakes."

"He's wrong about the noun." She closed the file on her thumb. "You don't turn a weapon. You turn a person. If I go in treating her as ordnance she'll read it in the first ninety seconds, because that is the only thing anyone has ever treated her as, and she'll know exactly what to do with it."

Sehgal made a sound that might have been agreement. He had a great talent for sounds that might have been agreement. "Then you'll want her comfortable," he said. "Her ground, not ours. Somewhere she can see the exits and count them."

"Obviously."

"I had a thought." He said it the way he said everything, as if the thought had only that moment occurred to him and faintly embarrassed him. "There's the dargah at Nizamuddin. Thursday evenings, the qawwali. Crush of people, no cameras worth the name inside the basti, twenty ways out through the lanes. A woman alone draws nothing there. And it's loud. Whatever you say to her, it dies in the singing."

Mira looked at him. It was, she had to admit, a good answer. It was the answer she might have reached herself in another hour, and the fact that he had reached it first was not suspicious, it was why the man had survived three changes of regime at a desk that ate its officers. He was good. That was all. She turned it over and found nothing under it but sense.

"Thursday's four days out," she said.

"Thursday's four days out," he agreed, "which gives you time to build a legend that won't tear, and gives her time to be

somewhere I can put you next to her without it looking arranged. You'll want the time. Believe me. The ones who rush the first meeting are the ones who get a second meeting in a mortuary." He nudged the paper bag an inch toward her, a small generosity, and left it at that.

She let Thursday stand. Later she would not be able to say why the date settled so easily, except that everything Sehgal handed her settled easily, and a thing that never catches is a thing you stop checking the edges of.

The legend took the rest of the day and most of the night.

She built it the way she had been taught, from the feet up, because the feet were where surveillance and instinct both started. A woman of the asset's apparent age and apparent caste-blur, neither placed nor placeless, the kind of educated, unmoored young woman the city manufactured by the lakh. Mira chose a cover that overlapped her own true biography by sixty percent, because the lies you can stand inside are the lies built around a frame of truth. A researcher, loosely. Contract work, the gig kind, the kind that explained irregular hours and a phone with no calls on it and a life lived in cafes. She had Sehgal stand her up an identity through the usual channels and was surprised, again, at how little friction there was. The backstopped PAN came through in an afternoon. The flat in Jangpura, the second flat, the one the cover would seem to live in, was leased and furnished and seeded with three weeks of plausible mess by a team she never saw. A phone arrived, already aged. Somebody had spent a fortnight walking it around Delhi so its location history breathed like a real life, slept in Jangpura, drank coffee in Khan Market, took the violet line to nowhere in particular. You could not buy that kind of patience in four days. It had been made before

she asked for it.

She noticed that, too. She noticed it the way she had noticed the bare desk, and she told herself the same thing she had told herself then: that Kaul wanted this badly, that a Directorate frightened of what its own runaway unit might do would move heaven to put a hand on the unit's only living instrument, that the absence of friction was the presence of priority. It was a good explanation. It covered the facts. She had learned, slowly and at cost, that the explanations that cover all the facts most smoothly are the ones to keep a hand on, and she kept a hand on it, lightly, and went on building.

The hard part was not the paper. The hard part was the approach, and the approach was the only part Sehgal could not hand her ready-made.

She sat with the thin file past midnight, the lamp throwing her mother's squint into relief, and she did the thing she was paid for, which was to imagine her way inside a person she had never met until she could feel the shape of the cage from the inside.

A child taken young. The file would not say how young, but young, because the scrubbing was lifelong and the scrubbing implied a hand on the child from before she could choose. Raised to fall through nets. Raised, Mira thought, by someone she would have loved, because that was the cruelty of it and also the architecture of it. You did not get this kind of work, the clean kind, the kind that left a worknumber and no name, out of fear or money. You got it out of belonging. The asset had been made to belong to one man, or one small circle of men, so completely that the belonging had become the air she breathed and the floor she stood on, and she had been given, in exchange for everything else a person might

have, the one thing a young person will trade anything for, which was to be needed, exactly, by someone who claimed her.

That was the lever. Not appetite. The recruiters who reached for appetite, for money or revenge or the thrill, were reaching for the cheap and the shallow, and this woman had been built past all of them. You could not offer her more than she had, because she did not experience what she had as a lack. You had to offer her something she had never been allowed to suspect was missing. You had to make her wonder whether the belonging had ever been belonging at all, or only use dressed in its clothes. You had to put one true thing in front of her, one fact she could not unsee, and let the cage become visible to the bird.

And Mira had a true thing. That was the part that sat badly with her, lying awake while the city's generators thrummed and a dog argued with another dog three lanes over. The thing she would say to the asset was true. The girl had been made, not born to this. Her origin, whatever she had been told of it, was a story authored to bind her. The man she belonged to had weaponised a child and called it duty, and somewhere in that there was a real and savage wrong, and Mira would lay it down in front of her like a card. It was true. It was also bait, and she knew the difference between a truth you tell because it is true and a truth you tell because it will open someone, and she had stopped, years ago, pretending the second kind was clean. You did the second kind because the alternative was a market full of dead people. You did it and you carried it. The carrying was the job.

She wrote three lines of approach on the back of an envelope and burned them in the kitchen sink, because the

discipline was the discipline even when she was alone, and went to bed knowing the shape of what she would do.

In the morning Sehgal had brought the coffee and a new idea, gently, the way he brought everything.

"I've been thinking about your Thursday," he said. He had not sat. He never sat. "There's a wrinkle. The asset moves, we think, on a rough rhythm. Markets, transit, the kind of pattern a careful person makes when they think they have no pattern." He said we think with the small deference of a man offering you his homework. "If I'm reading it, she'll be inside the city, east of the river, late this week. The dargah puts you in her path without anyone steering her there. After that the window closes. She goes dark again and you're back to the empty pages."

Mira watched him pour the coffee he would drink alone and set the flask down on the desk that held nothing of his own life on it. She thought about how much certainty was sitting underneath we think. The file in front of her could not draw a pattern. The file in front of her could barely draw a face. He was reading a rhythm out of a woman who had spent her whole existence destroying rhythm, and reading it well enough to bet a four-day window and a meeting ground on it, and he was offering it to her in the tone of a man unsure he had got it right.

"You're very confident of her movements," she said, "for a woman with no movements."

"I've been looking at her a long time." He said it simply, and it was, she remembered, true. He had told her on the first day, the file across his palms like something he was giving up, that he had hunted this one on his own hours for years, long before Kaul made it anyone's business. A private appetite, he

had called it then, almost ashamed. She had taken it for what it looked like, the obsession of a good officer with one that got away, the kind of thing that made a man invaluable and a little sad. "You spend long enough on someone," he said now, "you start to feel where they'll be. It isn't science. Don't put it in a report."

"I won't put it in a report."

"Thursday, then. The dargah." He capped the flask. "I'll have you in the lane by the well-house an hour before the qawwali. If she comes, she comes through there. If she doesn't, we've lost an evening and a packet of marigolds." He smiled, the soft clerk's smile, and the smile did not reach anywhere because there was nowhere on that face it had ever been taught to go. "You'll do this beautifully, Mira. You always do the difficult ones beautifully. It's the easy ones you should worry about."

He took his coffee to the window and looked down into the lane, and for a moment he was just a tired heavy man with no photographs, watching a street, and she could not have said what was wrong, only that something in the room had the faint, particular wrongness of a clock that keeps perfect time but was set, at some point you cannot place, by a hand that wanted you somewhere at a certain hour.

She picked up the file again. She reached, one more time, for a name to give the woman in it, and this time she let herself, silently, just to hold the person against the weapon. Not in the file. Never in the file. Only in the place behind her own eyes where she kept her mother's squint and the cut-off hand at the elbow and all the other proofs that people were people.

Whoever you are, she thought, somebody made you belong to him so you'd never ask whose hand was on the back of your neck. I'm going to ask it for you. And then she made herself finish the thought, because she did not let herself off the unspoken parts, that was the discipline too. And I'm going to do it because a man at the next desk needs you somewhere by Thursday, and I don't entirely know why, and I'm going to do it anyway.

She set the photograph of her mother a half-inch straighter against the lamp, so that it faced her chair and not the room, and turned to the empty pages, and began to learn by heart a life that had been built so that no one ever could.

Chapter 8

New Delhi · +9 days

The rain had stopped sometime before noon, and the flat smelled of wet concrete coming up through the open window, the particular grey smell of Bombay in the days after the first monsoon broke. Sita had been standing at the window for forty minutes without meaning to. She had registered the things she always registered. The paan stall on the corner that took UPI now, the QR code laminated and tied to the awning post with fishing line. The motorcycle that had been parked across the lane since morning, and the two boys who came back to it twice, which made it a courier's bike and not a watcher's. The CCTV dome on the chemist's that pointed at the till and not the street, so it saw money and not faces. She had counted the exits from the lane without deciding to count them. That was the trouble. She did not know how to stand at a window and only look.

Rudra was in the kitchen. She could hear him moving without hurry, the small domestic sounds of a man who had decided the afternoon belonged to him. Water going into a vessel. The tick of the gas before the ring caught. A knife on a board, unhurried, the rhythm wrong for someone in a hurry to be elsewhere.

"Come away from the glass," he said, not turning. "You've memorised it. It isn't going anywhere."

She came away from the glass.

He had taken off the linen shirt he wore in the city and stood in a vest, and in the vest he was an older man, the

muscle gone heavier on the bone, the white hair on his chest, the long seam under his ribs that he had never explained and she had never asked about. He had a cigarette behind his ear that he would not light in the flat. He was peeling ginger with the edge of a teaspoon, which she had not known you could do, scraping the brown skin away in wet curls and leaving the pale flesh clean.

"Sit," he said. "You make the room tired, standing like that."

She sat at the small table. There were two glasses on it, and she looked at the second glass and then looked away from it, because a second glass on a sill was a thing she had been carrying around for nine days like a stone in a shoe, and she did not want it on this table.

"What are you making."

"Nothing. Tea. Then something with the fish the man downstairs swears is pomfret and is not pomfret." He glanced at her. "You've eaten today?"

"This morning."

"What."

She had to think. "A bar. The protein one. On the train."

He put the teaspoon down. He did it gently, but he put it down in a way that meant something, and turned to look at her with the ginger still in his hand, and for a moment there was something in his face she did not have a name for, because it was not approval or correction, the two registers she understood, and it was not the flat watchfulness that Fateh wore. It was closer to grief, but lighter than grief, and gone before she could fix it.

"A bar on the train," he said. "At eighteen years old."

"It's efficient."

"It's a tragedy is what it is." He went back to the ginger. "Sit there. Don't help. You're not allowed to help. The one thing I want from you this afternoon is that you do nothing useful at all."

She did not know what to do with her hands. That was the first thing she learned, sitting at the table while he cooked, that she did not know what to do with her hands when there was no weapon in them and no door to watch and no person across a room whose breathing she was meant to be reading. She put them flat on the table. She put them in her lap. She picked at the cuff of her sleeve until she caught herself doing it and stopped, because picking was a tell, and a tell was a thing you trained out of yourself in the first year, and Rudra saw her catch herself and said nothing, which was worse than if he had said something.

He cooked for an hour. It should not have taken an hour. She understood, somewhere in the middle of it, that the length was the point, that he was wasting time on purpose and with great care, the way another man might spend money he had saved, and that he was teaching her something he could not say aloud because if he said it aloud she would treat it as instruction and complete it efficiently and ruin it.

He gave her ginger to taste, raw, and laughed when her eyes ran.

He told her the man downstairs had three daughters and called all of them by the wrong names on purpose, as a joke that had outlived the children's patience with it, and that this was the mark of a happy man, that he could afford to be tiresome to his own family. She did not understand why this was the mark of a happy man. She filed it away. She was always filing things away. He watched her file it away and

shook his head.

"You're doing it again," he said.

"Doing what."

"Saving it. You're putting it in the drawer to use later. There's nothing to use. It's only a man and his daughters and a joke that isn't funny. You're allowed to let it pass through you and be gone."

"I don't know how to let things be gone."

She had not meant to say it. It came out flat, the way she said everything, a report rather than a confession, and that was perhaps why she could say it at all. He stopped with the lid half over the pan. He did not look at her with pity, which she would not have forgiven, and which he knew she would not have forgiven, and so he gave her instead the thing he gave her instead of pity, which was work.

"Then I'll teach you," he said. "We'll start small. We'll start with lunch."

He served it on two plates that did not match, rice and the fish that was not pomfret in a thin red gravy, and he sat across from her and he ate slowly, and he made her eat slowly, and this was the lesson, and it was harder than the lessons that had hurt.

"You eat like a soldier on a ridge," he said. "Watching the treeline. Fork to mouth, eyes up, half a minute and the plate's clean and you don't remember a single thing you put in your face. Stop. Put the fork down between bites."

"Why."

"Because the food is good and a man took an afternoon to make it and you'll do it the honour of noticing." He put his own fork down to show her. "Down. Hands in your lap. Now tell me what you taste."

She tasted the fish. She made herself taste it. It was difficult in a way she could not have explained to anyone who had not been built the way she had been built, that to sit still over a plate and attend to nothing but the plate felt like turning her back on a room full of doors, that the animal in her sat up and screamed that this was how you died, here, exactly here, with gravy on your lip and your guard on the floor. She breathed through it the way she had been taught to breathe through pain, which was the only kind of breathing she knew, and she used the thing that had been made to keep her alive to do the small human thing instead, and after a while the screaming thinned out and there was only the fish, and the green smell of curry leaf, and a sourness underneath she could not place.

"Kokum," he said, watching her find it. "Good. There. You found it."

"It's sour."

"It's sour." He looked pleased in a way she had rarely been the cause of. Not pleased that she had performed. Pleased the way you are pleased when a thing you love turns out to be possible after all. "That's the whole of it, you understand. That's the secret they keep from people like us. Not the work. Any fool can do the work, the work is just attention pointed at a single thing. The hard part is this. Sitting in a chair on a wet afternoon with nothing to guard and finding the sour under the sweet and letting the time go by and not being afraid of it." He picked the fork up again. "They never gave you the afternoons. That was the theft. Not the rest of it. The afternoons."

She did not ask who they were. She had learned in nine days that the word they had grown a second floor under it,

that beneath the old simple they, the enemy, the ones who had taken her mother whose name she carried, there was a newer they she could not yet see the shape of, and that some of the people who lived on that second floor were people she ate lunch with. She had stopped asking the questions that made Fateh's face go smooth and shut, because a smooth shut face was its own answer and she had collected enough of those answers to know she was being lied to in a direction she could not yet measure. But she did not push it across this table. This table had fish on it and a man who had wasted an hour for her, and she found she wanted, with an ache she also did not have a name for, to keep the table the way it was for as long as it would stay.

So she ate slowly. She put the fork down between bites. She let an afternoon go by.

It was when he was washing the plates, his back to her, the water running, that he said the other thing, and he said it the way you say a thing you have rehearsed enough that it can come out sounding unrehearsed.

"If the floor goes from under us," he said, "I want you to know there's a way out that doesn't run through Fateh."

She did not move. The training held her perfectly still, which was its single mercy, that it let her receive a blow without giving anything back across the table that a watcher could have read.

"The floor isn't going from under us," she said.

"No. Probably not." He set a plate in the rack. "Old men get superstitious. You hold a thing together long enough with your two hands and you start feeling for the cracks even when there aren't any. Don't mind me."

"Rudra."

"It's nothing. Forget it. Eat your sour fish."

But he had reached up, while he said it, and taken the cigarette from behind his ear, and turned it in his fingers, not to light it, only to have something to do with his hands, and she understood with a cold and total clarity that he was doing the thing he had told her not to do an hour ago. He was picking at his cuff. He had a tell and he was letting her see it, and a man like Rudra did not let you see a tell by accident.

"Tell me," she said.

He dried his hands on the cloth. He came and sat down again, across the not-matching plates, and he looked at her for a while, and then he told her, plainly, in the clean declarative voice he used for the parts of a briefing that were not allowed to be misunderstood, and she realised partway through that this was a briefing, that he had cooked her an afternoon and taught her to taste kokum so that the thing he had to give her would land in soft ground instead of hard.

"There's a man in Bhuj," he said, "who runs a transport firm, trucks, the Kandla route, salt and cement. His name doesn't matter to you yet. If you ever say to him the word for the tide that I'll give you, he puts you in a cab that isn't carrying what the manifest says and you cross at a place that doesn't have the new gates. From there you have nine hundred kilometres of someone else's problem and then you have a coast." He said it without drama, a route, a procedure, the way he would have given her an exfil for a job. "There's an envelope. Not a bank, banks have faces now, every counter in this country reads your face before it reads your money. Cash, in a place I'll show you, enough to keep you grey for a year if you don't get greedy and don't get sentimental. There's a passport that isn't the green one and isn't yours and is clean,

properly clean, not a job-lot, a real one with a real history that I bought from a real dead girl who looked enough like you in the dark. And there's a number. You call it from a phone you buy with the cash and throw in the sea after. You let it ring twice. You don't speak. Someone comes."

The water had stopped running. The flat was very quiet. Outside the courier's boys started the motorcycle and it caught on the third kick and she did not turn her head.

"You've done all of it," she said.

"Yes."

"It's built. It's not a plan. It's built and it's waiting."

"Yes."

"When."

He did not pretend to misunderstand which when she meant. He turned the cigarette in his fingers.

"A while ago," he said.

And there it was, the cold thing, sliding all the way down. Not that he would get her out. She had always known, in the wordless animal way she knew most things, that of the two men who held the war in their hands, this was the one who would put his body between her and the dark if it came to that, and Fateh was the one who would do the arithmetic. That was not new. What was new, what sat in her chest like swallowed ice, was the tense of it. A while ago. He had built her a road out of this life before she had ever thought to want one. Which meant he had known, for longer than a while, that a day might come when she would need a road out, and he had known it specifically, with a truck and a tide-word and a dead girl's passport, with the granular dreadful specificity of a man who does not deal in superstitions at all, who deals only in things he has seen happen before.

You did not build that much road for a crack you only felt. You built it for a thing you had watched fall, once, long ago, and never told anyone the whole of.

"You keep saying if," she said. "If the floor goes."

"It's a habit. Soldiers say if."

"You built a real passport for an if."

He smiled then, and it was the worst thing he had done all afternoon, because it was a kind smile, and it was the smile of a man who has decided not to tell you the rest, the way Fateh's smooth shut face was a decision not to tell her the rest, and she saw for the first time that the two of them, the protector and the arithmetician, had the same locked room behind their different doors, and that she had been raised her whole life in the corridor outside it.

"Eat," he said gently. "Your fish is going cold and it cost a man his afternoon."

She looked down at the plate. The gravy had skinned over at the edge. She picked up the fork, and she put it down again between bites, the way he had taught her not an hour before, and she made herself taste the sour under the sweet, and she let the time go by, and she was more afraid than she had been in any room with any target, because for the first time in eighteen years someone had handed her a way to run, and a person did not give you a way to run from a house unless they had already smelled the smoke.

Chapter 9

New Delhi · +11 days

The flat in Karol Bagh had no name on the bell and a kettle that took four minutes to boil, and Sita had learned long ago that Fateh chose his meeting places by the second of those facts and not the first. A man who waited four minutes for water gave himself four minutes to read whoever sat across from him. She had come up the back stair past the tailor's godown, checked the parked scooters for the two that had been there yesterday, found one of them gone, and let herself in with the spare key from behind the meter box. He was already at the table when she entered, which meant he had not slept, because Fateh asleep was a man who arrived after you and Fateh awake was a man who arrived before.

"You walked," he said. Not a question. He could smell the cold on her coat.

"The Metro has cameras on the new line. Facial match got switched on at Jhandewalan in March." She hung the coat on the door hook, where it would dry without dripping on the floor and leave a mark a careful person would notice. "You taught me that."

"I taught you a great many things." He poured the tea himself, two glasses, the leaves stewed too long because he had started it before he knew when she would come. He pushed one across to her. His hand was steady. She watched the hand the way she watched everything now, because eleven days ago she had begun to understand that the steadiness of Fateh's hands had been, for eighteen years, the

most reliable lie in her life.

She did not drink. She waited. He had not summoned her to a flat with a tailor's godown beneath it to hand her a glass of bad tea.

"They are closing on us," he said.

She had expected it and still it landed somewhere below the sternum, the place the body kept for the news it had already guessed. She kept her face the way he had trained her to keep it, which was to say she let a small thing through, a tightening at the eyes, because a face that gave nothing was itself a confession. Eighteen years of method, and she used it on him now without deciding to, the way you breathe.

"Who is they."

"The service. The real one, the one with a building and a budget line and a man at the top who answers to a minister." Fateh turned his glass a quarter-turn on the table, a habit she had watched ten thousand times and only this month begun to read as a thing he did when he was choosing what to leave out. "There is a chief now who does not like loose threads. He has decided we are a thread."

"We have always been a thread," she said. "We have never been on any building's books. You told me that was our protection." She let the next part sit a beat. "You told me a great many things about who was above us. Most of them, I am beginning to think, were the same thing said in different costumes."

He looked at her then, fully, and for a moment the room held the shape of the conversation they were not having, the one that had started eleven days ago over a second glass on a dead man's windowsill and had not stopped since, only gone underground, the way a fire goes into the roof beams and

waits. He did not take the bait. He had taught her not to take bait. She had not really expected him to fail his own lesson.

"There is an office above us," he said. "There was always an office above us. The office is gone. That is not the same as there never having been one." He said it the way a man lays down a card he knows you cannot beat and cannot prove is real. "When this is finished you may ask me anything and I will answer it. Not today. Today I need you on the ground, because if I am right we have perhaps two weeks before someone with a warrant and a forensics van walks into one of our houses, and after that there is no ground left to stand on."

Two weeks. She filed it the way she filed everything, against the clock she carried in her without ever being told to, the clock that had told her on her eighteenth birthday that the man in the hotel room had been dead for ninety seconds before the corridor camera cycled. Two weeks was a real number. Fateh did not give false numbers. Whatever else he lied about, and she now believed it was nearly everything that mattered, his tradecraft did not lie, because tradecraft that lied got people killed and the one religion the man had was that her death was not permitted.

"Tell me the shape of it," she said. "Not the feeling. The shape."

He almost smiled. It was the closest thing to pride he allowed himself, and she hated, in a small clean compartment of herself, how much it still warmed her.

"A woman," he said. "R&AW, almost certainly, though she is being run carefully enough that I cannot put a desk under her yet. She surfaced eight days ago. She has been to Mangaluru." He watched the word land. She did not let it. She had read Sundaram's parcel four nights ago, alone, the

name he had refused to write sitting in the white space at the bottom of the page like a held breath, and she had buried what it did to her so deep that even now, with Fateh saying the city's name aloud, she let it pass over her like weather. Mangaluru. A coastal city where a dead woman had been seen alive. She filed the coincidence and did not let her pulse file it with her.

"Go on."

"She has been seen near two of our standoff addresses. The Andheri letting and the place off Link Road we have not used since the spring. She did not go in. She walked the street, she looked at the doors, she left. That is not a beat constable doing rounds. That is someone confirming a map she already has." He turned the glass again. "She is good. She countersurveilled herself coming out of the airport, which means she expects to be watched, which means she knows the kind of people she is hunting. That narrows the field of who briefed her to a number I do not like."

"A name," Sita said. "She has a name?"

"Mira." He said it flat, a label and nothing more, the way you name a tool. "Whether it is hers I have no idea. She uses it on a handset we have half a line into. She made contact with someone two days ago to set a meeting. Thursday. A dargah in the old city, Mumbai. The Makhdoom Shah, near Mahim. Afternoon, before the Asr crowd."

A meeting at a shrine. Sita turned it over. A dargah was good cover and bad cover at once: a place where a stranger could stand without explaining herself, and a place wrapped in CCTV because every shrine in the country had been wired after the bombings, the cameras feeding into a fusion centre that nobody fully trusted and everybody used. Whoever

picked it had picked the seam where the watched and the unwatchable met. That was a professional's choice. That was a choice she might have made.

"Whom is she meeting?"

"I don't know yet." A muscle moved at the hinge of his jaw. "That is part of what I need."

"And the other part."

He was quiet for long enough that the kettle, refilled at some point she hadn't registered, ticked as it cooled on the ring. Outside, a sewing machine started up below them, the tailor's day beginning, a needle going through cloth at a hundred strokes a minute, and she thought, absurdly, of Rudra two days ago turning a slice of mango on his fork and telling her to taste the thing before she swallowed it. She had not understood why he was telling her that. She thought she was beginning to.

"I need you to look at her," Fateh said. "Close. The way only you can. I need to know what she is. Whether she is a retrieval or a removal. Whether the service wants what we know or wants us gone, because those are two different operations and they call for two different answers, and I cannot give the wrong answer with the time we have." He met her eyes. "Assess her. Decide if she is a threat. Then come and tell me, and I will tell you what we do about it."

She heard the thing under the words, because he had built the ear that heard it. *Decide if she is a threat.* Not *neutralise the threat.* Not the clean imperative he had handed her at a restaurant table on her eighteenth birthday wrapped around a brass room key. He was giving her judgement. In eighteen years he had given her targets, drops, windows, exits, and exactly once before, when she was fifteen and a man in

Kathmandu had turned out to have a daughter asleep in the next room, he had given her judgement, and she had used it, and he had never spoken of it again. He did not give judgement to a weapon. He gave it to a person. She understood, with the part of her that had spent eleven days learning to read him against the grain, that he was either more frightened than she had ever seen him or that he wanted something from this that he was not naming, and that those two things might be the same thing.

"You're not sending a key," she said.

"No."

"You always send a key." The room keys. The whole grammar of her life had been brass and a room number, an instruction that needed no words and left no message, a thing you could hold in your fist and feel the weight of the order in. *Assignments come as a key*. It was the first rule, older than she was. "If this were a removal you would have put a key on the table by now. You haven't. So either you already know she is not a threat and you are testing whether I will see it too." She paused. "Or you do not know what she is, and that frightens you more than a known enemy, because an enemy you can plan against and a question you cannot."

He did not answer, which was an answer.

"Or," she said, softer, and watched his hand on the glass, "there is a third thing. You think you know what she is and you are afraid I will see something in her that you would rather I did not."

The hand stopped turning the glass.

It was a fraction of a second, less, the kind of stillness that a body produces when the mind behind it has been touched in a place it did not expect a hand. She had pushed too far

and she knew it, and she watched him decide whether to be the man who lied or the man who deflected, and he chose, as he always chose, the deflection, which was its own small confirmation of how much there was to lie about.

"You will see what is there," he said. "You always do. That is why it is you and not one of the others." There were no others, or so few that the plural was almost a kindness, a way of pretending the unit was larger than two old men and a girl they had grown like a crop. "I am not asking you to find what I want you to find. I am asking you to find what is true. If she is a retrieval, if the chief wants you brought in alive and warm, then there is a conversation to be had about what alive and warm costs and whether it is worth more than the war we are losing. If she is a removal, we run, and I have prepared for running." He said it and something passed behind his face, and she thought of Rudra again, of an escape route described over mango, two old men who had each, separately, in the same week, told her they had built her a door, and she wondered for the first time whether the two of them had built the same door or two different ones, and what it meant that neither had mentioned the other.

"And if she is neither," Sita said. "If she is a third thing too."

"Then you will tell me," Fateh said, "and we will both be in territory I do not have a map for."

She picked up the tea at last. It was cold and over-stewed and tasted of tannin and the inside of the cupboard the leaves had lived in, and she drank it anyway, all of it, because Rudra had told her to taste things and because a glass left full on the table was a thing a careful person noticed, and she was, before anything else, a thing other people noticed and then

did not survive noticing. She set the empty glass down precisely on the ring it had left.

"Thursday," she said. "The Makhdoom Shah. Afternoon."

"You'll have the Andheri letting. It's clean, I walked it myself Tuesday. There's a handset in the geyser cupboard, the line is one-way, you receive only, you do not transmit on it. If you need me you use the dead drop at the bookseller on the way to Bandra station, the third shelf, the Reader's Digest condensed volumes, nobody has opened those since 1994." A ghost of the old dryness. "Slip it inside the spine of the cricket one. I check it at six and at midnight."

"Cameras at the dargah."

"Everywhere. The shrine cameras feed the local fusion node, and the fusion node, on a good day, talks to a system that talks to a system. Assume your face is recorded. Assume nothing is watched in real time, because nothing ever is until the day it is. Dress for the after, not the during. If they pull the footage in a week, you want to be a woman who came to tie a thread and make a wish, not a woman who came to look at another woman." He said it and then he said the thing that she would carry out of the flat and down the back stair and onto the cold street, the thing she would still be holding on Thursday when she stood in the marble courtyard with the green threads tied to the lattice fluttering around her and a stranger named Mira crossing the flagstones toward a meeting that was not, Sita would come to understand far too late, the meeting anyone in that courtyard believed it to be. "Sita. When you look at her. Do not let her look back."

"Why."

He stood. He was not a tall man and the years had taken an inch from him and he covered it the way he covered

everything, with stillness, with economy, with the refusal to spend a movement he did not need. He gathered the two glasses, hers and his, and carried them to the basin, and ran the water over them, and she understood that this too was tradecraft, that there would be no DNA on a glass in this flat, that even here, even now, with two weeks on the clock and the building's forensics van coming, he was scrubbing the surfaces of her life out of habit and out of love, the two having been, in his hands, the same act for as long as she had been alive.

"Because the ones who are good," he said, with his back to her, the water running, "you cannot read by watching them. You read them by letting them try to read you, and watching how they do it. What they reach for tells you what they have been trained to find. But it is a near thing, that exchange. You open a window to see in and they climb through it." He turned off the tap. He did not turn around. "This one has been to Mangaluru. I do not know what she found there. Until I do, you keep the window an inch wide and your hand on the latch."

Mangaluru again. The third time he had set it on the table between them, and the third time she had let it lie there untouched, and she wondered which of them was testing the other, and whether they both knew, and whether that mutual knowing was the last honest thing left between them, two people lying to each other so fluently that the lies had become a kind of language only they could speak.

"Two weeks," she said, at the door, her coat dry now and cold against her shoulders.

"Perhaps." He was drying the glasses with a cloth, one and then the other, setting them upside down on the rack.

"Perhaps less. Do not wait for me to tell you it has run out. You will feel it before I say it. You always have."

She went down the back stair past the tailor, who did not look up from his needle, the cloth feeding through under his hands at a hundred strokes a minute, a man making something whole out of pieces, and out into the Karol Bagh morning, where the cold lay along the bottom of the lane and the shop shutters were going up one after another with a sound like distant applause. She did not go to the Metro. She walked, as she had come, reading the parked scooters, finding the gone one still gone and a new one she did not like in its place, filing it, walking on. Somewhere south of her, in a city by the sea, a shrine stood with its green threads and its cameras, and on Thursday a woman named Mira would cross its courtyard toward a meeting, and Sita would be there to decide what she was.

She had accepted it as duty. She told herself that, walking, the way you tell yourself a true thing to keep from looking at the larger thing standing behind it. Fateh had said the institution was closing on them and he had asked her to protect what remained, and that was an order, and she was a woman who carried out orders, and the carrying out was the only shape her life had ever been allowed to take. She did not let herself feel the other thing, the thing that had moved in her when he set down the glass without a key beside it: that for the first time in eighteen years she was being sent to look and not to kill, to weigh and not to obey, and that a door, once a person has been handed the judgement to open it, is very hard to hand back unopened.

She turned south at the main road and went to find a train that did not run on the line with the new cameras, and behind

her the tailor's needle went on and on, stitching the morning together, indifferent to the geometry that was closing, with the patience of a thing long arranged, around a courtyard by the sea where two orders and a third she could not see were all, on Thursday, coming to rest in the same square of light.

ACT TWO

Limited Hangout

Chapter 10

*New Delhi and undisclosed off-books sites in India; later the
unregistered birth of Meridian abroad · January 2008*

The boy who carried files came at seven with the last of it, two grey boxes corded in jute, and set them inside the door as though they might still be warm. He did not look at the room. Fateh had taught them that much over the years: when a thing is being closed, you do not look at it, you do not learn its shape, you put it down and you go and you forget the address. The boy went. The lift cage rattled down through the fog that had got into the stairwell, into the building, into the city, so that the bulb over the table wore a soft collar of it and the radiator pipes sweated.

He worked through midnight with the patience of a man unmaking a watch he had built himself.

There was a method to ending an off-books programme, and the method was not destruction. Destruction left a silhouette. Anyone could read the place where a thing had been burned. What he did instead was subtraction, patient and total, so that at the end there would be no programme that had ended because there would be no programme that had begun. He took the requisition slips first, the ones Luthra had countersigned in the clean early years when the work still had a roof and a sanction and a Colonel willing to do a hard thing for the country and sleep after. He matched each slip to its entry in the green ledger, struck both, and fed both to the shredder, and where the shredder left long noodles he cut them again by hand into a bucket and added water until the

paper was grey soup. Names dissolved well. Account numbers dissolved well. The years dissolved last, because the years were written in his own hand and his hand was reluctant.

Janaki's file he had left for the end, the way you leave the room where someone died until the others are swept.

It was thinner than it should have been. He had thinned it himself in March, when the confirmation came, because a dead architect is a liability the way a live one is an asset, and the difference between the two is only which way the documents point. He had pointed them. The vehicle had burned on the Hassan road with her in it, and what the fire left had been identified by the dental chart and the melted signet and the testimony of the sister, who had wept in the right places and signed where she was shown. The lab in Hyderabad had taken four months to return a profile from the marrow and had returned it hedged, consistent with, not less than, the careful grammar of men who will not be quoted. Consistent with had been enough. It had to be enough. A man cannot build on a maybe, and he had a thing to build, and so he had taken the maybe and called it a grave and laid a stone on it in his mind and walked away.

He did not reread the file now. He knew it. He turned it face down on the table and put his hand flat on the cover the way you do on a coffin lid when the priest has finished and the others have gone to wash, and he sat like that for a while in the sweating cold, an old habit he had no name for and would not have given a name if he had.

Through the wall, in the next room, the child slept.

She did it in the way of small children, completely, without negotiation, fists up by her ears as if she had surrendered to something. He had not meant to keep her. When the

programme came apart he had meant to do with her what had been done with the others, hand her across, sign her into a paper life and never learn where it took her. Instead he had carried her out himself in a kit bag with the top open, down the back stairs of the place that no longer existed, and he had not yet found the night to undo it. There would not be such a night. He understood that about himself now, sitting with his hand on the dead woman's file. He was going to raise the architect's daughter into the architect's work, and he was going to tell her the enemy had killed her mother, because it was kinder than the truth and because, by the only papers that survived, it was now true.

That should have been the end of it. The boxes empty, the bucket full, the stone laid. A man could go to bed.

But there was the other thing, the small wrong note, and he had learned across thirty years never to leave a wrong note unstruck.

It had come to him sideways in December, the way the good things always came, not as intelligence but as gossip among people who did not know what they were holding. A liaison man over a bad whisky in the Claridges bar, complaining about the Gulf, about how since the Americans shot up that traffic circle in Baghdad in September every private rifle between Amman and Muscat had gone to ground, the trade spooked, the money shy, nobody hiring in daylight. And then, idly, that somebody was hiring all the same, quiet, off the books, not Americans, not the usual South African crowd either. A new house. And the way they were doing it was the strange part, the liaison man said, because they were not buying triggers, they were buying patience. They wanted men who could sit. Men who could

wait three weeks for one walk-past and remember it whole. They were paying for watchers, the liaison man said, and laughed, who pays for watchers, and ordered another.

Fateh had not laughed. He had gone very still in the way that he had taught a generation of young people to recognise and fear, and he had thought: that is not how you build a private army. That is how you build us.

He had pulled the thread for six weeks the only way a thread could be pulled in the winter of that year, with paper and the telephone and the patience he had just heard described back to him in a bar. There was no grid to ask. The agencies sat in their towers and did not speak to one another, and a man who wanted a picture had to walk to each window himself and look out of it and carry what he saw to the next. He walked the windows. A shell company in a free zone, money arriving from a Liechtenstein foundation and leaving as construction draw-downs against a tourism project that had no tourists. A stalled resort on reclaimed sand in the northern emirates, fenced, guarded, the swimming pools poured and never filled. Three men hired out of Pretoria and a fourth out of Belgrade, all of them sitters, all of them gone quiet. And the method. Always, under it, the method, surfacing in the small operational habits the way an accent survives a learned language. An asset run on the two-glass rule, the meeting that is no meeting, the signal that is the absence of a signal. A break-contact drill that doubled back through a wet market because crowds that smell remember faces less. Recruits taught to eat slowly, of all things, taught to taste, because a man who cannot sit still over food cannot sit still over a target.

He knew that one. He had watched her teach it in a flat in Lodi Colony twenty years before, to a frightened boy who became a brave man and died in Kashmir. Eat slowly, she had told the boy. You are not in a hurry. The dead are never in a hurry, and you are going to be very good at being dead.

So he had bought a ticket.

He went in on the Sharma passport, the clean one, a textile buyer with real invoices and a real hotel and a genuine reason to be in a port that moved cloth. He flew Emirates into Dubai on the ninth of January and took the coast road north in a hired Corolla, past the cement works and the ship-breakers and the long brown nothing, and he did the approach the way you do an approach, by not approaching. He drove past the site once at noon at the speed of a man who is lost and does not care, and he saw the fence and the new guard tower and the wind sock, and a berm of bulldozed sand at the seaward end with the unmistakable geometry of a range behind it, and he drove on and did not slow and did not photograph anything, because the camera is the confession.

He took the observation post that evening from the only ground that gave it, the flat roof of a half-built block of holiday apartments eight hundred metres south, abandoned at second storey, the staircase open to the sky. He went up at dusk with a flask of sweet tea and a pair of Zeiss 8x30s that were older than some of the people he had killed, and he lay down behind the parapet on a square of folded cardboard and he waited, because waiting was the trade and he was still, after everything, the best he had ever met at it.

Except for her. She had always been able to wait longer.

The light went the way it goes there, fast, the sky bleeding out over the Gulf into a flat metal sheet and the compound

lamps coming up hard and white. They were working late. That told him something on its own, that the day's heat was the cover and the night was the work. He watched them bring a dozen recruits out onto the poured concrete between the empty pools and form them up, and he watched a snatch drill begin, a man bundled from a car and away, run and run again, and even at that distance through old glass he could feel the wrongness of it being right, the economy of it, no shout, no wasted step, the whole violent transaction folded down small and quiet and over before the eye had finished telling the brain it had begun.

And he saw the woman who was running it.

She stood off to the side where a teacher stands, not in the drill but over it, and she did not raise her voice once that he could hear across the water and the wind. She corrected with her body. When the third pair fumbled the bundle she walked in, three steps, and took the recruit's wrist and turned it, just turned it, a few degrees, and stepped back out, and the next time the pair did it clean. He knew that turn of the wrist. He had felt it on his own wrist in a flat in Lodi Colony, twenty years and a life ago, and his arm remembered the small mercy of it before his mind did.

He lay very still and he raised the glasses and he tried for her face and the night would not give it to him.

It was the distance first, eight hundred metres is eight hundred metres and 8x30 glass in poor light is honest about what it cannot do. It was the lamps behind her, so that she stood in her own shadow, a shape edged in white and dark within. It was the scarf she wore against the sand wind, wound high. And it was the years, which alter a person past the place where memory keeps them, so that even had the

light been kind he was not sure the woman in his head and the woman on the concrete could have been laid one over the other and made to fit. He held the glasses until his arms shook and the salt got into his eyes and the shape stayed a shape. Once she turned full toward his hide as though the back of her neck had told her something, and he froze the way the dead freeze, and she looked along the dark water for the length of three slow breaths, and then she turned back to her recruits, because there was nothing to see, because he was very good at being nothing.

He came down off the roof at midnight with his decision already made, because the decision had made itself in the watching.

A pupil. It had to be a pupil. He worked it through in the car going south with the heater ticking, the way he worked everything through, against the documents, against the stone he had laid. The architect was dead. He had thinned her file himself and matched the slips and watched the lab's careful grammar and stood at the idea of the grave. A dead woman does not run a snatch drill on reclaimed sand in the northern emirates in January. What runs the drill is what she left behind, and what she left behind was a method, and a method does not die with the maker, that was the whole terrible point of a method, it was built to outlive the hand. Somewhere in the lost years she had taught one of them more than the rest, the way teachers do, picked a favourite and poured the school into her, and now the favourite had grown into a teacher in her turn and gone to market with the only inheritance she had. The turn of the wrist. The eating slowly. The two-glass rule. It was all there because she had taught it well, and the proof that she had taught it well was that he had

flown two thousand miles on the strength of a habit and found, at the end of it, not a ghost but a graduate.

It comforted him, the way true things rarely did and convenient ones often do. It let the stone lie. It let the dead stay dead and the file stay closed and the child in the next room stay the daughter of a murdered woman, which was the only mother he could afford to give her.

He should have felt the loose end whip back and cut him. He felt instead the particular peace of a man who has followed a wrong note to its source and struck it, and the new house going up on the Gulf was not his to close, would not stay private long, would learn the way they all learned that since the traffic circle in Baghdad the age of the private rifle was ending before it had properly begun, and patience or no patience it would either die of the scandal coming for all of them or it would have to become something else to live. That was their problem in the free zone. His problem slept with her fists up by her ears.

He flew out on the eleventh on the Sharma passport with real invoices for cloth he had genuinely bought, and over the empty quarter at altitude, with the cabin dark and the others asleep, he allowed himself the one indulgence he had denied himself on the roof. He let the shape on the concrete be her for a moment, only a moment, the length of three slow breaths. Then he put it away. He had laid his stone on a maybe once already, on a hedged profile and a sister's tears and a melted signet, and the stone had held a year and would hold the rest of his life if he did not pick it up to look beneath it. He did not pick it up. He had decided what was true, and a man who has decided does not go back to the grave to ask the dirt. He was, after all, the second-best waiter he had ever

known.

The best of them stood that same night on poured concrete by an empty swimming pool, watching the dark water to the south long after the recruits had gone in, the scarf at her throat, learning nothing from the night because there was nothing in it to learn, and went back at last to her plans, which had stopped being about rifles and started being about something quieter and far larger, and which would one day have a name, and a daughter she had given away who did not yet have a target.

Chapter 11

New Delhi · +14 days

The thread-sellers worked the edge of the courtyard at Hazrat Nizamuddin, and Sita bought a length of red cotton from the oldest of them because a woman with empty hands is a woman who has come to watch. She paid in coins. Coins left no trail; there was no QR code to lean her phone against, no number for a sender to remember. The boy behind the stall would not recall her, and the small camera over the western arch, the one the dargah committee had bolted up after the last scare and never once cleaned, would record a covered head among four hundred covered heads on a Thursday night, which was to say it would record nothing at all.

She had come early, before the qawwals tuned, and taken the long approach through the lanes: past the shops selling attar in cut-glass bottles, past the kebab griddles throwing their smoke up into the wires, doubling once at the biryani place where the alley forked, because a fork is a gift and you do not refuse a gift. No one had stayed with her. She was reasonably sure no one had stayed with her. In the unit you were never certain; you were only out of reasons to be afraid, and you learned to treat the two as the same thing or you did not last.

The woman was already inside.

Sita had the face from a single photograph Fateh had shown her on his own phone and had not let her keep, and from the way the woman moved, which was better than the photograph. Mira. R&AW, Fateh had said, and the file had

said it too, and Sita had learned this year to take any word from Fateh in one open hand and turn it in the light a long while before she let it in. The woman against the south wall sat too still for a desk officer of any service Sita could put a name to. She had her dupatta drawn up and her spine to the marble, in the one place from which the gate and the inner sanctum were both visible without a turn of the head, and she had settled into it without appearing to settle, the way you set down a cup. That told Sita more than the file had. Amateurs took the corner. Professionals took the wall that watched the corner.

Assess whether she is a threat. Fateh had given her the task and then, which was the strange part, the part she had turned over every night since, he had given her nothing else. No key. No room. No hour by which it must be done. Judgement, he had said, as though the word cost him something, and she had understood that he was handing her a thing he had spent eighteen years keeping locked, and that he did not entirely know why.

So she would judge. She found her place along the eastern colonnade, in the press of bodies where the cold of the marble came up through her soles, and she settled into the particular stillness that was not stillness, the breath dropped low, the eyes soft, taking the whole field and fixing on nothing. The qawwals began. The harmonium first, a single sustained breath of it, and then the tabla, and then the lead voice went up over the courtyard like something let off a leash, and four hundred people leaned a degree forward as one animal.

Mira did not lean.

That was the second thing. Everyone leaned; the music reached in under the ribs and pulled, that was what it was

built to do across eight centuries of men who had known exactly what they were building. Mira sat with her face arranged in the right shape, lips parted, eyes wet at the right moment, and underneath the arrangement she was working the room exactly as Sita was working it, and Sita felt the recognition land cold and clean in her stomach, the way you recognise your own hand in the dark.

She is good. She is here for the same reason I am. She is watching the watchers.

The trouble with watching someone who is watching is that the geometry collapses. Sita held her position through two songs and understood, somewhere in the second, that she had been made. Not caught, not fixed, nothing so crude. But the woman's gaze had crossed her twice without weight, and the second crossing had been a hair too light, the deliberate weightlessness of a professional declining to look at the thing she has already seen. You could not counterfeit that lightness. You could only drill it into yourself for years.

She should have left then. The doctrine was unambiguous: a surveillance burned is a surveillance ended; you withdraw, you wash off, you come again in another skin or you send someone else. Rudra's voice, even, telling her so across a thousand mornings. *When they see you, you are no longer the one who decides.*

She did not leave. She told herself it was assessment. You learned more from one contact than from a thousand hours behind the long lens, and Fateh had asked for judgement, and judgement wanted the thing up close. That was the reason she gave herself, standing in the cold with the red thread wound twice around her fingers, and it was a good reason, and it was not the true one, and she knew the difference and

let it stand anyway.

When the qawwali broke for the changeover, the crowd loosened and flowed, and Sita let the flow carry her along the south wall, unhurried, a woman going to tie her thread on the jali of the inner shrine, which was a thing four hundred people had come to do. She did not look at Mira. She came level with the wall and there was a gap on the marble, a body's width, and she folded down into it with her knees drawn up, two arms' length from the woman, an ordinary pilgrim taking an ordinary space because the space was there.

For a long while neither of them spoke and the not-speaking was its own conversation. Sita worked the thread, made a show of it, and waited, because the first to speak surrenders the frame, and she had been taught the frame before she had been taught her letters.

"You tie it for a wish," Mira said. She did not turn her head. She said it to the courtyard, to the marble, a sentence she had plainly decided on before she opened her mouth. Her Hindi had a softness in it, a Lucknow vowel worn down by other cities. "Did you know that. You make the wish and you tie the thread, and when the wish is granted you are supposed to come back and untie it." She let a beat go. "Nobody comes back to untie them. Look."

Sita looked. The jali was a white stone lattice and every aperture of it was choked with thread, red and orange and a green gone grey, knot upon knot upon knot, the accreted wishes of decades that no one had returned to release.

"They forget," Sita said. The first words she had spoken aloud in three hours. They came out level. "Or it isn't granted."

"Or it's granted," Mira said, "and they don't want to give it back."

A man went by close with a tray of rose petals and the scent fell over them both and was gone. Sita catalogued the woman's hands, which were still, and the woman's feet, which were bare and pointed at the gate, and the small canvas bag against her hip with nothing in it that made a corner. There was no wire on her that Sita could see. There was no second person reading them. The contact was clean, and the cleanliness of it was itself a kind of statement, because a woman who meant to take you did not come alone, with empty hands, to a place with one gate.

"You're not from here," Mira said.

"No."

"I'm not either." She drew her knees up, mirror of Sita's own posture, and Sita noted the mirror and did not move out of it, because moving out of it would announce that she had noticed. "I come on Thursdays when I'm in the city. Not for the wish. I gave up on the wish." A small dry sound that was nearly a laugh. "For the noise, I think. You sit in the middle of all of it and nobody needs anything from you. Four hundred people and not one of them will speak to you. It's the only place I know like that."

Sita said nothing. The technique was familiar to her; she had used it; you offered a small confession to draw a larger one, you opened a door and stepped back from it so the other walked through under their own weight and believed the walking was theirs. She catalogued it as technique. She filed it under approach, under recruitment, under the long slow architecture of getting a stranger to hand you the soft part of herself. She knew exactly what was being done to her and the

knowing was a wall and she stood behind the wall, satisfied.

"My work takes me to a lot of cities," Mira said. "You learn them by their airports and their middle-grade hotels. You learn the names of the people at the desks and they never learn yours, and that's correct, that's the arrangement, you wouldn't want it otherwise." She turned her head now, finally, and looked at Sita full, and her eyes were tired in a way the file had not held and could not have. "And then one night you're in a room in one more city and the channel on the television is in a language you don't have, and you realise there is not one person on the earth who knows which city you are in tonight. Not one. If you didn't come back, no one would look in the right place, because no one would know where the right place was."

She said it without weight. That was the thing. She did not lay it down as bait with the hook showing; she said it like a load set down at the end of a long carry, because the arms have finally gone and there happens to be someone beside you and it no longer matters who.

And it went in.

It went in under something Sita had not known was thin. She had built the wall and the words had not come at the wall at all; they had come up from underneath it, from a quarter she did not guard because she had not known there was anything down there to guard. *No one would look in the right place.* She thought, before she could stop the thought, of the safe flat in Bhuleshwar with the two locks and the window that gave onto a wall, and of the fact that if she did not come back to it on any given night, Fateh would know within forty-eight hours and Rudra perhaps within twelve, and they would look, they would certainly look, and that this was the

whole and entire roster of the people on the earth who would look, and that she had until this exact moment thought of that roster as long. As warmth. As family, even, the word she was permitted.

She kept her face. She had kept her face through worse than this; she had kept it while a man died on the far side of a hotel door eighteen inches from her shoulder, a man who had been waiting for someone who never came. But she felt the heat climb the back of her neck and she knew that the woman, who was good, who was as good as anyone Sita had stood beside, would have a fair chance of reading it, and she hated the heat for that and could not call it back.

"You should sleep with the television on," Sita said. It was the only thing she had. "The light. It helps."

Mira looked at her another moment and then she smiled, and the smile was the worst of it, because it was not a winning smile, not the smile of a hand closing on a thing it has caught. It was rueful and a little surprised and without any triumph in it at all, the smile of one person who has been heard by another and had not expected to be.

"Yes," she said. "The light helps." She turned back to the courtyard, releasing Sita from the look, which was a mercy and which Sita resented as a mercy, because a mercy is a thing one person gives another and she did not want to be a person this woman could give anything to. "You do it too, then."

"Do what."

"The cities." Mira tipped her chin at the courtyard, the gate, the whole apparatus of comings and goings. "The desks who don't learn your name."

"I do a lot of things," Sita said, and heard how it sounded, and let it sound that way, because the truest thing she could say had to be dressed as the most evasive, and the woman would file it under evasion and be wrong about which part was the lie.

The qawwals were tuning again. The harmonium found its breath. Sita understood that the changeover was the window, that the contact would close when the music opened, that the woman had timed the whole of it to the music, as Sita herself would have timed it, and that she should rise now and go, wash off, take what she had to Fateh and say the only honest professional thing there was to say, which was: *She is good, she is patient, she works alone and she works clean, and she is the most dangerous kind, because she does not come at you, she lets you come to her.*

That was the assessment. It was complete. It was correct. She had it.

She did not rise.

"You said you gave up on the wish," she said instead, and was appalled at herself even as the words went out, because it was not a question doctrine sanctioned, it was not assessment, it was a hand reaching back toward a door that had been opened, and she had been the one to open doors all her life and had never once walked toward one. "What was it. The wish."

Mira was quiet. The harmonium held its note. When she answered she had gone somewhere behind her own eyes, and her voice had thinned to almost nothing under the rising music, so that Sita had to lean a degree to take it, and leaning, gave the woman the very thing the music drew from the courtyard, the half-step forward, the small surrender, and

knew she had given it and could not unlearn.

"I had a child," Mira said. "A long time ago. In another life, practically. And I wasn't able to keep her." She turned the empty canvas bag once in her hands, a thing to do with the hands. "That's all. That's the whole of it. People think the worst thing is grief, the clean kind, the kind where they're gone and you mourn them and the mourning has a shape to it. But there's an older thing under that. The not-knowing. She's somewhere. She's a grown woman somewhere on the earth tonight and she doesn't know which city I'm in either, and the difference between us is that I gave that up, and she never got to choose it." She set the bag down. "So. No more wishes. You only get to want a thing like that for so many years before the wanting costs more than the thing."

She said it and then she seemed to come back from wherever she had been, and a small alarm crossed her face, the alarm of the professional who has said too much, and she covered it, she covered it as Sita herself would have, with a short laugh and a gesture at the noise.

"Listen to me," she said. "The music does this. You'll think I'm mad."

"No," Sita said.

The lead voice broke over the courtyard and the crowd leaned and this time Mira leaned with it, gave herself to it, closed her eyes, and the conversation was over; she had ended it completely, leaving no edge to take hold of. Sita sat a moment longer in the cold rising off the marble with the red thread still wound around her fingers, unknotted, the wish she had not made still in her keeping.

She rose. She did it on the swell of the music when three hundred others were rising and reaching and swaying, and

she went out along the south wall and through the press at the gate, and she did not look back, because looking back is the amateur's tell and because she did not trust her face to do it. In the lane the attar and the kebab smoke closed over her and she ran the wash without thinking, the doubling, the pause at the fork, her body executing the drill while the rest of her stood off somewhere apart and watched it run and found it had nothing to say.

She had her assessment. *She is good. She is dangerous. She let you come to her.* All true. She would deliver it to Fateh and it would be accurate and complete and she would leave out nothing operational, and it would still be a lie, because the operational truth was not the truth. The truth was that she had gone in to look at a threat and the threat had looked back and had seen her, had seen the exact thing under the wall that Sita herself had not known was there, and had named it without cruelty and without wanting anything for the naming, or wanting only one thing, which Sita could not yet make out.

She tied the red thread to the next jali she passed, a small unimportant shrine in the mouth of the lane where no one was watching, and she did not make a wish, because she did not know what she would have wished for, and the not-knowing was new, and she carried it out into the traffic and the sodium light like something she had been handed and could not put down.

Chapter 12

New Delhi · +15 days

The flat was on the third floor of a block in Vasant Vihar that R&AW kept under a property company that paid its electricity bill on time and never otherwise existed. Mira had surrendered her phone at the door, into the steel box on the shoe rack, and watched Sehgal slide the lid shut without looking at it, the way a man closes a drawer he has closed ten thousand times. The box was lined with copper mesh. It was the only piece of tradecraft in the room that announced itself. Everything else was teacups and a ceiling fan turning slowly enough to count.

He had made the tea himself. That was a courtesy and a message both. No third person, no stenographer, no recorder she could see, which meant there was a recorder she could not. She accepted the cup and held it without drinking and let him begin in his own time, because Sehgal did not like to be hurried and she had learned, in the months since he had put the file in her hands, that the things he wanted most he asked for last.

"You look tired," he said.

"I've been on a train."

"The Rajdhani has beds."

"I didn't sleep."

He nodded as though this confirmed something he had suspected about the weather. He was a narrow man, grey at the temples, with the stillness of someone who had spent a career being underestimated and had stopped minding. He

had handed her the dossier in February in a room not unlike this one and told her, almost shyly, that he had been looking for this girl for a long time. On his own hours. Mira had taken that for an old man's pride then. She was less sure now what it had been.

"Tell me about Thursday," he said.

So she told him. She told it the way she had been trained to tell it, in sequence, without colour, the facts laid down like cards. The dargah at the end of the lane off the Mahim causeway, the one that filled on Thursday nights when the qawwals came and the courtyard went thick with attar and sweat and the smoke of the agarbatti the women bought at the stall by the gate. She had chosen it, she said, because a single woman could sit there for two hours and be invisible, because the music gave cover for two people to put their heads close and not be heard, because there were four ways out and a crowd to dissolve into at any of them.

"You chose it," Sehgal said.

"Yes."

He turned his cup a quarter-turn on its saucer. "Go on."

She went on. And it was in the going on that the floor of it shifted under her, quietly, the way a tide goes out without seeming to move at all.

Because she had not chosen it. Not really. She had stood in this flat in the last week of the recce with three locations on the table and Sehgal had been here too, pouring tea, saying nothing, and when her hand had hovered he had remarked, idly, that he had always found the Mahim dargah on a Thursday to be a forgiving sort of place. A man could be lonely there in company. He had said it and gone to refill the kettle and by the time he came back the choice had been hers,

fully hers, made of her own free professional judgement, and she had carried it ever since as her own.

She kept her voice level and laid the next card down.

The timing, then. She had moved on the girl now, inside the two-week window, because the window was closing, because Kaul's order to fold the unit was running on a clock and an asset is never more turnable than in the days before the ground goes out from under her. That much was doctrine. Anyone would have said it. She had said it herself, to Sehgal, in this room, weeks ago, and felt clever saying it, and he had agreed with her so readily, so warmly, that she had glowed a little under the agreement.

She set the cup down on the side table because her hand had developed an opinion she did not want him to read.

"And the approach," Sehgal said. "How did you open her."

This was the part he wanted. She understood that now too, late, the way you understand a sentence only when you reach its final word. He had not brought her four hundred miles to recite the geography of a shrine. He wanted to know what she had spent, and whether the spending had worked, and whether the instrument he had selected with such care had performed to specification.

"I gave her the truth," Mira said.

"Which truth."

"That the man who raised her built her. That she was made, not found. That whatever he told her she was, the file says otherwise, and the file is older than his story." She paused. "I told her her origin is a fiction. That she was an asset before she was a person. I gave it to her straight, the way you'd give a diagnosis. No softening."

"That was bold."

"It was true."

"Truth is the most expensive thing we carry," Sehgal said. "You don't spend it unless the return is certain." He looked at her then, properly, for the first time since she had sat down, and there was in the look something she could not name and did not like, an attentiveness too fine, a man checking the level of a fluid in a gauge. "Was the return certain?"

And here was the place where she had to decide, in the half-second the question left her, how much of herself to hand across the teacups.

Because she had given the girl more than the diagnosis. She had given her the other thing, the soft thing, the thread Sehgal had wound onto the spool for her before she ever left Delhi. *Find the place where you are the same, he had said, and stand in it with her. She has been alone her whole life and never had a word for it. Give her the word.* And Mira had understood the instruction perfectly, professionally, as a thing to do to another human being, and she had gone to Mumbai with it folded in her pocket like a blade.

She had told the girl about the child.

She had told her in the dargah with the qawwali rising, leaning close as the cover demanded, that she had carried a child and lost it, and that there was a particular cold that came afterward and never fully left, a cold you learned to work around the way you learn to favour a bad knee, and that she had spent years in rooms full of people being the most alone person in the room. She had said it because Sehgal had told her to find the place where they were the same and stand in it.

The trouble was that it was true.

That was the architecture of the thing, the thing she was only now seeing whole as she sat in the slow turn of the fan: he had not given her a legend to perform. He had reached into her and found the one true wound she carried and told her to press her thumb into it in front of a stranger, because a real wound bleeds convincingly and a manufactured one does not, and the girl, conditioned from infancy to read every false note in a voice, would have heard a legend in a heartbeat and would not, could not, hear this. The limited hangout works because most of it is true. That was the doctrine of it. You salt the real ore with one planted grain and the assay reads honest because it mostly is.

The planted grain had been the last thing. *When she is open*, Sehgal had said, *give her the door. Tell her there is a way out that is not death. Tell her the service does not want her dead. Let her think it was your idea to tell her.*

She had given the girl the door.

"The return was certain," Mira said.

Sehgal waited. He was good at waiting. The fan turned. Somewhere below, a car door slammed and a child's voice went up the stairwell and was gone.

"She's turnable," Mira said. "She left the meeting with her assessment of me complete and her certainty in him broken. I read it on her. She came to take my measure as a threat and she walked out a different shape than she walked in. Another meeting, two, and she's ours."

All of which was true, and none of which was the thing she was holding back, and Sehgal, she was certain, knew that there was a thing she was holding back, because a debrief between professionals is mostly the management of the spaces around the words.

What she did not say was this.

She did not say that somewhere in the second hour, with the music at its height and the girl's eyes on her, something had reversed. That she had pressed her thumb into the true wound for operational reasons and the wound had answered, not as a tool answers a hand but as one wound answers another, and that she had felt, for the first time in more years than she could stand to count, recognised. Not assessed. Not run. Recognised, by a girl half her age who had been built in a basement to feel nothing and had not quite succeeded, any more than Mira had quite succeeded at the opposite. She did not say that when she gave the girl the door, the way out, she had heard her own voice catch on the word *alive* and had not had to fake the catch. She did not say that she had walked out of the dargah and stood in the lane among the beggars and the flower-sellers and not known, for a full minute, which of them was the agent and which the mark, who had opened whom, whose hand was on whose spool.

She did not say that she was no longer sure she was the one running this.

"Good," Sehgal said at last, and the single word had a weight to it, a settling, the sound of a thing going into place. "That's good, Mira. That's very good work."

"It was a clean approach," she said.

"It was the right instrument," he said, "applied with care."

The instrument. She heard it. She let it pass across her face as nothing, a professional taking a professional's compliment, and inside her the word turned over and showed its other side. He had not said *you did well*. He had said the instrument was right. As though the doing well belonged to the selection and not to the hand. As though the credit ran

upward, to the man who had chosen the place and set the clock and reached into her chest for the bait, and she had only been the part of the mechanism that moved.

She picked up the tea again to have something to do with the hand. It had gone cold.

"You found her," Mira said. "Years ago. On your own time. You told me that in February."

"I did."

"Why you?" She kept it light, a colleague's curiosity, the kind of question that costs nothing to ask and everything to answer. "It wasn't your section. It was never tasked. A whole career's worth of other people's targets and you spend your evenings on a girl nobody had a file open on."

Sehgal smiled. It was a real smile, which was what made it impossible to read. "When you have done this as long as I have," he said, "you develop interests. Loose ends offend me. She was a loose end with very good handwriting. The tradecraft on the early jobs, before your time, before any of this" — he moved two fingers, taking in the flat, the box of phones, the country — "was beautiful. You don't forget a hand like that. You wonder who taught it." He set his cup down. "I wondered for a long time who taught it."

"And did you find out?"

For a moment, only a moment, something moved behind the stillness, a fish under ice, there and gone. "These are old men's hobbies," he said. "You shouldn't indulge me. Tell me what you'll need for the second meeting."

She told him. She asked for the things an agent asks for, the legend reinforced, the bank trail laid for the cover identity, a fallback dead drop in the event the girl wanted to signal between meetings, a clean phone routed through the

cover. He gave her all of it without a quibble, which she noted, because Sehgal quibbled on principle, treated every requisition as a small war, and he had just surrendered the field without a shot. He wanted the second meeting to happen smoothly. He wanted it more than he wanted to seem to want it.

"The Aadhaar people are circling the contract again," he said, apropos of nothing, refilling her cold cup with hot. "The TRINETRA business. Meridian. The court won't move, the politicians won't move, the whole thing sits there stalled and everyone pretends it's about privacy." He shook his head, a man amused by the foolishness of the times. "It will matter to you eventually. All of this connects. But not yet. For now you have one job and it is the girl."

She did not know why he had said it. She filed it. She had learned that everything Sehgal said apropos of nothing was apropos of something, and that the something usually arrived months later, fully formed, as though it had been waiting in the room the whole time.

"One job," she said. "The girl."

"Bring her in," Sehgal said. "Gently. She's frightened, even if she'd die before she showed it. Frightened things bolt if you grab. You've found the way to hold her without grabbing." He looked at her with what, on another man, she would have called fondness. "I knew you would. It's why it had to be you. Anyone else would have run a stranger at her. You ran someone who had stood where she stands. That can't be taught and it can't be faked. That's why I chose you."

That's why I chose you. There it was again, the credit running upward, the choosing his and the standing-where-she-stands hers, her grief the specification

he had read off a sheet and matched to the requirement. She had carried the child and lost it and carried the cold ever since, and the man across the teacups had looked at the worst thing that had ever happened to her and seen a fit for a slot.

She smiled at him. It was a good smile. She had been trained by professionals and refined by twenty years and she put into it nothing at all of what she was thinking, which was that she did not, any longer, fully believe that she had run the girl on Thursday. That somewhere in the second hour the running had become mutual and then become something with no name in the doctrine, and that the girl was now inside her in a place that the operation did not authorise and Sehgal would not approve, and that she was going to go back to Mumbai and sit in the dargah again and do her job, and that she no longer knew, truly did not know, whether she would be doing it for him.

"More tea?" Sehgal said.

"No," Mira said. "I should sleep before the next train."

He saw her to the door. He opened the steel box and gave her back her phone and she dropped it in her bag and felt, absurdly, like a woman collecting a coat. On the landing he touched her arm, lightly, the only time he touched her in the whole of it.

"You did the country a service, going down there," he said. "Whatever comes, remember that. You were on the right side."

"Which side is that?" she said, and meant it as the kind of dry thing one professional says to another at a door, and heard, too late, that it had come out as a real question.

Sehgal held her eyes a beat longer than the joke required.

"Ours," he said, and shut the door, and she stood on the landing with her dead phone warming in the bag against her hip, listening to the bolt go across, and could not for the life of her have said whose.

Chapter 13

New Delhi · +17 days

The fan turned overhead at the speed of a thing too tired to stop, pushing the heat from one side of the room to the other without ever spending it. Fateh had switched the light off an hour ago. He worked better in the grey that came up off the street, the sodium wash through the half-closed shutter, because in that light the papers laid out on the floor stopped being paper and became what they were, which was the shape of a man's intentions read backwards.

He had the cell spread across the tiles like a hand of patience. Forty-one index cards, a roll of butcher's paper gone soft at the creases, three burner ledgers transcribed in his own hand because he trusted no machine in the Lanka to hold them. At the centre, weighted under a brass tumbler, sat the card he kept coming back to. SALIM REZA. Thirty-four. Bhatkal by way of Sharjah, two years in a Gulf labour camp that had taught him patience and given him a grievance with an address. A competent man. Fateh had watched competent men for thirty years and could grade them the way a horse dealer grades teeth, and Salim Reza graded out as good. Disciplined, unhurried, careful with phones. The sort who would have run a respectable little cell for a decade, blown a market when the season called for it, and died eventually in a stairwell with his hands taped behind him, certain to the last that the war had been his.

That was the man. The trouble was that the man was not behaving like himself.

Fateh poured the cold tea into the saucer to cool it further, an old habit from a colder posting, and did not drink it. He went over the tempo again, because tempo was where a lie always surfaced first. A real cell breathed in a rhythm you learned to feel in the soles of your feet: a quickening when money came, a long held silence after, the irregular pulse of men who improvised because no one above them had thought far enough ahead to remove the need. You could hear the breathing in the toll records, in the gaps between calls, in the days a phone went dark and the days it would not stop. Salim Reza's cell did not breathe like that. It moved the way a metronome moves. Money arrived before it was needed, in amounts that anticipated a requirement the cell itself had not yet articulated. A scout went to a city three days before the cell had any reason to be interested in that city. A vehicle was acquired, garaged, and left untouched for nine days, which no broke outfit on earth does, because a parked car is money sleeping, and they had parked it as though they knew to the hour when it would wake.

He had seen tempo like that once before, a long time ago, and he set the thought down before it could finish forming, the way you set down a pan you have picked up by the wrong end.

Instead he went to the targets, because the targets were the part that would not let him sleep.

He laid the four of them in a row on the butcher's paper and looked at them the way Salim Reza's masters in Karachi, or wherever those men imagined themselves to be, would have looked at them, asking the only question those men ever asked, which was: what does this buy us. A faction does not kill for the pleasure of the noise. Every corpse is an entry in a

ledger, paid to a constituency, a sect, a sponsor, a wounded pride that lives in an office across a border and reads the morning papers to see whether its money was well spent. Show Fateh a target and he could read the bill it was meant to settle. He had done it his whole working life, and he had been wrong few enough times to count them.

He could not read these.

The first was a deputy harbour officer at the container port, a man whose entire significance was that he signed for what came off certain ships and looked the other way at the rest. Killing him bought nothing. He was useful alive to anyone who moved cargo, useless dead to everyone, a martyr to no cause, a name that would mean nothing painted on a wall. The second was a junior engineer who maintained a stretch of telecom backbone, a man so obscure that Fateh had needed two days simply to establish that he existed. The third was not a person but a transport interchange at a particular hour of a particular weekday. The fourth was not a person either, but a building, a glass thing on the eastern arterial that housed, among nine other tenants, a contractor that ran data for the railways.

He sat with them a long time, his back against the cool of the wall, the cards going from grey to greyer as a cloud crossed whatever moon there was.

Sectarian outfits killed for the dividend of fear among the faithless and pride among the faithful. They went for temples and trains and crowds with cameras already pointed at them, because terror is a performance and you do not stage a performance in an empty room. These four were the empty room. A harbour clerk. A man who fixed cables. There was no audience here, no constituency that would feel avenged, no

patron in a ministry who would nod over his tea and release the next tranche, pleased that his money had bought him standing among hard men. If Salim Reza had carried this list to any handler Fateh had known in thirty years, the handler would have laughed at him and asked where the people were.

And yet the money had come before the list. That was the detail that turned the whole structure inside out and showed Fateh the wiring behind the plaster. The money had not followed a plan the cell had made. The plan had followed the money. Somebody, far away and long before, had decided that these specific obscure things would be done, and had then arranged matters so that Salim Reza arrived, in his own good time and by his own apparent reasoning, at the belief that he had chosen them himself.

Fateh got up off the floor, his knees announcing their age one after the other, and stood at the shutter with two fingers parting the slats. The street did its night business below him. The chai stall folding down. The man who repaired nothing but sat all night beside a shuttered shop as if guarding it. Two boys on one scooter, going nowhere with great urgency. He had chosen the Lanka for this window. You could not approach it without being seen by a patient man, and Fateh was, if he was anything now, a patient man. He let the street reassure him and turned the problem once more in the dark behind his eyes.

Run it forward, then. Assume the man you cannot read is not the author. Assume Salim Reza is a pen. Ask who holds the pen.

He went back to the ledgers and traced the money the way he had traced it four times already, hoping the fifth pass would show him a seam the others had folded over. It came in

as hawala, which told him nothing, hawala being the oldest clean water in the world. But the disbursement told him something. It came through a single point. One man, whom the cell knew only as a Gulf voice on an encrypted line and a face met twice in the flesh, handed down the instructions and the funds, and that man, Fateh was now nearly certain, believed himself to be the lowest rung of a state's ladder. He carried himself like a man serving a flag. He used the tradecraft of a service, the dead intervals, the over-careful phones, the small private arrogances of a man who thinks an embassy stands somewhere behind him with the lights on. He thought the money was foreign. He thought he served a country.

Fateh had spent enough years inside a real service to know the exact posture of a man who only imagines he is inside one. This handler had been sold a country the way a mark is sold a bridge he does not own. He was a cut-out who did not know he was a cut-out, which is the most expensive kind to build and the most perfect, because a man who knows he is a cut-out can be turned, and a man who believes he is a patriot cannot, since he has nothing to betray but his own faith, and a man will die before he betrays his faith. Fateh had once explained this to a younger officer in almost those words, in a room he could still smell if he let himself. He did not let himself.

So. A pen that thinks it writes. A hand on the pen that thinks it is a service. And above the hand, holding the whole arrangement at arm's length through one bought believer, somebody who had taken the trouble to make every link in the chain misunderstand its own position. The harbour clerk would not know why he died. Salim Reza did not know he was

a tool. The handler did not know his country did not exist. Each of them sealed inside a story that made perfect local sense and complete global nonsense, and the only altitude at which the nonsense resolved back into sense was a height none of the three could see, where a single person looked down on all of it at once and understood what a harbour clerk and a cable engineer and a glass building had in common.

Fateh knew that altitude. He had built one like it himself, in a flat not unlike this one, and he had run a girl up and down it for eighteen years on precisely this principle, that an instrument serves best when it cannot see the whole of what it serves. He recognised the architecture because he had lived inside it and made others live inside it. That was not a comfort. It was the opposite of one.

He made himself say it plainly, in his head, in the flat declarative voice he kept for the things he did not want to feel.

The outfit is not led. It is driven.

There was a difference, and it was the whole difference. A led cell shared a purpose with the men above it. A driven cell was a vehicle, and the men inside it were not passengers but cargo, and the road they believed they had chosen had been graded and signposted and swept for them so smoothly that they mistook the absence of resistance for the exercise of their own free will. Salim Reza believed he was waging a war. He was being walked. Fateh could see the harness on him now, in the tempo, in the money that arrived ahead of need, in the four targets that paid no faction's bill, and once you have seen the harness on a man you cannot unsee it. You can only grieve for him a little, because he will go to his end certain that he was free.

The cold came up through the question that had to follow, the one he had been circling all night and refusing to set his foot on.

If the targets serve no faction, whom do they serve?

He laid the four cards out one final time and forced himself to stop reading them as a faction would and to read them as the height would, the single hand that had chosen each of them on purpose and for a reason. He still could not see the prize. But for the first time he could make out its shadow, the negative space the four deaths would cut into the world, and the shape of that space frightened him more than any list of the dead had frightened him in years.

They were not aimed at people. They were aimed past the people, at the noise the people would make afterward. A harbour clerk. A cable engineer. An interchange at rush hour. A data contractor for the railways. Killed, every one of them would generate a particular kind of aftermath. Not grief, which fades and is private. Not fear, which can be governed and is useful. They would generate questions. Inquiries. The long forensic churn of a state asking itself, in committee rooms and on television, how it had failed to see this coming, how four such ordinary threads had been pulled and nobody anywhere had felt the cloth move. Each target had been chosen, Fateh understood slowly, the way you choose the words of a question so that only one answer can be given to it. The attack was not the point. The attack was the question. Somebody, at the height, was assembling a question of human lives so that they alone could be standing in the room afterward, holding the answer.

He did not know to whom the answer would be sold, or for what, or how much. He could not see that far up. He saw only

the hand, and the terrible economy of it, the willingness to spend a harbour clerk and an engineer and a cell of true believers as so much ink, merely to write a single sentence in a place he could not yet read.

He sat down on the floor among the cards because his legs decided it for him.

For a moment he let himself be only tired, which he could not often afford. Thirty years, and the worst of them had all worn this same shape, the moment when a thing he had told himself was chaos resolved under his hand into design. Chaos he could fight. Chaos was a kind of weather, and you waited it out or you walked through it. But design meant a person. And a person at this height, working through three nested layers of men who each believed himself the author of his own life, was not an enemy his unit had any apparatus left to fight. His unit was a single conditioned girl and a cook who had once killed for wages and himself, an old man in a borrowed flat reading other men's telephone bills by the light off the street. Against that stood a mind that could afford to lose an entire cell in order to make a point land cleanly.

He had been taught this grammar, once. That was the thing he kept arriving at and stepping back from all night, as one steps back from the edge of a platform when the train comes through without stopping. He had been taught it in a room, by a teacher, in years he had spent a long time learning not to revisit, and the teacher was a long time dead. Which meant only that the school had outlived the teacher. A ghost leaves no fingerprints. A ghost leaves a grammar, and a grammar can be taught, and what is taught can be inherited, and somewhere a student of that dead hand was writing now in the dead hand's style, with the dead hand's patience,

bending living men around a purpose none of them could see. He had told himself as much before, in the UAE, watching a woman work a room with the technique he knew to the bone, and he had walked away from that street with the same conclusion folded carefully in his pocket: that a method had survived its maker, and that he was hunting an heir.

He made himself stop there. He made himself stop at the heir and go no further down that stair, because the next step did not bear taking at four in the morning with cold tea in a saucer and his knees gone and no one in the world to tell. An heir he could believe in. An heir let him keep the grave shut. He gathered the four target cards instead and squared their edges against the floor and held them in one hand, the harbour clerk and the engineer and the hour and the glass building, four obscure deaths that would mean nothing to anyone and everything to one, and he understood that he was holding a sentence written in a language he had been taught and had then given eighteen years of his life to forgetting.

Out on the street the man who repaired nothing shifted in his chair and was still again. The fan turned. The grey at the shutter thinned by a single shade toward the dirty white that passes for dawn in that city, and Fateh sat among the laid-out cards of a war that not one man inside it knew was being fought for the benefit of someone standing outside it, and he waited for the light to come up far enough to read by, and dreaded, with a steadiness that had become its own kind of courage, what it would let him see.

Chapter 14

New Delhi · +20 days

The Honda had moved.

Sita registered it the way she registered her own pulse, without deciding to. Forty minutes ago, when she came down the lane the first time with a polythene bag of onions swinging from her wrist, the grey Honda City had been nose-out beside the shuttered tyre shop, two wheels up on the broken kerb, a delivery man's idleness in the way it sat. Now it was nose-in. Someone had reversed it into the gap and killed the engine and not got out. The windscreen held the orange of the sodium lamp and gave her nothing behind it.

A car that repositions to keep a doorway in its mirror is not idle. She kept her stride even and let the thought arrive without letting it reach her face.

The doorway was a stairwell three buildings down, between a shop selling mobile covers and a juice stall pulling its shutter for the night. Behind that stairwell, on the second floor, a man named Iqbal Sayyed was supposed to take delivery of an envelope at nine and pass it on by ten. Fateh had given her the address at half past four that afternoon, the key to a room across the road in her palm before she had finished her tea, the window written on a slip she had already burned. Observe the handoff. Photograph the second man. Do nothing he would feel.

It was a clean tasking. Three people in the world had carried it: Fateh, who set it; Rudra, who confirmed the room; herself. The slip with the window on it had lived in her pocket

for four hours and then in an ashtray.

So the Honda should not have known to be there.

She did not stop. Stopping is the loudest thing a body can do on a street. She let the onions swing and she counted, in the lazy way of a girl walking home, the things that did not belong. The Honda. A man at the paan shop on the corner who had bought nothing and lit nothing and stood with his weight on both feet, squared to the lane, not the counter; a watcher's stance, the stance of someone whose job is the street and not the shop. Above, on the second floor, Iqbal Sayyed's window was dark. At nine o'clock on a delivery night it should have shown a tubelight and a moving shadow. It showed neither.

The handoff was not going to happen. The handoff had been told not to happen.

Her chest did a small cold thing and she let it pass through her and out. Eighteen years old and she knew this feeling the way older people knew a draught in a familiar house: somebody has opened a door that should be shut. She did not run the thought to its end. She ran instead the route she had walked into her own legs that afternoon, because the first rule Rudra had ever given her, before knives, before locks, was that you choose your way out before you need it, when your hands are steady and your mind is bored.

At the juice stall she turned as if remembering something and went back the way she had come, unhurried, a girl who had forgotten the dahi her mother wanted. The man at the paan shop did not turn his head. That was worse than if he had. A bystander tracks movement; he had not needed to, which meant his eyes had handed her to someone else.

She found the someone else at the mouth of the lane. A second man, younger, on a phone he was not speaking into, the phone held the way they hold it when the camera is what is working. He was looking at her and pretending the screen had his attention. Facial recognition wanted a clean frontal and good light. She gave him three-quarter profile and the shadow of the awnings and, as she came level, she let her dupatta slip from her shoulder and brought it up over her hair against the night chill, an ordinary gesture, a thousand women on a thousand streets, and it broke the line of her jaw and put cloth where the software wanted a cheekbone.

Into the wet market then, where the lanes narrowed to a man's shoulders and the floor ran with fish-water and the bulbs hung naked and swinging, throwing every face into a different person twice a second. Cameras hated it here. People hated it here. She loved it the way she loved few places, because here she was only one more body in a press of bodies and the press did her counter-surveillance for her. She let a hand-cart cut between her and the lane's mouth. She turned left where she had walked right that afternoon, past the mutton stalls with their iron hooks, and she came out the far side into a different street with a different smell, and she stood for ninety seconds in the doorway of a bakery letting the warm yeast air settle on her while she watched the way she had come.

Nobody came. Or rather, two men came, fast, and looked the wrong way, down toward the auto stand, because that was where a frightened girl would go, toward light and engines and a way home. She had gone toward bread instead. She watched them choose wrong and felt nothing she could call triumph. She felt the cold thing again, the open door.

She took the battery out of the burner and split the SIM with her thumbnail along the scored line Rudra had taught her to make in advance, and she dropped the two pieces into two different drains a hundred metres apart, and she walked the long way to the second safehouse, the one not on any slip, and she did not stop walking for an hour.

By the time she let herself in she had built the explanation. She had built it the way you build a wall against weather, because the alternative was to stand in the weather.

Rudra was awake. He was always awake; she had never once arrived to find him asleep, and had stopped wondering when he slept. He had the small gas ring going and a pan of milk on it, and he did not look up when she came in, which was his way of telling her she was safe, that the room had been quiet, that nothing about her arrival required him to be ready. He let the milk come to the edge of boiling and took it off and poured two glasses and put a pinch of saffron in hers because she liked it and not in his because he did not, and only then did he look at her and read the whole evening off her in the time it took to set the glass down.

"It didn't run," he said. Not a question.

"It was waiting for me." She heard her own voice come out flat and was glad of it. "The Honda had turned around. There was a static at the paan shop and a camera on a phone at the mouth of the lane. Iqbal's window was dark. Nobody moved the way a handoff moves. They moved the way a box moves." She drank. The saffron was warm and absurd and she was grateful for it in a way that embarrassed her. "Somebody told them I was coming."

Rudra sat. He had a way of sitting that took the urgency out of a room, lowering himself like a man with all night, and

she knew it was deliberate and she let it work on her anyway.
"How many carried the window?"

"Three. Fateh. You. Me."

"And the address before the window?"

She thought. "Fateh had the address by lunch. He gave it to me at half four. You confirmed the room." She stopped.
"The room was booked through the desk."

"There it is," Rudra said softly, as if she had found something he had merely waited for her to find. "The room was booked through a desk. The desk runs on a property-management system that talks to a payment gateway that talks to a bank that files with the regulator. You book a room in this country now and you have told eleven machines you are in it. Aadhaar at check-in if the boy at the desk is by the book. A camera in the lobby that uploads to a server in a city neither of us has been to." He turned his glass a quarter-turn on the table, the way he turned everything, and did not drink. "We have spent twenty years being the only ghost in the room. We are not the only ghost any more. The room is full of them and they all keep diaries."

It was the explanation she had built on the long walk, said back to her in his voice, and hearing it from him set it like cement. That was what she wanted. She knew, somewhere under the wanting, that she wanted it, and she let the knowing stay under.

"A leak," she said.

"A seam." He chose the gentler word. "Kaul's people are walking the perimeter. They have had us flagged for a fortnight; you know this, Fateh told you himself. They are not looking for you by name, they are looking for a shape, a pattern of bookings and SIMs and movements that does not

file taxes and does not draw a salary. NATGRID is a machine for finding the shape of a thing that is trying not to have a shape. We made a booking that did not match any honest life and a young woman went to a building under watch, and somewhere a screen lit up. That is all. That is what closing feels like from the inside. It feels like being known."

"Iqbal's people were told to stay away," she said. "That isn't a screen lighting up. That's a word in an ear."

"Or Iqbal's people felt the watch and went to ground on their own, the way frightened men do, and the watch you saw was the same watch that frightened them, watching the wrong door for the wrong reason and finding you by luck." He let that sit. "You went to the building. The building was already hot. You walked into someone else's heat. It is not pretty and it is not personal and it nearly cost you, and you read it and you walked out through the fish market like I taught you, and you are sitting here drinking my milk. Tell me the part of that which says betrayal and I will worry with you all night. I do not hear it."

She turned it over. She wanted to find the flaw in it and she also, she understood, did not, and the second want was stronger, and she let the second want win because she was eighteen and tired and the saffron was warm and the only two men who had ever kept her alive were Fateh and the one across the table, and to follow the thought to its true end was to point it at one of them, and that she would not do. Could not. There was no muscle in her for it. They had built her and they had built her without that muscle, and tonight she was grateful for the lack the way you are grateful for a coat you did not know you were wearing.

"A seam," she said again, trying the word for fit.

"Seams we can live with," Rudra said. "Seams we expect. The whole country is a seam now. A man cannot buy a packet of cigarettes without leaving a trail, and a girl cannot watch a doorway without the doorway watching her back. It is the new weather. We change our clothes for it, that is all." He reached across and, with one finger, turned her glass a quarter-turn so the handle faced her, a small absurd courtesy, and the gesture undid something in her chest more than the words had. "You are not blown. Iqbal is. Let Fateh have the building. You sleep."

She did not sleep.

She lay on the cot in the back room with her shoes on, which she always did the first night in any room, and she listened to Rudra moving softly in the front, rinsing the pan, and she let the wall he had helped her build stand against the weather, and it stood. A seam. The new weather. Kaul's perimeter closing, a machine finding the shape of a shapeless thing. It was true. She had read the files; she knew what NATGRID was, what the grid could do, what TRINETRA was supposed to do better, the great argument running in the newspapers about who should be allowed to see the citizen. It was all true and it all fit and it asked nothing of her that she could not bear. That was how she knew to trust it. The explanations that cost you nothing are the ones to watch, Fateh had told her once, but she did not remember that tonight, or she remembered it and set it with the other thing under the wanting, where the light did not reach.

In the morning she went to Mira.

She had not planned to. She had planned to go to ground, to lie still for a day the way the manual said, to let the heat bleed off her. Instead her feet took her along the seafront

where the tide was out and the rocks were black and slick and the crows worked the tideline, and she found the bench where they had sat the third time, and Mira was there as if she had known, which she had not, which was only that Sita had learned the rhythm of where Mira walked and had walked into it on purpose while telling herself it was an accident.

Mira saw her face and did not ask. That was the thing about Mira. She did not come at you with questions the way an interrogator did, the way Sita had been trained to and trained against. She made room on the bench and she had two cutting chais already, because she always bought two, she said, the second for whoever the morning brought, and she handed one across, and the glass was hot through the thin paper and Sita held it and looked at the sea and let the silence be a thing they were doing together rather than a thing between them.

"Bad night," Mira said eventually, to the sea, not to her.

"A thing I was doing went thin." She had no business saying even that. She heard herself say it and felt the manual close like a hand around her throat and she said it anyway, because here, on this bench, with this woman who had told her about the child she had lost and the years she had spent being no one for the service, the manual's hand had no grip. "Someone knew I'd be where I was. Or near enough to knew."

Mira turned then, and the turn was slow and careful, and her eyes did the thing Sita had no defence against, which was simply to be steady and to wait without wanting anything. "That's the worst feeling there is," Mira said. "Worse than the danger. The danger you can run from. The other thing you carry home."

"Rudra says it's the new world. That everything leaks now. That I walked into heat that was already there." Sita heard the want in her own voice, the want for Mira to agree, to set the cement harder. "He says it isn't a person. It's the weather."

Mira was quiet for a long moment. A crow lifted off the rocks and beat out over the brown water and came back. "He might be right," she said. "Mostly it is the weather. Mostly it's a booking, a SIM, a face a machine half-recognised." She looked back at the sea. "But you should know who knew. Whatever it was. You should be able to name everyone who could have put you there, and look at each name without flinching, until you find the one you flinch at. That's not paranoia. That's hygiene. I'd help you do it, if you wanted. Two of us, going through it cold. Sometimes you can't see your own list."

Sita felt the offer land in her like warmth into cold hands, and she said yes before she had decided to, the way she had walked here before she had decided to, and she began, there on the bench with the tide out, to tell Mira the names. Fateh, who set it. Rudra, who confirmed it. The desk, the gateway, the bank, the grid. She laid them out one by one for the only person in the world she had let inside the wall, and Mira listened, and nodded, and asked one quiet question and then another, mapping it, and Sita felt the relief of being helped to carry the thing.

Out past the rocks a fishing boat came in low against the haze, and Mira's hand, when it came to rest a moment on Sita's wrist, was perfectly steady, and her eyes did not flinch at a single name on the list, not one, and Sita took that for proof that the list was clean.

Chapter 15

New Delhi · +22 days

The conference room on the fourth floor had no windows that opened, which Mira had always taken for a kind of confession. Air came filtered through a vent above the long table, dry and a little metallic, and the men who sat under it learned in time to mistake that staleness for gravity. She took the chair against the wall, not at the table. She was not a principal here. She was a field officer summoned to report, and reporting officers sat where they could see the backs of the people who decided things.

Kaul came in two minutes after the hour with his reading glasses already on, which meant he had read the brief and meant everyone to know it. He set a single folder square to the table edge and folded his hands on it. Sehgal followed him by a respectful half-step, carrying nothing, because Sehgal never carried paper into a room. He carried it in the people who handed it to him on the way.

"We'll keep this short," Kaul said. "I have the National Security Adviser at eleven and I would like to walk in with a closed file, not an open question."

Mira watched the table arrange itself around that sentence. Joint Secretary from the operations directorate. A man from the legal cell whose entire function this morning was to nod when liability was mentioned. A note-taker. And Sehgal, who had drawn his chair a careful eighteen inches back from the table's edge so that he sat slightly outside the circle, in the place from which a man can speak to everyone

and be blamed by no one.

The folder under Kaul's hands was the folder on Fateh. Mira knew its weight without seeing inside it. She had contributed to it. Her own assessment of the asset, the girl, was somewhere in there, three pages she had labored over and hated, every sentence of which was true and none of which said the thing she actually believed.

"The unit," Kaul said, and did not need to name it. "I want to record the decision properly. We are not in the business of leaving daylight for an inquiry to crawl into eighteen months from now."

"There won't be an inquiry, sir," Sehgal said. "There'll be a line in a budget that stops appearing. That's the cleanest kind."

A small laugh moved around the table, the laugh of men relieved to be told the dangerous thing is also the tidy thing. Mira did not laugh. She had begun, in the last three weeks, to notice the shape of Sehgal's sentences. He never argued for a course. He described the course already taken as though it were weather, something that had happened to all of them, and the room agreed because no one likes to argue with rain.

"Walk me through the intelligence picture as it stands this morning," Kaul said. "Not last week. This morning."

This was the part Mira had come to watch, though she could not have said so to anyone, least of all herself, until very recently. She kept her hands still in her lap and she watched the provenance.

Because intelligence has provenance the way money has serial numbers, and a career spent in the field teaches you, if it teaches you anything, to read the chain a thing travels before it reaches the man who acts on it. Raw goes to a desk.

A desk assesses. Assessment goes up through a directorate that adds its caveats and strips the desk's enthusiasm. By the time a thing reaches a chief it has passed four sets of hands and acquired four sets of fingerprints, and a good chief reads the fingerprints as carefully as the text, because the fingerprints tell him who wants him to believe it.

The picture Kaul received this morning had one set of fingerprints on it. Mira watched them go on, one document at a time.

"The fusion product came up overnight from NATGRID," Sehgal said, and slid a single sheet to the operations man, who slid it to Kaul. "Salim Reza's cell has gone quiet in a way that reads as pre-operational. Bookings cancelled, two phones dark, a pattern we've seen before a tasking. I had it pulled forward for you."

"Pulled forward from where?" Mira asked.

She had not meant to speak. The note-taker's pen stopped. Kaul looked at her over the glasses, not unkindly, the way a chairman looks at a junior who has discovered her voice at an inconvenient altitude.

"From the queue," Sehgal said. He turned his head toward her with an expression of perfect patience. "The assessment queue runs three days behind on volume. I flag the items that bear on a live decision and ask the desk to prioritise them. This bears on a live decision." He let that sit. "Was there something in the product, Officer Mira?"

"No," she said. "The product's clean. I was asking about the queue."

"Then we agree it's clean," Sehgal said, and turned back to Kaul, and the room moved on, and Mira understood that she had just been shown, very gently, exactly how it was done and

that there was nothing in it she could hold.

Because he was right. The queue did run three days behind. Flagging items for the chief was his job, the literal text of his post, the reason an Additional Secretary existed. And yet. She sat with her hands still and she made herself name the thing precisely, the way Fateh had once taught her to name a surveillance team precisely or not at all. The product was clean. The product was also the third product in eleven days that arrived exactly when a wavering man needed a reason to stop wavering, sourced to a fusion desk whose raw she could not see, flagged by the one man in the building who never touched the raw and never could be shown to have touched it.

It was not evidence. It was a smell. And she had been in this trade long enough to know that the smell of a thing and the proof of a thing live in different countries, and that women who confused the two ended their careers in the medical directorate explaining to a sympathetic doctor why they believed the air-conditioning was talking to them.

Kaul read the sheet. "Pre-operational," he said. "So the argument that Fateh's unit is the only thing standing between us and Reza."

"Is the argument Fateh makes," Sehgal said. "Yes. It's a good argument. It's the argument every off-books shop makes when you reach for the plug. We are the only ones who understand the threat, therefore we cannot be accountable for how we meet it." He spread his hands a few centimetres above the table, a man laying something down rather than picking it up. "Sir, I've worked this question from every side I can find. If Reza is genuinely going operational, the answer is to bring the case inside, give it to a sanctioned unit, run it

under warrant and oversight. The answer is not to keep funding a man we cannot find on any organisation chart, running an officer we did not recruit, by methods we would have to deny under oath. If he's right about the threat, that's an argument for control, not for him."

It was, Mira thought, a beautiful piece of work. She admired it the way you admire a lockpick's hands. Every clause of it was true and serviceable and pointed in one direction, and the direction was the door, and the door was the only door, and a reasonable man could not stand in this room and want anything other than to walk through it.

"Officer Mira." Kaul had turned to her. "You met the asset. Twice now."

"Yes, sir."

"In your assessment. Is she retrievable. Or is she so far inside the man's conditioning that we are talking about a containment problem rather than a recruitment."

The room waited. Sehgal, eighteen inches back from the table, waited with a stillness that she felt on the side of her face like a draught.

This was the question she had lain awake on. The honest answer was that the girl was not a containment problem, that the girl was the most retrievable human being Mira had met in years, retrievable precisely because no one had ever offered her anything to be retrieved into, and that Mira had walked out of their second meeting no longer certain who had been recruiting whom. None of that could be said here. Here it would be heard as a field officer who had gone soft on a target, and the file would note it, and she would be pulled, and the girl would be handed to someone who read retrievability as a tactical window and nothing else.

"She's retrievable," Mira said. "On a timeline. Not on yours."

"Meaning."

"Meaning if you shut the unit this month, you don't retrieve her, you orphan her. She runs, or she's picked up by whatever the unit's collapse shakes loose, or she does something on her own initiative that we then own. The conditioning Mr Sehgal describes is real. It's also the only structure she's ever had. You don't disband a structure around a person like that and expect her to walk calmly into ours. You give me time to be the new structure first."

She had not planned the last sentence. It came out of her with more in it than she wanted, and she saw Kaul hear the more, and she saw, in the corner of her eye, Sehgal's head tilt by perhaps two degrees, the attention of a man who has found a loose thread and is deciding whether to pull it now or later.

"How much time," Kaul said.

"Six weeks. Eight."

"You have until the unit is closed," Sehgal said, mild as milk. "Which is the chief's decision and not mine, but if I may, sir, the longer we run a parallel clock, the longer we are exposed on exactly the ground we're trying to leave. Officer Mira's instinct is sound. It is also the instinct of every handler who has ever asked for one more month with an asset they've grown to value. I've asked for that month myself, years ago, and I was wrong every time." He smiled at her, and the smile had warmth in it, the genuine warmth of a senior man remembering his own young self, and that was the worst part, that the warmth was not faked, that he believed every word and the words still all walked her toward the door. "We can

give the officer her timeline. We cannot give it to her on top of the unit."

"No," Kaul agreed. "We can't."

And there it was, decided, the way these things were always decided, not by a hand coming down but by two reasonable men agreeing that a third thing was simply not available. Mira sat with her clean assessment in a folder she would never see again and watched the machine do precisely what it was built to do, fault-free, blameless, and wrong, and she could not point to a single bolt in it that had been turned the wrong way.

Kaul closed the folder. "Then we close it. Operations directorate to draw down funding at the end of the fiscal month. Officer Mira retains the asset case under my desk directly, not under the unit's, with a brief to bring her in inside the window the closure allows. Legal to paper the termination so it survives an inquiry that won't happen." He took off the glasses. "Anything else for the record."

"One thing." Sehgal, again, after the decision, when no one is guarding the room anymore. "The man himself. Fateh. We're closing his shop, not arresting him, and I'd recommend we keep it that way, because the moment we move on him personally we create a martyr and a memoir. But I'd ask the chief to authorise a light watch. Where he goes when the money stops. Who he calls." A small pause. "If he's running the threat he claims, he'll lead us to it. If he's protecting something else, he'll lead us to that. Either way I'd rather know than guess."

"Approved," Kaul said. "Through the directorate. Keep it light."

"Through the directorate," Sehgal agreed. "I'll see the tasking goes to the right desk."

And Mira, watching the backs of their heads, felt the small cold thing turn over in her stomach that she had been refusing to name for eleven days, because Sehgal would see the tasking went to the right desk, Sehgal always saw the tasking went to the right desk, and the right desk would report up through a queue Sehgal flagged, and now the one man in the country hunting whatever was actually out there would be walked and logged and timed, and every footstep he took would arrive, assessed and fingerprinted, on the chief's table by way of the same quiet hands, and there was not one syllable of it she could stand up and call wrong.

The meeting broke. Chairs went back. The legal man was already talking to the operations man about indemnity language. Kaul gathered his folder and his glasses and went out toward his eleven o'clock with the closed file he had wanted, and he had it, and he had earned it, and Mira thought he was one of the most honest men she had ever served and that he had just been driven like a hired car.

In the corridor Sehgal fell into step beside her. He did this sometimes, a courtesy, the senior man walking the junior officer out so that the building saw she was valued.

"You spoke well in there," he said. "The structure point. I'll remember it."

"It didn't change anything."

"No," he agreed, untroubled. "But it was true, and true things accrue. Not today. Later." He walked with his hands behind his back. "You're fond of her. The asset."

"I'm doing my job."

"Those aren't opposites. The good ones never feel them as opposites. It's why I asked Kaul for you and not for one of the cold ones." He said it simply, a man giving credit where it was due, and Mira felt the compliment go in like a needle, clean, almost painless, leaving only the smallest bead of doubt where it had entered. He had asked Kaul for her. She had known that since Sehgal told her himself, weeks ago, in the same generous voice. She had taken it then as the thing it appeared to be. She was no longer sure what it appeared to be.

They reached the lift lobby. Sehgal's phone buzzed in his breast pocket, and he took it out and read the screen, and Mira, who had spent eighteen years not being caught watching things, watched it without watching it. It was his second phone. She knew his first; everyone knew an Additional Secretary's official handset, the one the building could log. This was the other one, slim, black, the kind a man carries who has a life the building does not log, which was most senior men, which proved nothing, which meant nothing, which she catalogued anyway in the part of her mind that had kept her alive in three countries.

He read whatever was on it. His face did not change. That was the thing she would carry out of the building and turn over for the rest of the day, that a piece of news arrived on a phone the institution could not see and his face did not change at all, when every other face in that meeting had moved at every other piece of news, because a man's face moves when information is new to him and does not move when the information is only confirmation of a thing already known and already arranged.

"You'll bring her in," Sehgal said, putting the phone away, looking up with the same patient warmth. "Inside the window. I have confidence in you, Officer Mira. So does the chief." The lift came. He gestured her into it ahead of him and did not get in himself. "I'll take the stairs. The doctor says I should."

The doors closed on his small, kind, certain smile.

Mira rode down alone through the filtered air, and she made herself, as the floors fell away, do the only honest accounting available to her. She had nothing. A queue flagged within its mandate. A product that was clean. An argument that was sound. A second phone in a city of second phones. A face that had not moved. Lay any one of those before Kaul and he would look at her over the glasses and she would see in his eyes the word the building kept for officers who had been alone in the field too long, and the word was tired, and after tired came the medical directorate and the sympathetic doctor and the file that closed on her instead of on Fateh.

She could not say it. That was the architecture of it, she understood now, standing very still as the numbers descended. The thing was built so that it could not be said. Every brick of it was load-bearing and lawful and each one, removed and examined alone, was innocent. You could only see it from inside the whole, and from inside the whole you looked exactly like a woman who had begun to believe the air-conditioning was talking to her.

The lift reached the ground floor. The doors opened on the lobby, the metal detector, the constable, the ordinary noise of an ordinary building doing the nation's careful work. Mira stepped out into it and signed her name in the register the building could see, and somewhere above her a kind and

patient man was climbing the stairs his doctor had recommended, having arranged, faultlessly and for someone she would never be permitted to name, the quiet murder of the only watch that mattered.

She put the pen down and went to find a telephone that no one had flagged.

Chapter 16

New Delhi · +25 days

The rain had been falling since four, the first real rain of the season, and by the time Sita came down off the flyover into the old mill district the gutters were running brown and the city had the smell it only had in June, of wet dust and diesel and something green waking under the concrete. She had been walking for an hour and ten minutes. She had used three buses and a length of the harbour line and a chemist's shop with two doors, and she had bought nothing she did not throw away, and she carried no phone. The phone was the first thing Rudra had taught her to fear, before the gun, before the needle. A phone was a witness that never blinked and never died and could be made to remember everything. She had left hers in the flat in Wadala, charging, lit, a girl who was at home.

She knew the cameras on this stretch. The municipal ones at the junction by the old chimney, two of them, one dead since the storms last year and never repaired, the other angled too high to take a face under an umbrella. The private camera over the jeweller's, which fed nowhere anyone watched. The new one on the bank's ATM cabin, which was the one that mattered, and which she passed with her chin down and her shoulder turned, a woman hurrying out of the wet like ten thousand others. Facial recognition liked a clean front and a still head and good light. It was given none of those things. That was not cleverness. It was only knowing the weather, the way a fisherman knew it, and the weather

now was total, and the trick was to move inside it the way a fish moved inside water, unremarkable, belonging.

The church was at the end of a lane the redevelopment had not yet reached, a low Portuguese thing with a whitewashed face gone grey, Our Lady of something, the name worn off the gate. Mira had chosen it. Sita had let her choose it and had then spent two days learning it on her own, the three ways in, the sightlines, the hour when the caretaker slept. There were no cameras inside a church. There was still, in this country, in this year, one room the grid had not entered, and it was this one, and Sita found that she distrusted it for exactly that reason. A place no one watched was a place someone had decided not to watch.

Mira was already in the third pew from the back, on the left, a cotton dupatta over her hair, a woman at prayer. She did not turn when Sita slid in beside her. The church held perhaps a dozen others, scattered, each in a private negotiation with the dim. Candles burned in a rack by the side altar and the rain came down on the tin of the porch roof in a sound that would defeat any directional microphone short of a van outside, and there was no van outside. Sita had checked the lane twice.

"You walked," Mira said. Not a question. She had a way of stating the thing she had observed so that it was not an accusation, only a fact laid between them, to be picked up or left. "You're wet through."

"It's raining."

"It is." Mira's hands were folded on the rail in front of her. A wedding ring she had no husband for. Sita had noticed it the first time and said nothing, and Mira had seen her notice and said nothing either, and that exchange of silences had

been the beginning of whatever this was. "I wasn't sure you'd come. After last time I thought I'd frightened you."

"You didn't frighten me."

"No," Mira agreed, and there was a tiredness in it. "No, I don't suppose I did. That's rather the trouble with you."

Sita looked at the altar. The plaster Christ with his chipped foot, the gold gone tarnished, the cheap electric halo behind the Virgin that someone had wired to a switch by the door. She had no feeling for any of it. She had been raised inside a discipline that had no room for it, and she had assumed, the way the young assume, that the absence was strength. Sitting next to Mira she was no longer certain. Mira carried her griefs openly, the lost child, the lost years, and they had not destroyed her. Sita had been taught that to carry a thing openly was to hand the enemy a place to cut. She was beginning to wonder who had taught her, and why, and what they had been protecting by it.

"You said you had something for me." Sita kept her voice level, kept it down under the rain. "On the phone you said you had something."

"I said I had a reason to see you." Mira turned then, only her head, and her eyes in the candle-dark were steady and a little wet, and Sita could not have said how much of the wetness was the woman and how much was the room. "Sita, I'm going to tell you a true thing. I want you to understand before I do that I'm telling it to you because it's true, and because I think you've earned it, and not because someone has told me to make you trust me. Both of those things can be in the same sentence. I need you to know I know that."

It was, Sita thought, a very good way to begin a lie. It was also, she allowed, exactly how an honest woman might begin

a truth she was ashamed of the use of. The two were not distinguishable from the outside. They never were. That was the whole cruelty of the work.

"Tell me," Sita said.

Mira was quiet for a moment, ordering it. When she spoke it was in the flat operational register, the briefing voice, stripped of the warmth, and Sita understood that Mira was giving her this in the only language they both fully trusted, the language of the trade, because the warm one had been used on her too often by too many to mean anything now.

"Your unit," Mira said. "The one Fateh runs. You've worked out by now that it isn't on any chart. No sanction above it, no office, no line of accountability that wouldn't make a minister sweat. You found that out yourself; I'm not telling you anything you don't carry already. You've been living with the idea that it's an orphan. That it's two men and a war they're holding together on fumes and old loyalties and whatever they can scrape from accounts that don't get audited. That Fateh is a man with nothing behind him but his own back."

"Yes." It came out of her before she chose it. That was precisely the shape of the thing she had been living inside since the night she understood Fateh had been lying about the chain above him. A war held together by two men's hands. She had found something almost noble in it, and had been ashamed of the nobility, and had kept it anyway.

"It isn't true," Mira said. "Or it's half true, which is worse, because the half that's true is what makes you stop looking. The unit has been funded. Not scraped. Funded. For years. Money that did not come from any line the service controls and did not come from any line the army controls. I've seen

the shape of it. Not all of it; nobody's seen all of it. But the shape."

Sita did not move. The rain went on. A candle guttered in the rack and a woman three pews up genuflected and crossed herself and rose to leave, and Sita tracked her to the door from the edge of her eye, the way she could not not do, and the woman was nothing, was only a woman, and was gone.

"What shape," Sita said.

"Leases," Mira said. "The safe houses, the ones you've used, the ones in Bhandup and the one near Pune you think nobody knows about. They're held through firms. Firms held through other firms. Ordinary, that's how everyone hides money now, it's not even clever, it's just the texture of the world. But somebody pays the firms. The float you operate on, the cash that's always there when Fateh needs it, the clean documents, the doctors who don't ask, the men at the airport who look the other way for an hour. That isn't fumes, Sita. Somebody underwrites it. Somebody has been underwriting it for a very long time, longer than you've been carrying a weapon, and they do it so carefully that the man spending the money may not even know whose money it is."

"Fateh knows." Sita heard the flatness in her own voice and did not like it.

"Maybe. Maybe Fateh thinks he knows. Maybe Fateh thinks it's an old friend, a debt being repaid, a patriot who can't be named. Men like Fateh are very easy to fund, did you know that, because they're so certain the cause is theirs that it never occurs to them to ask whose cause they're being kept alive to serve." Mira stopped. She had gone further than she meant to; Sita saw her pull back from it, saw the small physical act of it, the way she straightened her dupatta and

brought her hands together again on the rail. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to poison him for you. He raised you. I know what that's worth and I know what it costs to hear it."

"You don't know what it's worth," Sita said, and was surprised by the steel of it. "You don't know what he is to me."

"No." Mira accepted it without flinching. That was a thing about her. She did not defend her own ground; she gave it up and somehow stood where she had been standing. "I don't. I have a guess and the guess hurts to look at, so I won't make you look at it. I'm only telling you the money. The money is the true thing. You can check it. I'd rather you checked it than believed me; I'd trust you more if you did, and you'd trust me more, and we'd both be better off." She almost smiled. "Go and look at who pays the lease on Bhandup. You won't get to the bottom. You'll get three firms deep and hit a wall. But you'll see I wasn't lying about the wall being there."

Sita looked at her hands. They were a killer's hands and they looked like a girl's. She thought of the years, the flats, the keys handed across restaurant tables, the way money had simply always been present the way air was present, never spoken of, never short. She had taken it for the ordinary condition of the world, the way a child takes the warmth of a house and never thinks of the men who dug the coal. She had been eighteen years inside a house and had never once asked who paid for the coal. The not-asking had been trained into her so deep she had taken it for a virtue.

"Why," she said. "Why tell me this."

"Because you're going to be made to choose soon," Mira said quietly. "Sooner than you think. The unit is being closed. You know that too; I can see you know it. When it closes, the people who were funding it are going to want to know what

becomes of the asset they paid to make. That's you. You are the most expensive thing they built. And you are going to have one short window in which you get to decide whether you're a thing that was built, that goes back on a shelf or gets broken up for parts, or whether you're a person who knows who built her and why, and can therefore refuse." She turned fully now, and took, very carefully, as though Sita were something that might detonate, the edge of Sita's wet sleeve between two fingers, not the hand, only the cloth. "I want you to get to refuse. That's the part nobody told me to want. That's mine."

The candles. The rain. Somewhere out in the lane a scooter went by too fast through the water, the sound rising and fading, and Sita's whole body had marked it and dismissed it before her mind arrived. She let the silence sit. She had learned that from Fateh, of all of them; that silence was a tool and most people could not bear to leave it lying on the table, they would reach for it, they would fill it, and what they filled it with was always more than they meant to say.

Mira filled it.

"There was a name," she said. "When I went looking at the money. Three firms deep, where the wall is. There's a name on the far side of the wall, in the way you sometimes see the shadow of a thing through a curtain without seeing the thing. I shouldn't even have it. It's not in any file you could ask for. It went past me once, in a context I can't give you, and I'd be lying if I said I understood it." She hesitated, and Sita watched the hesitation and could not read whether it was the hesitation of a woman deciding to give a gift or a woman deciding how much of a leash to pay out. "Meridian," Mira said. "The name was Meridian."

The word came into the dim church and lay there.

Sita waited for it to mean something. That was the discipline; you held a new thing still and let it find the things it connected to, and if it connected to nothing you filed it and moved on and trusted that the connection would surface later, in the bath, on a bus, at three in the morning. She held it still now. Meridian. An English word. A line on a map, the line where the sun stood highest, the line they drew through Greenwich to measure the world from. It connected to nothing. It was a name with no face and no flag and no street, a shadow through a curtain, and she could no more act on it than she could act on a word in a dream.

And yet.

There was a cold that came up through her that she could not source, and she distrusted it because she could not source it, the way she had distrusted the church for being unwatched. Somewhere underneath the trained stillness a thing she had been carrying for weeks turned over in its sleep, the parcel Sundaram had left her, the woman the files had buried, the woman seen alive in Mangaluru with the proof in someone's hand, the name Sundaram had refused to write down so that even his own paper could not betray it. The two things lay near each other in the dark of her and did not touch. She did not let them touch. She did not know that she was not letting them; she only felt the cold, and named it caution, and let it pass.

"Meridian is nothing," she said. "It's a word. You've given me a word."

"I've given you the truth and the edge of where the truth goes," Mira said. "I can't give you more because I don't have more, and if I pretended to you'd know I was pretending, and

then we'd be finished. The money is real. You can stand it up yourself. The name is the edge of the world I can see. I'm handing you the map to the edge of the page. I can't draw what's off it. Nobody's given me that page." She let go of the sleeve. "I'm not sure anyone has it."

And there it was, Sita thought, with a clarity that arrived cool and complete and left her oddly unmoved, the way the worst clarities did. The gift and the leash were the same object. Mira had given her something true, a true thing she could verify, a true thing that would crack open the floor under everything Fateh had let her believe, and in giving it Mira had also made herself the source of it, the only door through which more of it might ever come. A name attached to nothing. A name Sita could not pull on without coming back, every time, to the hand that had given it to her. You did not hand a starving person a key to a locked larder unless you meant to keep the second key. The truth was real. It was also a tether, and the loose end of it was in Mira's fist, and Mira knew that it was, and Mira had said as much, in her way, with the wedding ring and the wet eyes and the part that was hers. That was the thing about Mira that Sita could not get past and could not stop returning to, like a tongue to a broken tooth. Mira told you the shape of the trap while she set it. It did not make the trap less a trap. It made it one you walked into with your eyes open, on purpose, because the company inside it was the only company you had.

Outside the rain eased, dropped from a roar to a steady running, and in the new quiet the church seemed to lean closer.

"I have to go," Sita said.

"I know."

"Don't follow the route I take out."

"I won't." Mira did not move to rise. She would give it ten minutes, fifteen; she knew the trade as well as Sita did. "Sita." Sita was already standing, already turning her face from the candlelight toward the dark of the side door. "Check the money. Whatever you do about me, about any of it, check the money first. Let it be the one thing you didn't take on faith."

Sita went out the way she had marked, past the rack of candles and the plaster foot with its chip, into the porch where the rain came off the tin in a curtain. She stood under it a moment, inside the weather, the unwatched dark of the lane in front of her and the whole lit and remembering city beyond it. She held the name in her mouth without saying it. Meridian. It fit nowhere. It was a key, and she had no lock, and she had been raised in a house where a key handed to you across a table was never a question and always an instruction, and the instruction was the same as it had always been, the same as her eighteenth birthday, the same as every clean room she had walked out of since. Go. Find the door it opens. Open it.

She stepped out into the rain and let the curtain close behind her, and began, without deciding to, to walk toward Bhandup.

Chapter 17

New Delhi · +27 days

The tea had gone cold an hour ago and Fateh let it sit, because reaching for it would mean taking his eyes off the wall, and he had learned a long time ago that the work happened in the corner of the eye, in the moment you stopped trying to see it.

The Lanka was a single room behind a shuttered tailor's on a lane in Nizamuddin, rented under a name that paid its electricity bill on time and otherwise did not exist. No NATGRID node reached it. The phone in his pocket was a brick of a thing that took a removable battery, and the battery was out, on the table, beside the cold tea. The only modern instrument in the room was the city outside, breathing its data into the night, and he had spent thirty years learning to stand just outside its breath.

On the wall: index cards. He still used index cards. Rudra teased him for it, said the boys at Lodhi Road did all this on screens now, drew their links with a fingertip and let the machine suggest the rest. That was precisely the trouble. The machine suggested. It drew the line you were already inclined to draw and called it analysis. A card you had to pin yourself. A thread you had to cut and knot and walk back to the box when you were wrong, and the walking back was where you learned you had been wrong.

He had been pinning these cards for twenty-seven days.

Salim Reza's outfit, top left, a loose galaxy of names and call signs and a single grainy photograph from a wedding hall

in Bhatkal. Below it, in three rough columns, the operations he could attribute to them since the spring. The Pune transit job that never fired. The hawala seizure in Surat that turned out to be a gift, a sacrifice dressed as a loss. The courier picked up at Lucknow junction with a phone full of the wrong thing, beautifully the wrong thing.

He stood in front of it with his hands behind his back, the way Luthra used to stand, and he made himself read it as handwriting.

That was the discipline. Not who, not why. How. The way a man held the pen. You could change the alphabet, the language, the ink, and a graphologist would still find you in the downstroke, in the place you lifted off the page. Tradecraft was the same. A school taught the letters. It could not teach the hand.

The door scraped. Rudra came in sideways with two glasses of tea from the stall at the lane's mouth, set one down beside the cold one without a word about the cold one, and lowered himself onto the stool by the window where he could see both Fateh and the street. He had a paper twist of peanuts. He always had something to eat. He had spent forty years in rooms where you could not smoke and could not sleep and could not be seen to be nervous, and he had decided early that a man eating peanuts looked like a man with nowhere to be.

"You haven't moved a card since this afternoon," Rudra said.

"I've moved three."

"You moved them and moved them back."

Fateh almost smiled. "That counts."

Rudra cracked a shell. He did not look at the wall. That was a courtesy he extended; he let Fateh be alone with it even when he was in the room. He looked at the street, and at Fateh's hands, and he waited.

Start with the feint, Fateh told himself. Start with the thing they want you to see.

The Pune job. On paper a failure. A device that did not detonate, a cell that scattered, three arrests, a clean win for the Anti-Terrorism Squad and a paragraph in the papers. He had nearly filed it as exactly that, six weeks ago, and the only reason he had not was that it was too clean. The arrests came too fast and in the wrong order. You arrest the foot soldiers and work up; here the squad had walked in and taken the middle, the quartermaster, the man who knew the next two links and no further, and the foot soldiers had simply evaporated and the man above the quartermaster had never existed on any board but Fateh's.

So the device was never meant to fire. The device was a price. You spent a quartermaster and a fizzled bomb to buy the ATS a victory, and a victory makes a service stop looking, and while everyone admired the Pune arrests the real movement went through Surat, where the hawala "seizure" put a forensic accountant onto a money trail that led, with just enough difficulty to be believed, to a Gulf charity that the analysts already wanted to believe in.

He had seen the shape of it for two weeks. The feint that costs you something real, so that the loss authenticates it. Most handlers could not bear to pay. They built feints out of chaff, out of decoys they did not value, and a decoy you do not value has a lightness to it, a thinness, the opponent feels the absence of weight. This hand paid in coin. Spent a real cell, a

real bomb, three real men who would do real years, to seat a false story so deep that the story would now defend itself.

"Whoever's running them," Fateh said, "isn't running them to win."

Rudra cracked another shell. "Everyone's running to win."

"No." Fateh tapped the Pune card, then the Surat card, then drew his finger down the dead air between them where the unwritten man lived. "They're running them to be seen. Every move is built to be found. Not now. Later. When someone goes back over it." He heard his own voice flatten, the way it did when he was talking past Rudra to himself. "It's all built to be read backward."

"Built to be read backward by whom?"

"That's the wrong question."

"It's usually the right one."

"Not here." Fateh stepped back from the wall, finally took the warm glass, drank half of it without tasting it. "The question is who builds like that. Who has the patience to lose on purpose and the stomach to pay full price for it."

He did not answer it. He went back to the second tell.

The cut-outs. This was the part that had kept him at the wall past midnight, three nights running, because it was the part that did not belong to the men he was looking at. Salim Reza's people were sloppy in the ordinary way of true believers; they reused phones, they prayed at the same mosque, they trusted blood and let blood betray them. That was the texture of every cell he had ever broken. And laid over that texture, like a clean armature inside a rotting body, was a system of separation so disciplined it could not have grown in that soil.

He walked it out loud, low, the way you walk a route before you drive it.

"The money reaches Reza through a faction handler. One man. Reza thinks he knows him; he knows a legend. The handler thinks the money is a state's." He moved a card. "Above the handler, nothing. No second contact, no fallback, no parallel. One door, and the door doesn't know what's on the other side of it. If we take the handler tomorrow we get the handler. We get a man who can describe a foreigner he met four times and a numbered account that's already closed."

Rudra had stopped eating. "That's not Reza's level."

"That's not anybody's level. Not on this subcontinent. I've broken every cell worth breaking for thirty years and I've never had a door that opened onto a wall." He pressed his thumb hard against the bridge of his nose. "You build that. You build that the way you build a watch. You sit with it for years."

"R&AW could build it," Rudra offered, mild, watching. "Old guard. Somebody who learned it the hard way and never forgot."

"R&AW couldn't keep it secret for one fiscal quarter."

"The other services, then. Across the border."

"Their hand is heavier. They love a second man. They always seat a second man, for control, because they don't trust the first, and you can find the whole net by finding who the first man is afraid of." Fateh shook his head slowly. "There's no fear in this. The handler isn't afraid of anyone above him because there's no one above him he can name. That's not control by fear. That's control by..." He stopped.

The word he wanted was love, or something adjacent to it, the loyalty you build in a man by letting him believe he is the principal, by giving him the dignity of his own decisions inside the box you have drawn. You did not frighten such a man. You made him proud, and a proud man guards your secret as if it were his.

He had watched that done once. He had watched it done beautifully, by a woman who could sit across a table from an asset for two hours and send him out the door believing the entire operation had been his idea, and grateful, and willing to die for the gratitude.

Fateh put the thought down carefully, the way you put down something you are not sure is loaded.

"Sit," Rudra said.

"I'm fine."

"You've been on your feet since I brought the first tea and that was lunch." Rudra pushed the second stool out with his foot. "Sit, and tell me the third one. There's always a third one with you. You do two out loud and you keep the third behind your teeth because it's the one you don't like."

That was the trouble with a man you had worked beside for forty years. He read your handwriting too.

Fateh did not sit. He went to the wall instead, to the bottom of the third column, to the Lucknow card and the small ugly thing pinned beneath it that he had not wanted to look at since he pinned it.

The courier. A boy, really. Twenty-two, a good worker, three years in the network, trusted with the kind of errand you only give to someone you mean to keep. Taken on the platform at Lucknow with a phone that held exactly enough to confirm the Gulf-charity story and not one byte more, and

the timing of his arrest had bothered the local people because they could not see who had given him up. There had been no informer. The boy had simply walked into a checkpoint that had no reason to be there, on a day it had no reason to be there.

"They burned him," Fateh said.

"Couriers get burned."

"Not like this. He wasn't blown. He wasn't careless. He was spent." The word came out of him with an old disgust. "He was a clean, loyal, useful man with years left in him, and they walked him into a wall because his capture, his phone, made the false trail bleed real. You can't fake a man's terror in an interrogation room. So you don't fake it. You give them a real frightened man who really believes what he's telling them, because he doesn't know it's a lie, and his belief sells it the way nothing you script ever could." Fateh's voice had dropped almost to nothing. "He's still inside. He'll do eight years for a story that was never true, told by men who decided he was worth eight years."

Rudra was quiet. Outside a scooter went by, then the lane was still.

"That's the cruelty," Fateh said. "Not the killing. Anyone can kill. The cruelty is the arithmetic. Looking at a loyal man and seeing his exact worth in a column, to the rupee, and spending him for it without flinching and without waste. Not one rupee more than the operation needed. They didn't enjoy it. That's the thing." He turned around. "If they enjoyed it I could find them, because cruelty for its own sake is sloppy, it overspends, it leaves a man dead who only needed to be moved. This is cruelty that balances the books. Spend the minimum. Mourn nothing. Move on."

He had argued with someone about this once. In a flat in a city he would not let himself name yet, with the windows taped and the heat off so the thermal signature stayed low, he had argued for the life of an asset he had run for two years, a fat happy double in a customs office, and the woman across the table had heard him out completely, with that grave attention she gave everyone, and then she had explained, gently, without heat, exactly what the man was worth and exactly what the operation needed and how the two numbers met, and she had been right, and the man had died, and Fateh had hated her for a week and then understood that the hatred was just grief wearing his own face, because she had only said aloud the sum he had already done in private.

He had learned it from her. He had learned all of it from her. The feint that pays in coin. The door that opens on a wall. The arithmetic of a loyal man's life. He had built the Alpha program half as a wound and half as a monument, and the monument was to her, and the things he had taught the girl were the things this woman had taught him, downstroke for downstroke.

A school, he told himself. He had decided this years ago, in that other city, watching another woman direct a net with the master's grammar. A school. She had trained people before the end. One of them had carried the method forward, had inherited the hand the way a son inherits a father's signature and writes it badly enough that you know it is the son.

That was the comfort he had lived inside for a long time, and standing at the wall now he felt it begin to give, the way ice gives, not all at once, a single fine line racing out from under your boot.

Because a student drifts.

He knew this the way he knew his own pulse. He had trained operators for thirty years and not one of them, not even the best, not even the girl, reproduced him exactly. They took the grammar and made it their own. They economized where he splurged and splurged where he economized. They could not help it; the hand is the self, and the self leaks in. A copy is a copy precisely because it cannot stop being someone else. Over years the drift only widens. By now, after this many years, a student of hers should write a dialect, recognizable but its own.

This was not a dialect. This was not the master's grammar carried forward by an heir. He went card to card, the feint, the cut-outs, the spent courier, and he was no longer reading method. He was reading temperament. The exact ratio of patience to nerve. The particular place the hand lifted off the page and the particular place it bore down. The mercy withheld at precisely the cost where mercy became expensive, and granted, once, pointlessly, where it cost nothing, because she had always done that too, always spent one rupee of kindness she did not have to, on someone who could never repay it, as if to prove to herself she still could.

There. On the Surat card. A man inside that operation who should have been spent and was not. A bookkeeper, useless after his use, who any disciplined hand would have burned to close the trail, and who instead had been quietly walked out, given money, sent home to a village. It served nothing. It was a flaw. It was a deliberate flaw, the one extravagance in a faultless ledger, and he knew that extravagance, he had watched her commit it across a table while she explained to him why a customs official had to die, sparing a clerk with one hand while she signed the other man's death with the

other, and when he had asked her why, she had said only that you keep one, sometimes, so you remember what they cost.

It was a signature. It was a flaw signed into the work by someone who could afford to sign it, who had earned the right to be recognized by the one person left alive who would know the flaw for what it was.

Fateh stood very still.

The crack ran all the way out now and the floor was just a sound underfoot, a long groaning give.

It was not a school. There was no heir. The patience and the nerve and the arithmetic and the single signed mercy were not a method anyone had inherited because the temperament behind them was not transferable, it was a person, it was one hand, and the one hand that wrote like this, that had ever written like this, that he had stood beside and learned from and buried, the one hand was. He could not finish it. He would not let himself finish it, because finishing it meant that the grave he had stood at, the death he had built the rest of his life on top of, the name he had given a child so that the dead woman would have something walking around in the world, all of it, the whole foundation, was a feint that paid in coin. The largest he had ever seen. And he had bought it. Twenty years ago he had bought it whole, the way the ATS bought Pune, and he had been admiring the arrest ever since while the real thing moved through the dark beside him.

"Fateh." Rudra's voice, careful, from the window. He had not moved from the stool. He had been watching the whole time, the peanuts forgotten in his lap, watching Fateh's face the way you watch a man on a ledge, ready and helpless at once. "What do you see."

Fateh looked at the wall. At the bookkeeper spared in a village. At the boy doing eight years for a lie he believed. At the door that opened onto a wall, and behind the wall, where there was supposed to be no one, where for twenty years he had been certain there was no one, a hand he knew by heart was holding the pen.

His own hand had begun, very slightly, to shake. He set the tea glass down so the tremor would not show in the surface, and even as he did it he understood that Rudra had already seen, that Rudra had crossed the room without seeming to and was standing now at his shoulder, and that there was nothing on Rudra's face but patience, the long patience of a man waiting for another man to say the thing they both already knew.

"Tell me she's dead," Fateh said.

He did not say the name. He could not yet make his mouth do it.

Rudra did not answer.

Chapter 18

New Delhi · +28 days

The seam of the day was the thing she had loved, and it was the thing that gave her away.

Fateh had known it for twenty-seven days the way you know a word is on your tongue, and on the twenty-eighth he stopped pretending he did not. He stood at the long table in the back room of the old block-printing works he called the Lanka, and he laid the intercept logs out in their proper order, and he looked at the times.

Not the words. The words were nothing, the words were grocery lists and football and a cousin's wedding in Bhatkal, the patient nullity of a cell that understood metadata was the only thing now worth hiding. He had stopped reading the words a fortnight ago. He read the clock instead. He read when the dead numbers woke and when they slept, the SIM that lived four days and died, the handset that surfaced for ninety seconds at a kerb in Kurla and was gone. He had a wall of it. Salim Reza's tempo, plotted across four weeks in a hand so small Rudra had complained he would need a watchmaker's loupe.

And the traffic clustered at the junctions. Not at noon, not at midnight, not at the round bureaucratic hours a careful man chooses because they look like nothing. At the seams. The grey half-hour before the city woke, the grey half-hour as it gave up the light. The sandhi, she had called them, the joints of the day, and she had said it to him once on a roof in Colombo with a glass sweating in her hand: watch the

watchers and you will see them all yawn at the same moment, because attention is a muscle and a muscle tires at dusk. Work the joints. Slip through where the day is sewn.

He had taught it to no one. He had not taught it to Sita, because it was hers, because to teach it would have been to say her name aloud in a room, and for eighteen years he had kept that name out of every room.

He pressed his thumb against the edge of the table until the nail went white.

There was more than the timing, and that was the trouble; the timing alone a clever student could have stolen. But under the timing there was the other thing, the redundancy she built into everything, the doubled signal she called the second key. Every operational message she had ever sent carried a twin, sent by a different road an hour later, identical in content and useless except as proof of life: it told the receiver the first message was real and not a plant. Counter-deception, she called it, though it was vanity as much as craft, a refusal to be impersonated. He found it in Reza's traffic on the eleventh day and told himself it was coincidence. He found it again on the nineteenth, and on the twenty-fourth, and now it sat on his wall in his own cramped hand, three instances, and coincidence was a comfort he could no longer afford to buy.

The dead do not send a second key.

He had buried her himself. Not the body, there had been no body, that was the whole architecture of it, but he had buried the idea of her with all the rites a man performs in private: he had closed the file, he had told the child a story, he had let the grief set in him like a bone setting crooked, and he had built on top of the bone. He had built the Alpha program

on it. Half of what he had made in eighteen years was a monument to a woman the enemy had taken, and he had told himself that every clean kill, every quiet exit, was a coin laid on her grave.

There was no grave. She had let him do all of it, and somewhere she had been alive enough to teach a man in Bhatkal to work the joints of the day.

He heard the outer door, the particular two-beat knock, the bolt. Rudra came through into the back room shaking the wet off a cheap umbrella, and the smell of the street came with him, rain on hot dust, frying oil, the river.

"You did not sleep," Rudra said. It was not a question. He had a paper packet of something under his arm and a phone in his other hand, dark, the way they kept them.

"I slept."

"You slept the way a horse sleeps. Standing up, lying to itself." Rudra set the packet down and looked at the wall, the whole four-week architecture of it, and his face did the thing it did, the stillness that came over him before he said something he had been carrying up the stairs. He had been Fateh's other hand for twenty years. He could read the room before he was in it. "You found your ghost."

Fateh did not answer at once. He went to the small gas ring in the corner and lit it and set the pan on, because the body wants a task when the mind is going over a cliff, and he spooned tea and water and let it come to the boil before he trusted his voice.

"Tell me first what you came to tell me," he said. "You came with a face on. I will not have it sitting in the room while we talk about old things."

Rudra let it go a moment. Then he turned the dark phone over in his hand. "The procurement. The grid they have been trying to sell the Ministry. TRINETRA." He said the name the way they all said it now, a little too carefully, the way you handle a thing you suspect is hot. "It is dead in committee. Has been for six weeks. The privacy people have it by the throat, the Aadhaar judgment is fresh, there are three petitions in the courts about the last business with the Israeli software, and no minister wants his name on the thing that puts a private company's hand on every citizen's telephone. The Secretaries are running for the doors. A friend in North Block tells me the file has been moved to a slow drawer. They are letting it die of old age."

"Good," Fateh said. "Let it."

"I have not finished." Rudra set the phone down on the table, screen up, dark. "The same friend, a different conversation, a different night. NIA has chatter. Not from us, from a liaison feed, the kind that comes in dressed up so you cannot see whose it is. A window. Something in the next two to three weeks, soft target, a city, multiple. Nothing firm enough to act on, nothing firm enough to ignore. The sort of thing that goes into a folder and waits for a body count to make it retroactively important."

The tea climbed the side of the pan and Fateh took it off the ring. He poured two glasses. His hand was steady, which surprised him, because his mind was no longer in the room at all; his mind was on a roof in Colombo, and then it was on a wall in Kurla, and then it was running down a corridor twenty years long looking for the door where the two things met.

A grid the state will not buy. And a coming attack the state will not see.

He set the glass in front of Rudra and did not let go of his own.

"Say the rest," Rudra said quietly. "I can see it arriving on your face. You have always had the worst face in the service. It is why I do the meetings."

Fateh sat. He looked at the wall, the four weeks of it, the seams of the days marked in red where the traffic woke and slept.

"They cannot sell the machine because the machine frightens people," he said. "Big Brother. The all-seeing eye. Every objection in those petitions is the same objection: who watches the watcher, and what stops him. You cannot argue a man out of that fear. You can only make him more afraid of something else." He turned the glass a quarter-turn on the table, a small precise movement. "There is one thing that sells a surveillance grid that nothing else on earth can sell it. A disaster the grid would have stopped. A morning where a city is full of ambulances, and a man in a grey suit stands up in a closed room and says: here. Here is the signal. Our system saw it. Forty days out it flagged this cell, this window, this target, and your systems, your NATGRID, your lawful intercept, your honest tired men, saw nothing. Buy us, and the next morning of ambulances does not come."

Rudra had gone very still. "Foresight."

"Manufactured foresight." Fateh heard his own voice flatten, the way it did when the thing was too large to be carried with any warmth in it. "Because the machine cannot do what they will claim it did. None of them can. You cannot predict a man's choice from his telephone, you can guess, you can narrow, you can be wrong expensively, and they all are. The Americans sell the same dream and it is the same dream,

a very good filing clerk that knows everything that has already happened and nothing of what has not." He drank, finally, and the tea was too hot and he was glad of it. "So if you cannot predict the future, and you must show the world you predicted the future, there is only one road open to you. You make the future. You build the disaster yourself, quietly, through three cut-outs and a handler who thinks his money is Gulf money or Pakistani money or anybody's money but the truth. And on the far side of it you produce the proof you wrote in advance, the proof your own machine could have read, and you wave it over the bodies, and the petitions die, and the file comes out of the slow drawer, and the minister signs."

Rudra was quiet for a long time. The rain had got heavier; it ran in the gutter past the high window with a sound like a held breath let out slowly.

"The cell," Rudra said at last. "Reza."

"The cell is a tool." Fateh said it and felt the shape of it settle, ugly and complete. "It is the instrument. Reza does not know what he is. Reza thinks he is fighting a war. The handler above Reza thinks he is running a war for somebody's state. And the hand above the handler is not fighting any war at all. The hand above the handler is closing a sale." He looked at the wall again, the red seams of the days. "I have been four weeks reading a terror network and the whole time I was reading a sales pitch. The attack is the demonstration. The bodies are the brochure."

He stopped. He had not yet said the part that mattered, and Rudra, who knew him, waited for it without pushing, the way you wait at a deathbed.

"You asked if I found my ghost," Fateh said.

"I did."

"I found her." He put the glass down with great care, as though it might go off. "The handling above the handler. The tempo. The way the whole thing breathes through the joints of the day. The doubled signal, the second key, sent twice by two roads so it cannot be faked. There is one person in the world who built operations that way. I know it because she built me that way. I was the second key once. I was her proof of life."

Rudra did not say the name. Perhaps he did not know it; the original program was older than him in their joined account of things, and Fateh had told him only the bones, a sanctioned unit under Luthra, a collapse, a woman the enemy killed, an infant carried out of the wreckage. Or perhaps he knew it and would not say it in this room, out of the same instinct that had kept Fateh from saying it for eighteen years. Either way he let the silence hold the name, which was the kindest thing anyone had done for Fateh in a long while.

"You buried her," Rudra said.

"I buried a story. I have understood that today." Fateh found that his hands wanted the task again, and there was no task, so he laid them flat on the table on either side of the glass. "She did not die. She let me think it. She let the whole service think it, she let the enemy take the credit for it, and that was the cleverest part, because a dead woman is worth nothing to anybody, you cannot ransom her, you cannot turn her, you cannot use her against the people who love her. She made herself worthless on the open market." His voice caught on a single word and he took it past, the way you walk a horse past a fire. "And she went away, and somewhere she has spent twenty years becoming the thing I have been hunting,

and I did not know her because I had decided she was dead. The first rule she ever taught me. Decide a man is dead and you will never see him again, even when he is sitting across the table drinking your tea."

The thing under the thing he could not yet look at directly, so he looked at it sideways, the way you look at the sun. If she was alive, then the woman the child had grieved her whole life was a fiction. The murdered mother, the photograph he had let the girl keep, the small constructed shrine of a loss that had never happened. He had built Sita on a grave with nothing in it. He had made a weapon out of a girl and told her she was avenging a dead woman, and the dead woman was running the war on the other side, breathing through the joints of the day in Kurla, and the girl had been killing, very cleanly, very obediently, in her mother's exact method without ever knowing whose method it was.

He felt something move in his chest that he did not have a professional word for, and he let it pass through and did not name it, because naming it would not help, and there was a clock now, and the clock did not care what he felt.

"Two to three weeks," he said.

"If the chatter is good. It may be nothing."

"It is not nothing. The chatter is hers too, do you see, the chatter is part of the proof. She is laying the trail now, before the event, because the trail only works if it predates the event. The whole value of the thing is that the warning came first." He pulled one of the logs toward him, the doubled signals, the second keys, and looked at them with a new and terrible clarity. "She has to write the foresight into the record in advance. She has to leave the breadcrumbs so that afterward they can be found and held up and called a miracle. The

flagged cell. The named window. The marked target. All of it has to exist, in the data, before the morning of the ambulances, or there is no demonstration. The machine has to be seen to have known."

He stopped. Rudra was watching him, and Fateh realized he had stood up, though he did not remember standing.

"And that," Fateh said slowly, "is the flaw in it. That is the whole flaw in the whole beautiful thing."

"Tell me."

"You cannot show that you predicted a future you have not yet caused without leaving a record that you knew the future before it happened. Foresight and foreknowledge are the same trail read in two directions. From the front it looks like a prophet. Walk it backward, walk it from the morning of the ambulances back along the breadcrumbs to the hand that laid them, and it is not a prophet. It is an accomplice. Every piece of proof she plants that the machine saw the attack coming is also proof that someone made the attack come. The thing that sells the grid is the thing that hangs the architect." He was breathing harder than the room warranted. "She is going to leave us a confession written in the future tense. Somewhere in the next twenty days she has to put the evidence into the stream, and the moment she does, the evidence has her fingerprints inside it, because foresight that good can only come from the inside of the plan."

The rain ran in the gutter. Somewhere below, a scooter coughed and would not start, coughed and would not start.

"Then we do not stop the attack," Rudra said, very low, the soldier in him reaching for the cold shape of it before the man could flinch. "We do not warn anyone. We let her lay the trail, and we take the trail."

"I have not said that." But he had thought it, in the half-second before Rudra said it, and the fact that he had thought it told him exactly how far he had already come down the road, and how little of the man he had been would be left at the bottom of it.

He looked at the wall, the four weeks of red seams, the joints of the day, and for the first time he did not see Reza's network in it. He saw her hand moving across it, patient and unhurried, sewing a slip through the grey half-hours, and he understood that she had taught him everything he would now need to catch her, and that this too was probably something she had foreseen, because she had always built the second key into everything, the proof against impersonation, the test of whether the message was real.

He wondered, standing in the cold light of the back room with his tea going to skin in the glass, whether she had left a second key in this. Whether somewhere in the trail there was a doubled signal meant for one reader only, sent by a road only he would think to walk, identical and useless and saying nothing but: I am alive, and I know it is you.

"Get me the liaison feed," he said. "The dressed-up one. I want to see whose handwriting is under the costume." He set the glass down. "And do not, on any account, tell the girl."

Chapter 19

New Delhi · +29 days

The air-conditioner in the rented flat had failed at some point before midnight, and Mira had not noticed until the sweat began to bead at the small of her back and dampen the waistband of her trousers. She did not get up to look at it. She had learned long ago that a fault attended to at two in the morning was a fault you carried into the next day's mistakes, and the work in front of her was the kind that punished a wandering hand.

The work was paper. She had laid it out the way she always did, by inventory rather than by argument, because argument was the thing she was trying to arrive at and you did not start a journey by assuming the destination. Three stacks on the cheap glass table, weighted against the ceiling fan with a stapler, a glass ashtray she did not use, and her own dead mobile. The first stack was what the state would admit to: registrations pulled off the Ministry of Corporate Affairs portal, the MCA21 filings anyone with a login and a debit card could buy at fifty rupees a document. The second was what the state kept but did not advertise: the funding chain Mira herself had walked backward from the rogue unit's money, eleven days of it now, the interlocking companies that had paid Fateh's off-books war without any of them ever appearing to pay anything at all. The third stack was thin. The third stack was the one that frightened her, and she had put it furthest from her hand on purpose.

She began, as she always did, at the bottom.

The shell that had touched the unit's money last was a thing called Saraswati Logistics Solutions Private Limited, a Delhi registration with a corporate identity number that placed its incorporation in the spring of 2019 and a registered office at an address in Okhla that, when she had driven past it a week ago, turned out to be a chartered accountant's two rooms above a shop selling bathroom fittings. Saraswati had no logistics and solved nothing. Its single declared activity in the filings was management consultancy. Its two directors were a married couple in Faridabad whose Director Identification Numbers attached them, between them, to forty-one other companies. Mira had stopped being impressed by that early. Nominee directors were a wholesale trade in this country; you could rent a face for a board for the price of a decent dinner, and the people who lent their faces rarely knew what they had signed. She did not want the faces. She wanted the hand that moved them.

So she went up.

Saraswati's shareholding, declared in its annual return, sat almost entirely with a holding company in the same building, Trishul Advisory Services, and Trishul's sat with a Singapore entity, Meridian Risk Group (Asia) Pte Ltd, and there, at last, the name surfaced that she had been carrying since the dargah, since the file Sehgal had handed her with his soft attentive patience, the name she had set at the far edge of the funding chain like a stone at the bottom of a well. Meridian. She wrote it on the legal pad without underlining it. Underlining was for people who needed to remember they were excited. She did not need reminding.

The Singapore filings were cleaner than the Indian ones, which was the first thing that told her something. ACRA

returns, audited, lodged on time, never late, never amended, the kind of compliance that costs money precisely so that no examiner ever has a reason to look twice. Meridian Risk Group (Asia) was a wholly owned subsidiary of Meridian Risk Group Holdings, registered in Mauritius, and the Mauritius company filed almost nothing, because Mauritius existed so that companies need not, and above Mauritius the chain went dark in the ordinary way, into a trust whose deed she would not see and a protector whose name was a service address in a tower in Ebene she could find on a map and never enter.

She had expected that. The darkness at the top was not the discovery. Everyone with money to hide ended in a jurisdiction that sold silence. The discovery, if there was one, was always lower down, in the texture, in the part the architect of the thing had been forced to expose to daylight in order to make it work at all.

Mira lit no cigarette. She had given them up the year she lost the child and had kept the ashtray as a thing to look at when she wanted one. She looked at it now and pulled the public face of Meridian toward her instead.

Julian Mehta.

He photographed well. That was the first impression and she distrusted it for being the first. The corporate website, printed and stapled, gave her a man in his early fifties in an open collar, silvering at the temples in the way that men paid to silver, a half-smile that had been workshopped to land between competence and warmth. Founder and Chief Executive. There was a TED-style talk, transcribed because she could not stream it on the dead phone, in which Mr Mehta spoke of "the architecture of foresight" and "moving the state from reaction to anticipation," and there was an

op-ed in a financial daily, three weeks old, in which he answered the privacy lobby with the practised reasonableness of a man who has answered them many times: that TRINETRA did not watch the citizen, it watched the pattern; that those who invoked Aadhaar and Pegasus to frighten the public were the true reactionaries; that the choice was not between freedom and the grid but between a grid the nation governed and a grid it bought blind from abroad. He was good. He was very good. He was the public organ of a thing that had been told, by the people deciding the contract, that its problem was that it looked like Big Brother, and Julian Mehta was the answer to that problem, a face with a conscience stitched onto the front of a machine.

And he had decided nothing.

She did not arrive at that quickly. She arrived at it the slow way, which was the only way she trusted, by laying his signature against the decisions that mattered and finding it absent.

A company speaks, in its filings, through its resolutions. The ordinary business, the appointment of auditors, the adoption of accounts, those bore Mehta's name and his flourishing electronic signature in the proper places, the way a king signs what is put before him. But the resolutions that moved the thing, the special resolutions that altered the share capital, the powers of attorney that let a man in one country bind a company in another, the approvals for the inter-company loans that were the arteries of the whole organism, those Mehta did not sign. Those were executed under a delegation of authority, a board resolution from 2017 that she found buried in the Singapore file, by which the directors had granted to a "duly constituted attorney" the

standing power to act for the company in all matters of investment, treasury, and intra-group arrangement. The board had handed away the steering and kept the horn.

She found the name of the constituted attorney on the third reading, because it was placed where names are placed when you want them filed and not read, in the schedule to a power of attorney, in the witnessing clause, in the small print of a Mauritius deed where it had to appear for the document to be valid and where no examiner would ever go.

R. C. Almeida.

She set down the pen and let the fan turn over her twice before she picked it up again.

Almeida appeared, once she knew to hunt the name, in places that had no business sharing anyone. He was the constituted attorney for the Meridian holding company in Mauritius. He was a nominee director, for a window of nine months in 2018, of a Cyprus entity that had wired a "consultancy fee" into Trishul. He was the authorised signatory on a Singapore bank mandate. He was the witness, in a careful italic she began to recognise across the photocopies, to a trust deed she was not supposed to have and a power of attorney she was. He was, in short, the single recurring proxy, the cut-out who appeared at every seam where two pieces of the structure were joined, the one human hand the architecture could not do without, because a power of attorney needs a hand to hold it and a trust deed needs an eye to witness it and you cannot build the whole thing out of companies witnessing companies all the way down. Somewhere a person had to sign. And the person who signed was always the same, and the person who signed was not Julian Mehta and was certainly not the man whose name the

trust would shelter at the top.

Almeida was a service. She knew the type from the offshore work she had done in her twenties, before the child, before any of it. A professional nominee in a tax jurisdiction holds a thousand such offices and remembers none of them; he is a letterbox with a pulse, paid a retainer to lend his name and his signature and to ask, on pain of losing the retainer, absolutely nothing. He would not know what Meridian was for any more than the couple in Faridabad knew what Saraswati was for. He was not the principal. He was the principal's glove.

So she had the front, which was a face, and the seam, which was a glove, and between them she had a company that decided things, that pushed targets and money through eleven layers of plausible nothing, that was at this moment pitching the Indian state a machine to read its own citizens, and nowhere in the whole apparatus, on no document she had bought or stolen or been handed, was there a person who could be said to own it, to want it, to mean it. The chair at the centre of Meridian Risk Group was occupied by no one. Julian Mehta sat in front of it and could not turn around. She was now fairly sure he could not even let himself try; you do not survive being the face of a thing by examining the half of it that knows you are a puppet. He half believed his own talk. That was the cruelty of the design and also its genius. The most convincing front is the one who has been allowed to think he is the principal.

There was a principal. There had to be. A structure of this patience did not assemble itself out of nominees and reasonableness; someone had stood where she was standing now, years ago, with the inverse of her problem, and had

thought not how do I find the hand but how do I make sure no one ever does. Every choice she was reading was the answer to a question that hand had asked. Why this jurisdiction and not the cheaper one: because the cheaper one shared its registered agents and the agents were a thread. Why a constituted attorney and not simply a controlling director: because a director is the company and can be subpoenaed as the company, and an attorney is only a hand and can be cut off and replaced. Why the early, almost theatrical compliance in Singapore: so that the examiner's eye would slide off the clean thing and never reach the dirty one above it. She was reading, line by line, the mind of someone who had thought about being looked for by exactly the kind of person she was, and had built every wall a half-step before the search arrived.

It was here, somewhere in the third hour, that the third stack stopped being furthest from her hand.

She had not wanted to open it because the third stack was not evidence. It was memory, and memory was the thing she trusted least in herself and least in anyone. But the structure on the table in front of her had begun to do something to the back of her neck, and she had learned, across more years than she liked to count, that when the back of her neck spoke before her reasoning did, it was reasoning that had simply got there first by a road she could not see.

She knew this hand.

Not the names. The names were nothing, the names were Almeida and Saraswati and Trishul, generated the way you generate a password, to be meaningless. It was the method she knew. The grammar of it. The particular discipline that never let a shell repeat a registered agent, that placed the

human seam in the one jurisdiction where the seam could be amputated cleanly, that bought a year of premature audit the way a careful traveller buys insurance against the trip he intends to take. She had seen this grammar set out once, not in the field, not in any case of her own, but on a page. A long time ago. In a file with another office's letterhead at the top, a file that had crossed her desk for forty minutes during a posting she no longer had, in a context she had been told, in so many words and by a man more senior than Sehgal, to forget she had ever been shown. She had read it because she read everything; she had forgotten it because she was ordered to and because there had been no reason on earth, then, to keep it. It had described a person by their tradecraft, because the person had left nothing else to describe them by. The file had been, she remembered now with the particular nausea of a memory arriving uninvited, a kind of eulogy. An account of a method, written up after the methodist was gone, the way you write up a man's habits when you can no longer ask him anything.

She did not, would not, give it a name. The name was not in the file she remembered, or if it had been she had done her job and lost it, and the figure the file described was past tense in every clause, a closed thing, a finished matter, a school whose last pupil had died with the schoolmaster. There was no living person at the end of the road she was on. There was only this: that the dead leave grammar behind them, and the grammar gets taught, and the back of her neck did not care whether the hand that had built Meridian was the hand from the file or only a hand that had learned at the same table. The point was that there was a table. The point was that someone had sat where she would never get to look and had built, out

of patience and shell companies and a single rented glove, a machine to make the nation see, and had built it so well that the man who fronted it could not see his own master, and so well that she, eleven days into the funding chain with every document the state could buy, could find the shape of the hand and not the hand.

And the hand moved Sehgal.

She had not let herself put the two things in the same sentence until now, because once you put them in the same sentence you could not take them out. But she had spent fifteen days watching her own Additional Secretary be steered, watching flagged intelligence arrive at the precise hour it was most useful, watching Kaul's correct and faultless decisions clear a path she could feel and could not name, and she had concluded only that Sehgal was a hand held by someone outside. She had not asked whose. She had told herself the question was unanswerable from where she stood. It was answerable. It was answered, in eleven stacked layers, on the glass table in front of her, under a stapler and a glass ashtray and a dead phone. The same patience that had hollowed out Julian Mehta and left a smiling vacancy where a chief executive should be had reached into her own service and hollowed out a man she reported to, and the proof of it was not a confession or a wire or a face. The proof of it was a style. A grammar she had been ordered, years ago, to forget.

Mira sat back. The fan turned. The sweat had gone cold on her spine and she became aware again of the dead air-conditioner she had not got up to fix.

Somewhere above Mauritius, in a tower she could find on a map and would never enter, there was a chair, and in front of the chair sat a man who talked about foresight and could

not turn around, and behind it sat no one the law could name, no one the documents would admit, no one she could put in a room. A principal who, by every paper in the country, did not exist. She had walked the whole road to find a person and had arrived, at four in the morning, at a method and an empty chair, and the worst of it, the thing that kept her hand off the third stack even now that she had read it, was that the method felt less like a stranger's than it had any right to.

She picked up the pen and wrote, on the legal pad, beneath the name she had not underlined, four words.

Mehta is a chair.

Then she turned the pad face down on the glass, as if the words could be seen through the ceiling, and went at last to look at the air-conditioner, because there was nothing more the paper could tell her tonight and a great deal it had refused to.

ACT THREE

The Authored Escape

Chapter 20

*New Delhi and undisclosed off-books sites in India; later the
unregistered birth of Meridian abroad · May 2008*

The fan turned too slowly to move the heat, only to push it from one corner of the room to another, and Fateh sat under it with his jacket off and his shirt going dark between the shoulder blades, reading paper that should have been ash three weeks ago.

The bungalow had no name on its gate. It sat in a lane in Kaka Nagar where the other houses belonged to joint secretaries and a retired air marshal, and a man could come and go through its side door without a single neighbour learning his face. That was the whole virtue of the place. The Madras Engineers had built it in the fifties for someone whose appointment no longer existed, and the service had kept it the way a careful man keeps a spare key sewn into a coat lining, against a day he hopes will not come.

The day had come. In the courtyard, two clerks were feeding a steel drum, and the smell of burning carbon paper came in under the door with the dust. They had a list. Fateh had seen the list. It was thorough in the way that frightened him, because thoroughness here was not order, it was erasure, and the men who signed the order had wanted it to look like neither.

He had got in ahead of the drum by one morning and a forged movement slip. Rudra had stood in the lane with the Ambassador's bonnet up, pretending to a fault in the radiator, watching the road. They had perhaps an hour more

before the senior clerk came back from his lunch and his second cigarette and noticed that the almirah in the back room had been opened with the correct key by the wrong man.

The file Fateh wanted did not have a name either. It had a number, and the number was not in the master register, which was how he had known it mattered. A thing the service truly meant to keep, it kept off its own index. He had learned that from the woman whose work he was now reading, and the lesson sat in him like a stone he could not swallow.

PROJECT ASHHEEN. Below it, in a typist's even hand, a subtitle that someone had later struck through with a single ruled line, as if even the typewriter had said too much: *On the Early Formation of Instruments.*

He read it standing, then sat, and then forgot to be uncomfortable.

It was not an operations file. It was a curriculum.

The early pages were dry, almost academic, the prose of a serious mind keeping itself level over difficult ground. A survey of the literature, such as it was, on the conditioning of the very young. Citations he half recognised, from journals the service had no business subscribing to. A long, cool passage on attachment, and what could be done to it, and the argument, advanced without heat, that the ordinary bonds a child forms in its first years were not a foundation to build upon but a flaw to be designed around. *The subject who has never been permitted to expect rescue, the page said, does not waste the operational instant in hoping for it.*

Fateh put the page down and looked at the wall for a moment. Then he picked it up and read the rest.

There was a schedule. There was, God help them all, a schedule. Years laid out in a grid, the way a school lays out its terms, except that the terms here had names like *deprivation tolerance* and *handler substitution* and *language denial*, and against each was a band of months, beginning when the subject was an infant. Cold and warmth administered to a plan, so that neither could be relied upon and only the work remained constant. Carers rotated before a face could become a mother's face. A child taught its alphabet in three tongues and allowed to keep none of them as its own, so that no single people could ever quite claim it and it could pass among all of them. He read the words *the absence is the instructor* and understood that a person had sat at a desk, in a building paid for by the Republic, and written that down as a thing to do to a baby, and had thought it not cruelty but rigour.

He knew the hand. He had not seen it for fifteen months and he had told himself, every one of those months, that he had buried it. He knew the spacing of it and the way the author let a hard sentence stand alone on its line, refusing to soften it with what came after, because she had despised softness in prose as she had despised it everywhere it pretended to be kindness. He turned to the back where the authorisations were clipped, and there it was, the signature he had once watched go onto leave passes and death notices and a card, once, slipped under his door without a word in it.

The drum coughed in the courtyard. He had perhaps forty minutes now.

At the very back, behind the doctrine, the consignments. These were the worst because they were the most ordinary, a ledger of intake done in the flat language of a stores register. Subjects entered by code, never name. Date of intake.

Provenance, recorded in two or three clinical words. Authorising officer. Most of the codes had a second date beside them and a single struck line, the way the failed batches of anything are marked, and he made himself not think about what the struck line meant for a child.

One code had no struck line. Intake recorded in a winter month at the close of the collapse. Provenance, two words. *Maternal consignment*. And the authorising signature was hers.

Maternal. Not *recovered*, which was the word the file used for the ones taken from places the service had no right to be. Not *salvage*, which was the word for the ones found. Consigned. A thing handed over by the one person in the world who had the standing to hand it.

He sat with that for longer than he could afford. Outside, a clerk laughed at something, and a crow came down hard on the parapet and walked along it.

He had told the others, when he took the infant out of the wreck of the program, that it was rescue. He had half believed it. A child left in the ruins of a thing the state was at that moment murdering, no parent the records would admit to, no claim on her but his own arms. He had carried her out the way you carry anything you mean to save, fast and without looking back, and he had built a life around the carrying. He had let it become his reason.

And here was the paper that said she had not been left. She had been placed. The same hand that had written *the absence is the instructor* had signed the line that put the child into the school the file described, and had done it before the world was told that hand was dead. The mother had not lost the daughter to the enemy. The mother had filed her, like

a document one wants kept off the index, against a day she hoped would come.

He did not let himself follow the thought to where it wanted to go, because where it wanted to go was a door he had nailed shut with both hands. The woman was dead. The enemy had killed her; he had read the witness statements, he had stood at the empty grave they gave her, he had carried the certainty of it like a wound that had at least the decency to be a real wound. A dead woman's last instruction was a thing he could honour. A living woman's design was a thing he could not survive, so the woman was dead.

He folded the consignment page along its existing crease and put it inside his shirt, against the skin, and he took the doctrine too, the whole of Ashheen, and what he left in the almirah he arranged so the gap would not show until the gap no longer mattered. Then he went out the side door into the white afternoon and got into the Ambassador, and Rudra closed the bonnet and got in behind the wheel and did not ask, because that was their arrangement, and pulled out into the lane.

"Gole Market," Fateh said. "There's a man I have to see before they retire him properly."

They had not retired Sunil Luthra so much as let the air out of him. He had been Chief; now he had a flat in a government colony with a guard who saluted out of habit and a drawing room kept dim against the heat, and he received Fateh in a vest with a towel round his neck, an old soldier surprised at home, and was too disciplined to show that the visit alarmed him.

"You should not be here," Luthra said, when the boy had brought the water and gone. "You of all of them."

"No," Fateh agreed. "And you should not have signed Ashheen. So we are two men who should not."

Luthra's face did not move. He had a fine, dry, deliberate face, the face of a man who had spent a career making bad choices look like the only choices, and he wore his age the way he had worn his rank, as a thing to be carried correctly. He looked at the folded page Fateh laid on the low table between them, and he did not pretend not to know it.

"You went into the house," he said.

"Before your clerks finished. Yes."

"That was foolish. They will count the ash and find it short." Luthra picked up the page and did not unfold it. He held it as you hold a thing whose weight you already know. "What do you want, Fateh. Absolution? I'm a Hindu, I can't give it. Confirmation? You have the paper. You can read."

"I want you to tell me it isn't what it says it is."

"It is exactly what it says it is." Luthra set the page down again, squared it to the edge of the table with one finger, an old man's precision. "We were losing a generation. You remember the years. We were burying boys faster than we could find them, and the ones we found we trained too late, after the world had already taught them to flinch, to hope, to want a wife and a Bajaj and a Sunday. By the time we had a man fit for the work he was thirty and frightened of dying because he had learned there were things worth not dying for. We could not afford men who had learned that." He said it without relish, which was the part Fateh would remember. A grocer explaining his margins. "She came to me with a paper. You have read the paper. I read it and I was sick, the way you

are sick now, sitting there. And then I asked the only question that a man in my chair is paid to ask, which is whether it would work. And she had the answer. She always had the answer."

"It is a child," Fateh said.

"It is a method." Luthra met his eyes. "Don't make a speech to me, Fateh. I have heard the speeches. I gave some of them, when I was young enough to afford them. You are not a young man any more and you did not come here to be young at me. You came because you have one of them in a flat somewhere that the service does not know about, and you are trying to decide whether the thing you are about to do is a sin or a duty. I am telling you it is both, and that the men who can hold both in one hand are the men we have always been short of."

The fan turned. Somewhere below the window a scooter would not start, and a woman was calling a name, the same two syllables, patient and endless.

"You're defending it," Fateh said.

"I am explaining it. There is a difference, and at my age it is most of the difference I have left." Luthra leaned back. "I never raised my hand to a child. Understand me. Not once did I think of it as cruelty, and I will go to the ghat not having thought of it as cruelty. Cruelty is purposeless. This had a purpose. A man who beats his son in temper is a brute. A man who sends his son to a hard school, who lets the boy be cold and hungry and friendless so that the boy will one day stand when softer men sit down, that man is not a brute. He is a father who has counted the cost and chosen the long good over the short comfort. We did not hate them, Fateh. We disciplined them. The two are not even neighbours."

"Discipline keeps something back to return to." Fateh heard his own voice come out level and was grateful for it. "You took away the thing to return to. You wrote it in the schedule. The absence is the instructor."

"That was her line."

"I know whose line it was."

Something passed over Luthra's face then, the first thing all afternoon, and Fateh saw that the old man had been waiting for this, had perhaps wanted it. "Yes," Luthra said. "You knew her. Better than I did, I think, though neither of us will say how. So you tell me, since you knew her. Was she a cruel woman?"

Fateh did not answer.

"She was the least cruel person I ever commanded," Luthra said. "That is why I let her write it. A cruel mind would have made it bloody and we would all have known to stop. Hers made it gentle. Hers made it look like care. There is a page in there, you must have read it, where she sets out how the carers are to be kind. Genuinely kind, she insists on it, properly kind, and then withdrawn on a schedule, so that the child learns kindness is real and also that it goes, and stops, somewhere in the second year, expecting it to stay." He shook his head slowly. "Only a tender person could have designed that. A brute could not have imagined how much it would cost the child, because a brute would never have known what the kindness was worth in the first place."

The page sat on the table between them with its single crease.

"And this one," Fateh said. He did not touch the page. He did not need to. "Maternal consignment."

He watched the old man decide how much to give him, and watched him give less than he had, which Fateh had expected and could not resent, because it was what he himself would have done.

"There were not many," Luthra said at last. "Most were recovered. One or two were given. A child is the easiest thing in the world to give away and the hardest, and I learned not to ask which it had been for the giver, because the answer was never simple and I had no use for it." He looked at Fateh with something that, in a man who had spent fifty years not feeling things in front of others, came very close to pity. "She is dead, your woman. I read the file same as you. So whatever you are turning over in your head about a signature, put it down. A signature is not a confession. It is only a hand that has stopped."

It was the kind thing to say, and it was also the convenient thing, and Fateh let himself be given it the way a thirsty man takes water he suspects is bad. *She is dead*. He needed the words more than he needed them to be true, and the old man, who had spent a lifetime supplying men with exactly what they needed in the place of what was so, supplied them now, and the supply was a mercy and a lock turned on a door, both at once.

"Burn the rest," Fateh said, standing. "All of it. Don't let your clerks keep a single page of the schedule. If this surfaces, it ends men who don't deserve to be ended for it, and it does the child no good at all."

"And that page?"

Fateh did not give it back. He picked it up off the table and folded it once more, against the skin again, the consignment line and the signature he would not let himself read as

anything but a dead woman's last instruction.

"I'll keep that," he said.

Luthra looked at him for a long moment, and Fateh saw the old man understand exactly what the keeping meant. Not evidence. Not a weapon held against the day he might need one. An inheritance, accepted. The schedule going into the man the way it had gone into the file, off the index, kept against a day he hoped would not come and knew now would.

"You'll follow it," Luthra said. It was not a question. "The schedule. You came here to be talked out of it and you are leaving with it inside your shirt."

"I came to know what it was," Fateh said. "So that if I do it, I do it knowing."

"That is the only honest version of the thing," the old man said. "It is also no comfort at all. I should know. I have had fifteen years of it." He did not get up. He sat in his vest with the towel round his neck, a man the service had let the air out of, and he watched Fateh to the door. "What will you call her?"

Fateh had not told him it was a girl. He stopped with his hand on the frame and did not ask how the old man knew, because the old man knew everything, that had always been the trouble with him, and there was nothing to be gained now by confirming it.

He had not let himself choose the name in fifteen months. He had called her *the child*, and *her*, and once, exhausted at two in the morning with her fever breaking against his chest, *little one*, and had hated himself for the tenderness of it because the page against his skin told him tenderness was a thing he would have to ration to a schedule.

Outside, the woman below the window was still calling, patient, endless, the two soft syllables going up into the heat for a child who did not come.

"Sita," he said.

He went down the dim stair into the white afternoon, where Rudra waited with the engine running, and he carried the dead woman's name into the dead woman's daughter as if it were a gift, and did not feel the floor of the world shift under him, because the woman was dead, he had read the file, the woman was dead.

Chapter 21

New Delhi · +33 days

The flat was on the third floor of a building in Karol Bagh that had no name on its gate, only a number painted over an older number, and Rudra had chosen it, she understood now, for the way the stairwell turned. You could not come up it without being seen from the landing, and you could not stand on the landing without being heard on the stairs. He had taught her that years ago without telling her it was a lesson. He had taught her most things that way.

He had laid the contents of a canvas bag out on the table in the order a man lays out tools he intends to use, not show. She stood over them and read them the way she read a room.

A passport, Indian, maroon, the corners worn to the soft paleness of three years in a hip pocket. A second passport, navy, Sri Lankan, newer. A bundle of rupees in the violet five-hundreds, rubber-banded, and under it a thinner bundle of American hundreds gone the grey of circulation. A cheap touchscreen phone still in its box. A SIM taped to a card on which a single twelve-digit number had been written in pencil and then, she saw, gone over again so it would not fade. An Aadhaar card in the maroon passport's name. A train ticket, paper, second class, Old Delhi to Kathgodam, dated for the day after tomorrow.

"Open it," Rudra said.

She opened the maroon passport. Her own face, younger, looked back at her under a name that was not hers. The stamps inside were real stamps, or had been made by

someone who had held the real die. Dubai. Colombo. A Schengen entry at Frankfurt four years gone and an exit she could not remember making because she had never made it.

"There is a history under that name," he said. He had not sat. He stood at the window with two fingers parting the curtain a centimetre, watching the lane the way other men watch television. "A bank account that has been used. Small things. A phone bill paid every month by standing instruction since before you were old enough to hold a phone. A woman who books a train now and then and once returned a kettle to a shop in Pune. If anyone pulls the thread, the thread holds. It does not stop. It goes back and back until they get tired of pulling."

"You built this when."

"I started it the year you turned twelve."

She set the passport down on its face. Twelve. She had been learning to defeat a four-lever lock the year he had been opening a bank account for a woman who did not exist, so that one day the woman could become real enough to carry her out of the country.

"You knew it would end."

"Everything off the books ends," Rudra said. "The only question they ever ask you is whether you walked out or were carried." He let the curtain fall. "I am not going to let you be carried."

She found she could not look at him for a moment, and looked at the table instead, which was a thing she had been trained out of and was, she realised, choosing to do. The trained part of her catalogued the kit and found it flawless. A flawless kit was itself a kind of message. It said: someone with reach and patience and money wants you gone clean.

The part of her that had been her own for thirty-three days now, since Fateh had handed her judgment instead of an order, asked a smaller and uglier question, and she did not voice it, because there was no one in the room she trusted enough to hear it and only one she trusted at all.

The question was: why is it so easy.

She had spent eighteen years on the assumption that nothing was easy, that a door that opened was a door someone wanted you to walk through. And here was a door, beautifully hung, swinging on oiled hinges, and the man holding it was the man who had taught her to distrust doors.

"Kathgodam," she said. "Then up."

"Then up. A bus to Bhowali, you don't take it. You walk to the third stand and wait for the shared jeep, the one that does the monastery run for the foreigners. You get off before the monastery, at the village. There is a house. The man there grows apples and does not ask questions because the last time he asked questions it cost him a son. You stay until the snow, then you decide who you are going to be."

"And you."

"I have somewhere to be," Rudra said, which was what he said when the answer was no.

She did her counter-surveillance the long way back, because the kit in the bag against her spine made her careful in a manner that had nothing to do with training and everything to do with wanting, very badly, to live. She crossed Ajmal Khan Road against the flow and watched the faces that adjusted. She rode one Metro stop the wrong way and got off and waited and got on again. Nobody adjusted. Nobody waited with her. The city took no interest. That, too, was a

kind of message, and she did not know how to read it, because she had never in her life been of so little interest to anyone.

On the platform at Rajiv Chowk a man in a courier's vest stood reading his phone with the particular stillness of a man not reading his phone, and her pulse moved, and then a train came and he got on it and was gone and she understood she had wanted him to be a watcher. It was easier to be hunted than forgotten.

There was an operation in the city. She had felt it for a week, the way you feel weather coming in the joints of an old injury. Tempo where there should be none. On the Tuesday she had seen a van make the same delivery to the same shuttered shop in Seelampur twice in four hours, and the men who carried the boxes carried them wrong, from the knees, like men trained not to be seen straining. On the Wednesday a boy she had marked as a runner three weeks earlier had passed a folded paper to a fruit-seller and not bought fruit. None of it was hers. None of it was the unit's; the unit was a corpse the state had not finished burying. She had asked Rudra and Rudra had said the new grid threw shadows, that NATGRID and the link-analysis the contractors sold made every coincidence look like a conspiracy, that she was seeing pattern because she had been built to see pattern and there was nothing now for the pattern to mean.

She had believed him because she needed to, and because he had never lied to her, and the second of those was a thing she had decided to keep believing on the strength of the first.

But she had logged the van. She had logged the boy. She logged them the way you put coins in a tin you tell yourself

you will never need to open.

Mira chose a Sufi shrine in the old city for the meeting, which Sita understood as a courtesy. You could not run a static post inside a dargah on a Thursday. The crush was its own counter-surveillance, the qawwali loud enough to swallow a parabolic mic, the press of bodies hostile to a camera's line. It was where one professional told another professional that she had nothing to hide and everything to fear, and Sita loved her a little for it, and hated that she had a word for what she felt, because the word made it a liability she would have to manage.

They sat against the cool marble of the colonnade with their shoes in their hands and let the singing wash the words away from any listener more than a foot distant.

"You've decided," Mira said. Not a question. She had a way of stating things back to you so you could see the shape of them.

"I haven't said anything."

"You're sitting like someone who has somewhere to be tomorrow." Mira turned the small coins of her bangles around her wrist. "I know the sitting. I've done it."

Sita watched a man press his forehead to the lattice over the saint's tomb and stay there, asking for something, his shoulders moving. "Tell me what's on your side," she said.

"Not freedom." Mira said it fast, to get it out of the way, and Sita respected that too. "Don't let anyone sell you freedom. What's on my side is a name and a number and a file, and a country that is angry with you but would rather have you in a room than in the ground. There's an office. There's a man called Kaul who would never shake your hand

and would sign the paper that keeps you alive. You'd talk for a year. You'd give them Fateh, the whole architecture, every key he ever handed you. And then you'd be a person the state has a reason to protect, which is the only kind of safe there is for people like us."

"You're describing a cage with a lock on the inside."

"I'm describing a cage where you hold a key," Mira said. "Which is more than either of us has now."

The qawwali turned a corner and lifted and the courtyard moved with it, a thousand people leaning toward the same grief. Sita thought of the maroon passport and the apple-grower's house and the snow that would tell her, eventually, who she was going to be, and she thought that Rudra was offering her the absence of everyone and Mira was offering her the presence of an institution, and that she did not know which of those was the deeper loneliness, only that she had been alone her whole life and had not known there was another kind of word for it until this woman had said it to her in a garden a month ago and made her cry without meaning to.

"There's a third thing you're not saying," Sita said.

Mira's hands went still on the bangles. "Meridian."

The name sat in the noise like a stone in a current. Mira had given it to her weeks before, a shadow at the far edge of the money that had paid for Sita's whole life, and Sita had carried it since the way you carry a tooth that has begun to ache, touching it with the tongue of her attention when she could not sleep.

"I've been pulling the thread," Mira said, low, leaning so her shoulder touched Sita's and her mouth was near Sita's ear and the words went nowhere else. "Companies inside

companies. Mauritius. A man in front who is not the man. The money that funded Fateh did not come from any service of ours, and it did not come from across any border you'd name. It came from a private thing that wants to sell the state a machine that sees the future." She drew back enough to be seen. "And the tradecraft, Sita. The way it's all run. The hand on it. I've read a file about a hand exactly like it. A woman the service buried years ago."

Sita kept her face the still water she had been trained to keep it. Inside, something turned over that she did not let reach her eyes.

"Buried," she said.

"In the file. Dead." Mira watched her. "I don't know what it means. I want to know what it means with you in a room where it's safe to know it. Not here. Not where you have to decide in a courtyard whether to trust me with the rest of your life."

Sita looked at her own bare feet on the worn marble that ten thousand years of feet had polished. Her mother was dead. Her mother had been killed by the enemy when she was an infant and they had given her the dead woman's name as if a name were a thing you could be handed across a grave, and she had spent her life as the blade of a war fought over that grave, and now a woman she had decided to love was telling her there was a hand in all of it that moved like a ghost the files called dead, and Sita did not let herself complete the sentence that the trained part of her had already, coldly, completed and set aside, because to complete it was to open a door, and she had learned today that she did not trust doors that opened easily.

"You're offering me the truth," she said.

"I'm offering you a place to stand while you look at it."

"And if the truth is something I can't survive knowing."

"Then I'll be standing next to you," Mira said, "which is the only part of any of this I'm sure I mean."

They left separately, twenty minutes apart, Sita first, into the lane of attar-sellers and the smell of frying and the boys with handcarts shouting the single syllable that meant make way. She walked the way she always walked, mapping exits, and she was three turns from the dargah when she saw the van again. The Seelampur van. The same dent in the same panel, the same way the men carried the boxes from the knees, and it was on the wrong side of the river for the work she had imagined it doing, and it stopped outside a shop that sold nothing, and a man got out of the cab and stood for exactly as long as it takes to count a street and got back in.

She crossed and bought a glass of sugarcane juice she did not want and stood with it in the shade and logged the van for the third time, and the plate, and the man, and the way the operation breathed, and she felt the old certainty rise in her like nausea: this is real, this is large, this is moving toward something, and someone has told me it is weather.

She thought of Rudra at the window with two fingers in the curtain. She thought of the kit that was too good, the history that went back and back until the puller got tired, the door on its oiled hinges. She thought of Mira's hand going still on her bangles at the name of a dead woman.

Every way out of her life had opened in the same week. The state had stopped watching her. The man who raised her had a flawless route ready. The woman who loved her had a country that would take her in. The whole machine, which

had spent eighteen years closing on her, had at the last moment stepped back and held every door, and a woman who has spent her life being moved by other hands knows the feeling of being moved even when she cannot see the hand.

She drank the sugarcane juice down to the ice and set the glass on the vendor's plank and walked, and behind her the van's engine turned over and the operation she could not name went on assembling itself in the heat, box by box, toward a day she would not be told about until it had already happened and the future had been proven, on schedule, to a buyer she had never met.

She did not look back at the van. She had logged it. The tin was getting full.

She walked toward the Metro with the kit against her spine and the train ticket for the day after tomorrow and the apple-grower's silence waiting at the end of a country, and for the first time in her life she let herself want a thing simply, the way Rudra had taught her to want food, slowly, without apology: she wanted to be free.

It was, she would think much later, the most dangerous thing she had ever wanted, because it was the first want anyone had ever made so easy for her to have.

Chapter 22

New Delhi · +35 days

The traffic on the Eastern Express Highway had set like cooling fat, and Fateh sat in the back of the hired Dzire watching the minute change on the dashboard clock, knowing the minute was the only thing in the city moving faster than he was.

He had read it the way you read weather off a barometer: not the storm itself, only the pressure dropping. For nine days he had followed Salim Reza's tempo the way he had once followed hers, and the tempo had told him a thing the content never would. The cell had gone quiet in the particular manner of a hand drawn back before it strikes. The cut-outs had stopped buying small and started buying nothing, which meant the buying was finished. The safe flat in Govandi had been swept and abandoned with the gas still connected, a tell he had learned at her shoulder twenty years ago: you leave the utilities live so the neighbours notice nothing for a week. A live meter is a quiet street.

So he knew it was today, and he knew it was the western suburbs, and he did not know the hour, and the not-knowing was a stone in his chest.

"Bhaiya," he said, "leave the highway. Take the service road, go under at Sion."

The driver looked at him in the mirror, the long incurious look of a man who has ferried stranger fares, and obeyed. The car peeled off the elevated artery and dropped into the older city, the one that smelled of frying and drains and the iron

tang of the monsoon coming, and Fateh felt the streets close around him like a familiar coat.

He had no authority to be here. That was the thing he kept arriving at, the way a tongue keeps arriving at a broken tooth. Kaul had shut the unit. There was no office above him now, no number he could ring that would not, the moment he gave his name, set in motion the machinery of his own arrest. The men who could put four hundred constables onto a platform with a single order did not know he existed, and the one man who could prove the threat was real was the one man who could not say how he knew it. Because to say how he knew it, he would have to say her name. And to say her name was to say she was alive, and to say she was alive was to unmake eighteen years and a girl asleep in a flat across the bay who believed she was named for a murdered woman.

He took out the cheap handset, the clean one, the one with a SIM bought for cash off a pavement vendor in Kurla against a photocopy of a stranger's Aadhaar. He had the duty number for the control room. He had had it for years; old habits kept old numbers warm. He dialled.

A young man answered, bored, professional. Fateh gave him the city, the corridor, the window. He said the words that were supposed to move mountains, communal target, today, the western line, IED, and he heard the boredom in the young man's voice change shape, not into urgency but into the practised wariness of a man who takes forty such calls a week and watches none of them come true.

"Sir, your name. Your source. You are calling from which agency."

"There is no time for that. Watch the junction stations. Watch where the foot overbridges funnel the crowd. Put your

people on the down platforms at the evening peak."

"Sir, I cannot action an anonymous input without a source grading. If you give me your details, I can escalate."

"By the time you escalate they will be dead."

A pause. He could hear the room behind the boy, the hum of monitors, the murmur of the apparatus that watched everything and saw nothing. "Sir, I am logging your call," the young man said, which meant only that there would be a record of a crank, a line in a register, a thing for the inquiry to find afterward and shake its head over.

Fateh ended the call. He sat with the dead phone in his hand and understood, with a clarity that was almost peace, that the log itself was part of the design. Somewhere a machine would later be made to cough up a flag, a probability, a name in amber, and they would hold it against this hour and say: it knew. The machine knew, and the men did not, and what kind of country leaves its children to men. His true warning, the warning of a living man who had spent his life in this, would lie in a register graded ungradeable. The false oracle would be crowned over his head.

"Faster," he said.

"Sir, the traffic."

"Then I will walk."

He paid the driver in notes, too many, the way you tip a witness to forget your face, and stepped out into the crush three hundred metres short of the station. The crowd had the density of the evening peak, that Mumbai pressure where the individual dissolves and the body becomes a corpuscle in something larger, and he let it carry him, working his shoulders, an old man moving through young men, his eyes doing the only work that mattered.

He was looking for her hand. Not for a bomber. A bomber was a fool with a bag, interchangeable, already as good as dead and not knowing it. He was looking for the architecture above the fool. The choke point chosen not for the maximum kill but for the maximum legibility, the place where afterward the analysts would say of course, the place that photographed as negligence. She had taught him that. The target is never the target. The target is the story the target tells. You do not bomb a barracks, hard and armed and expecting you; you bomb the soft civilian throat the state has sworn to protect and failed, because the wound you are making is not in the flesh, it is in the covenant. Break the covenant and the people will hand you anything to feel safe again. Anything. Even their faces. Even their phones. Even the keys to the whole watched house.

He saw the overbridge ahead, the long iron staircase pouring commuters down onto the down platform, and he saw the way the hawkers' barrows narrowed the mouth of it, and he thought, there, that is where I would put it, that is where she would put it, and he began to push.

He was perhaps forty metres away, close enough to see the chai stall and the steam off the urn and a boy in a school uniform with his tie pulled loose, close enough to start to shout a thing he had not yet found the shape of, when the air changed.

There is a sound before the sound. He had learned this too, in another life, in the bad years. A pressure that arrives a quarter-second ahead of the noise, that the body registers before the mind, a slap of compressed air against the eardrums and the chest. He was already turning, already folding, when the world went white and flat and silent.

The silence was the worst of it. He came to himself on his hands and knees on the platform with no memory of falling, and the world had been switched to mute, and into the mute poured a high thin singing that he understood after a moment was inside his own head. Around him people moved without sound. A man ran past with his mouth open in a shape that should have been a scream. A woman sat against a pillar holding her own forearm at an angle forearms do not go, looking at it with mild puzzlement, as if it belonged to someone she half remembered.

He got up. His legs held. He did the thing the body does when the mind has gone away, the trained inventory: hands, count to ten, feet, weight on each, no wet warmth anywhere that meant his own blood. He was whole. He had been forty metres away and behind the angle of a pillar and he was whole, and the boy with the loosened tie was not, because where the boy had been there was now a geography Fateh's eye refused at first to read, a rearrangement of the ordinary into something the brain filed under no heading it owned.

Sound came back the way feeling comes back to a slept-on limb, in a rush of pins. And with it the smell, which he would carry to his death: scorched hair, cordite, the sweet copper of opened bodies, frying oil from the overturned barrow burning on the platform, and under it all, absurdly, the smell of spilled tea.

People were screaming now. The platform announcer, untouched in her booth, was still reading the arrival of the slow train to Karjat in the flat singsong of the unharmed, and the train was not coming, and her voice went on under the screaming like a hymn no one had told to stop. A man was filming on his phone, holding it steady with both hands the

way you are taught to, and Fateh felt a flare of hatred for him that he knew at once was unjust, because the man was not a ghoul, the man was a citizen doing the only thing left to a citizen, gathering the evidence, feeding the record, and the record was exactly what she wanted fed. Every phone in this carnage was a camera, and every camera was a witness for the prosecution she would mount against the privacy of the entire nation. Look, she would have them say, look what we cannot see coming. Look what we let happen because we were squeamish about being watched.

He moved among the hurt because he did not know what else his hands were for. He knelt by the woman with the broken arm and turned her face toward him and saw she was not bleeding from anywhere that would kill her in the next minutes, and he said, in Marathi, you are alive, you are alive, help is coming, and he did not know if it was true and he said it because it was the only currency he had. He pressed a stranger's scarf to a man's thigh and put the man's own good hand over it and shouted at him to press, press hard, look at me, press. He worked the way you bail a sinking boat, knowing the sea will win, because the alternative is to sit still in the water and feel it rise.

And while his hands worked, the other part of him, the part that had never in forty years been permitted to look away, read the scene.

It was beautiful. That was the obscenity of it, and he made himself face the obscenity because facing it was the last loyalty he could offer the dead: it was beautiful work. The charge had been small. He could see that already from the throw of it, from the way the blast had stayed low and forward and channelled down the platform rather than up

into the overbridge ironwork. A bigger bomb would have brought the staircase down and killed in the hundreds and made a different kind of story, an engineering story, a story about reinforcement and audits. This bomb had been built to kill in the careful dozens and to leave the architecture standing so that the architecture could be examined. It had been built to be solved.

He understood it then, kneeling in another man's blood with the announcer still calling trains that would never arrive, the whole of it, the way you understand a sentence whose grammar you have been staring at for an hour and which resolves all at once. She had not built a massacre. She had built a demonstration. The dead were not the purpose; the dead were the price of the purpose, paid in advance, in full, so that a thing could be shown to have foreseen them. Somewhere in a clean office with good coffee, the proof was already prepared. A model that had flagged this corridor. A probability surfaced on a date that could be shown, that had been made to be shown, to predate this evening. The retroactive miracle. The machine that knew. And the men who had not listened to the living voice on the duty line would weep into the cameras and swear, never again, and reach with both hands for the only thing that had been correct, because correctness in a season of fear is the only god a frightened state will worship.

He had built the Alpha program half as her monument. He had taken her method and her temperament and her cold beautiful certainty and he had poured them into a child, believing he was keeping a faith with the dead. And the dead had not been dead. The dead had been at work all these years, refining the same method to this, to a platform in the western

suburbs at the evening peak, and the proof of her foresight that she must now plant, the trail of probabilities seeded backward to sell the machine, was also, he knew, the one thread by which the whole of it could be pulled. To prove you predicted a thing, you must show you knew it. And to show you knew it is to confess you knew it. The act that sells the oracle is the act that hangs the prophet. He had seen the flaw two weeks ago from a flat in Delhi and had felt, God forgive him, a flicker of something like pride, the architect's pride, the pride of the one student who could still read her hand. He felt no pride now. He felt the boy with the loosened tie under his eye like a thumb pressed on a bruise.

A police constable arrived at a run, young, terrified, his lathi useless in his hand, and stood over the scene with his mouth working and no orders in his head. Then more of them. Then the first paramedics, in their cheap polyester, doing the triage Fateh had been doing without the word for it, touching foreheads, calling colours. The platform filled with the living come to tend the maimed, and Fateh felt himself become, in that filling, what he had to become: nobody. An old man with grey in his stubble and blood on his sleeves, one more shocked commuter, a face the CCTV would log and the facial-recognition would chew on and spit out as low-confidence, no match, a ghost. He let his shoulders round. He let his eyes go vacant. He began, with the slowness of the genuinely stunned, to drift back toward the stairs.

By the overbridge a knot of men had gathered who were not commuters and not police. He knew the type before he knew the men: the suits a little too good for the platform, the lanyards, the one already on his phone speaking in the clipped confident English of people who manage other

people's catastrophes. A television crew was setting up at the mouth of the station, the reporter doing her breathing exercises, the cameraman finding his light in the smoke. And Fateh, drifting past with his vacant eyes, heard one of the suited men say into his phone, not even lowering his voice, because why would he lower it, who in this hell was listening:

"We need to get ahead of the narrative tonight. Tell Delhi the question they're going to ask by morning is what could have stopped this. Have the answer ready before they ask the question."

Have the answer ready before they ask the question.

Fateh kept walking. He did not break stride, did not turn his head, gave the man not one flicker of the old killing attention, because the discipline of forty years held even now, even with the singing still in his ears and the smell in his throat. But inside, in the place no machine could read and no camera log, something settled into its final shape, cold and clear and without hope.

The fear had already begun its conversion. He could see it crossing the faces at the barrier, the commuters held back by the tape, watching the smoke, holding their phones, and he could see it in them as plainly as weather: the moment, in each of them, where horror curdled into the longing to be kept safe at any cost. By morning the longing would have a name and a price and a contract waiting on a desk in Delhi for a signature that had been stalled for a year on the question of whether a free people could bear to be watched. The platform behind him was the answer to that question, written in the only ink that the men with the signatures ever truly read.

He reached the street. The evening had come on while he was below, and the city's lights had begun, indifferent, the

way the city's lights always began, and somewhere out in the dark a girl he had named for a woman he had buried was making, he believed, her own small free choice to run, never knowing whose hand was on her shoulder, never knowing that the same hand had just signed this. He thought of her and could not afford to think of her and put her away.

He took out the clean phone. He looked at it for a long moment in the light of a hoarding that advertised, in letters two metres high, a bank that promised to know its customers. Then he wiped the handset down out of habit, snapped the SIM between his fingers, and dropped both into a drain, and walked north into the crowd, an old man with nowhere to report and no one to believe him, carrying the only thing he had carried out of the smoke: that she was alive, that she had done this, and that the proof which would crown her was the same proof that could undo her, if a man could reach it before the country, in its grief, signed the door of its own house open and handed her the key.

Chapter 23

New Delhi · +36 days

The air conditioning in the conference room on the second floor of the annexe had been set too low, the way it always was when men who mattered were expected, and Mira had learned long ago to read the temperature of a meeting before anyone spoke. Cold rooms were for decisions already taken. Warm rooms were for arguments. This one was cold enough that the Joint Secretary from the Home Ministry kept his jacket buttoned, and the stenographer at the side table had wrapped both hands around her tea.

She had come early, as she always did, and taken the chair against the wall rather than at the table. Wall chairs did not speak. Wall chairs watched. From here she could see all of them at once: the half-circle of principals along the polished veneer, the two flat-panel screens wheeled in on a trolley, the security men outside the frosted glass who would let no phone past the door. Even Kaul's phone had gone into the lead-lined box by the entrance, and she had watched him surrender it without looking at it, which told her more about his state than his face did.

Eleven days since Mumbai. The smell of it was still in the city somewhere, she thought, though that was sentiment and she knew it. What was actually still in the city was the count. Thirty-one at the suburban station, four more in the hospitals who would not last the month, and a number she had stopped letting herself round up. The newspapers had moved from grief to blame on the fourth day, which was faster than usual,

and the television had moved there on the second.

Julian Mehta stood when the chair nodded to him, and buttoned his own jacket, and Mira watched the room rearrange itself around his confidence the way iron filings find a magnet.

He was good. She would give him that. He did not begin with the dead. A lesser man would have begun with the dead, would have offered the committee his condolences as currency, and the committee would have despised him quietly for spending them. Mehta began instead with a date.

"On the ninth of last month," he said, "twenty-two days before the attack, the platform raised a tier-two anomaly on a cluster of three telephone numbers operating in the western suburbs."

The first screen woke. A map, the familiar shape of the city, three points pulsing softly in red. Below them, a band of dates and a confidence score rendered in the clean sans-serif of a company that had paid a great deal for its clean sans-serif.

"None of these numbers was flagged by any existing watch list," Mehta said. "None appeared in NATGRID. None was under lawful intercept, because no agency in this country had a reason to ask for one. They were, by every existing measure, three ordinary citizens. Aadhaar-verified. UPI-active. Unremarkable."

He let that sit. The Joint Secretary shifted in his buttoned jacket.

"What the platform saw," Mehta went on, "was not the men. It was the shape of them. The hour their devices slept. A pattern of small cash withdrawals against an income that did not require cash. Three SIMs that travelled together and

never called one another. A purchase, in Bhiwandi, that on its own means nothing." He did not say what the purchase was. He did not need to. "TRINETRA does not predict the future. I want to be precise about that, because precision is the only thing that will survive this room. It does not see crimes that have not happened. It sees the arithmetic of intention, and it scores the arithmetic, and on the ninth it scored these three above the threshold the state's own systems would have required to act."

Mira kept her face where she had left it. The arithmetic of intention. She filed the phrase the way she filed everything, against a day she might need it, and she felt the first cold turn of the thing in her stomach that she had carried into the room and could not put down.

Because the objection was so obvious that a clever child would have made it, and not one man at the table was going to make it.

Sehgal made the small noise he made before he spoke, a clearing of the throat that was not quite a cough, an old habit she had stopped finding harmless. He was three seats from Kaul, where an Additional Secretary belonged, and he had positioned his papers in a neat fan in front of him as though he intended to refer to them, which he would not. Sehgal did not read in meetings. Sehgal listened, and steered.

"For the record," Sehgal said, mildly, "did Meridian forward this assessment to any Indian agency at the time it was generated?"

It was the perfect question. Mira almost admired it. It looked like skepticism and it was a gift, and Mehta caught it the way a fielder catches a ball lobbed gently into his hands.

"We did not," Mehta said, and let regret cross his face. "And I will not stand here and tell you that we should not have. But you must understand our position, Additional Secretary. We are a foreign-incorporated company without a contract, without standing, without any lawful channel through which to hand the Government of India a list of three of its own citizens and say, watch these men. We would have been laughed out of the building on a good day. On a bad day we would have been arrested for surveilling Indian nationals without authority. The very objection that has stalled this procurement for fourteen months is the objection that gagged us on the ninth."

There it was. He had taken the privacy fight, the thing that was supposed to be the wall against him, and turned it into the reason the dead were dead. Mira watched it land. She watched the Joint Secretary from Home, who had spent a year being the cautious man, the Puttaswamy man, the man who quoted the nine-judge bench on the right to be let alone, absorb the suggestion that his caution had a body count. She watched him not look at anyone.

It was beautifully done and it was a lie standing on a true fact, which was the only kind of lie that ever worked in a room like this.

Kaul had not spoken. Kaul was looking at the map.

She knew that face. She had worked under it for nine years and she could read the small country of it the way she could read a street: the muscle at the jaw that had nothing to do with thinking, the stillness that in another man would be calm and in Kaul was the opposite. His sister's husband had been on the platform at Mumbai. Mira knew because she had been the one to confirm it for him, quietly, in his office,

before the lists were public, because someone had to and the others were afraid of him. He had said thank you and asked her to close the door on the way out and she had heard nothing through it, which was worse than hearing something.

So when Kaul finally spoke, she leaned, very slightly, into the cold.

"You scored three men above your threshold," Kaul said. His voice was level and dry. "On the ninth."

"Yes, Chief."

"And on the ninth you did nothing."

"We could do nothing, Chief. As I have said."

"And now," Kaul said, "you have brought the score to me. After."

The room understood the shape of it then. Mira felt the temperature of the meeting move under her, the way you feel a train move when the one beside it pulls out, that lurch where you cannot tell for a half-second which of you is going. Kaul was going to ask it. The obvious thing. The thing she had carried in.

But he did not ask it the way she would have. He could not. Grief had taken the cleanest blade out of his hand and replaced it with a heavier one.

"What I am trying to establish," Kaul said, and she heard the care in it, the man rationing himself, "is what assurance this committee can have that a score generated after an event, by the only party with a commercial interest in the score, is the same score that existed before the event."

Mehta did not flinch. "An excellent question, and one I anticipated."

The second screen woke.

"The assessment of the ninth," Mehta said, "was written, at the moment of its generation, to an immutable ledger held by a third party, time-stamped and cryptographically sealed, in Singapore, beyond our reach and beyond our editing. We did not control it then and we cannot alter it now. The auditors are KPMG. Their attestation is in your folders, behind tab four. The score existed before the event. That is not my claim. That is a forensic finding."

And the room exhaled. Mira watched it exhale. The thing they had been afraid of, the suspicion that this was a conjuror's trick, a card forced and then revealed, dissolved into a tab and an auditor's letterhead, and the relief in the room was physical, because a forensic finding was a thing a committee could hold, a thing it could put in a file and stand behind, and the alternative was to keep sitting in a cold room with thirty-one dead and no answer.

She turned the claim over in her hands, privately, the way she turned everything.

It was probably true. That was what nobody at the table would let themselves see. The score very likely had been written to a sealed ledger on the ninth, time-stamped and clean, exactly as he said, audited by men in Singapore who had no idea what they were attesting. The trick was not in the ledger. The trick was upstream of the ledger, in the only question that mattered and that no one would ask: not whether the score existed before the event, but how it came to exist at all. A machine did not score three invisible men twenty-two days early out of arithmetic. A machine was told. And she had spent the last weeks learning the one thing in this whole apparatus she could be sure of, which was that there was a hand somewhere that knew things a beat before it

should, that fed them in at the right moment to the right man and met no surprise when they arrived. She had watched that hand work on Sehgal. The same foreknowledge that reached Sehgal had reached this machine. It had not foreseen. It had been informed.

That was as far as she let herself go, and she made herself stop there, on the edge of it, because below the edge there was no floor she could stand on and no name she could put a finger to and no proof of any of it, only a shape she could feel the cold of and could not draw. Informed, not prescient. A penetration dressed as a prophecy. She could not even say that much in this room without becoming the woman who, in the face of a forensic finding and an auditor's letter, offered the committee a feeling. They would be gentle with her. That would be the worst of it. They would be gentle.

So she said nothing, and hated the discipline of it, and recognised in the hatred the exact shape of the trap, because the discipline was real and the silence served the hand just as surely as Sehgal's smooth questions did. The machine did not need her to lie. It needed her to be correct, and cautious, and quiet. It ran on the virtues.

"Then there is the matter," Sehgal said, into the warm relief he had helped manufacture, "of timing."

He had waited for the room to want it. That was his real gift, Mira thought, watching him, not the steering but the patience inside the steering, the willingness to let a thing ripen until the committee believed the next step was its own idea.

"We have been deliberating this procurement for fourteen months," Sehgal said. "On entirely proper grounds. The privacy concerns are real. The constitutional questions are

real. I have raised some of them myself." A small concession, perfectly weighted. "But we are now in a different country than we were on the eighth of last month. The question before us was once whether the state should acquire a capability of this kind. That question has been overtaken. The men who did this had a capability we did not. The only instrument that saw them is sitting in a folder behind tab four, owned by a company we have spent fourteen months keeping at arm's length. I would ask the committee to consider whether arm's length is a posture we can still afford, or whether it is a luxury we have already paid for once, in Mumbai."

It was very quiet.

Mira looked at Kaul, and Kaul looked at the map, and she understood that he had lost, and that he knew he had lost, and that the manner of his losing was the cruelest part of it. He was not a stupid man. Somewhere behind that rationed face he could feel a wrongness he could not hold, the same wrongness she could feel and not name, the sense of a thing too clean, arriving too well, from too convenient a direction. She was almost sure of it. But he could not reach for the wrongness, because to reach for it he would have to stand in a room of grieving and frightened men and say that the machine which had seen the killers of his sister's husband was not a miracle but a sign of something he had no word for, and he had nothing to reach for it with except, like her, a smell. And his sister was waiting at home with a face he had to go back to. Politics had him by one arm and grief by the other and they were pulling him the same way, which she had not known grief and politics could do, and it frightened her more than either alone.

"I want the ledger independently re-examined," Kaul said. "Not KPMG. Our own people. Technical division, not policy."

"Of course," Mehta said.

"And I want the three numbers run backward through everything we hold. Every contact, every transaction, every cell that touched a tower they touched. I want to know who they were before they were a score."

"Naturally, Chief. We will give your technical division full access to the assessment chain."

He would, too, Mira thought. He would give them everything, every honest byte of it, because the honesty was the point, the honesty was the trap. They would re-examine the ledger and find it sound. They would run the three numbers backward and find three men who really had done it, really had bought the thing in Bhiwandi, really had slept and woken and withdrawn cash in the pattern the machine described, because the men were real and the deaths were real, and the only thing no audit would reach was the long invisible reason standing behind it all, the hand she had traced through a chain of shell companies to a shadow above Mauritius and lost there, against a name on no document, because it had been laid down by someone who knew exactly what an audit reaches and had set the whole proof carefully on the near side of it.

"Then unless there is anything further," the chair said, and looked along the table, and the table looked at its hands, "I think we record that the committee, in light of the events of last month, recommends that the procurement proceed to the contracting stage, subject to the Chief's verification requirements and the standing privacy safeguards."

The stenographer's pen moved. That was the whole of it. A line in a record, in a cold room, and somewhere a sale that had been stalled for fourteen months on the right grounds lurched forward on the wrong ones, and not one criminal act had occurred at the table. Every man had behaved well. That was what she would not be able to make anyone understand afterward, if there was an afterward in which she was permitted to try. There had been no villainy in the room. There had been caution, and grief, and an auditor's letter, and a good question asked at the right moment by a man who already knew the answer, and the machine had moved the way it was meant to move, and the movement had been faultless.

The principals rose. There was the low murmur of men who had decided something hard and were relieved to be standing. The Joint Secretary from Home went to Kaul and said something Mira did not catch, and Kaul nodded without hearing it. Mehta was gathering his trolley and his clean screens with the modesty of a man who had won and knew better than to look it.

Sehgal squared his fan of papers, which he had not once consulted, and slid them into his folder, and on his way to the door he paused beside her wall chair as though he had only just noticed her there.

"You were very quiet, Mira," he said. Pleasantly. The way you would say it to a junior whose silence you had appreciated.

"There wasn't much for me to add," she said.

"No." He looked at her a moment longer than the words required, and she made her eyes the eyes of a tired officer at the end of a long meeting, and gave him nothing, because

giving him nothing was now the only move she had left that he could not turn into a gift. "No, I don't suppose there was."

He went out. She stayed in the wall chair while the room emptied, until it was only her and the stenographer packing her machine and the cold air still running for no one, and she sat with the thing she knew and could not prove, and felt it settle into her for the long stay, the way a stone settles into a coat pocket you have stopped noticing you wear.

Outside the frosted glass the security men were handing back the phones. She could see the shapes of the principals collecting them, the small bowing-forward of men reaching into the lead-lined box for the devices that knew everything about them and would soon, if the line in the record held, be the property of a company whose owner was a name she had never once been able to find.

She got up, finally, and took her own phone from the box, and it woke in her hand with the ordinary brightness of a thing that had nothing to hide.

Chapter 24

New Delhi · +38 days

The rain had stopped an hour before, and the city was drying in patches, which was the worst of all conditions for what they were about to do. Wet streets held a sheen that threw the sodium lamps back at the cameras and washed out faces. Dry streets gave nothing away either. But this halfway state, the asphalt steaming faintly under the lights, the puddles still holding their mirrors, meant a walking figure cast two of itself, and two figures were what every analyst was trained to notice.

Rudra had chosen the hour anyway. He stood in the doorway of the chemist's, closed since nine, his shoulders loose, a man waiting for a friend or a rickshaw, and when Sita came level with him he did not look at her. He looked past her at the road, the way you look at weather.

"Left at the temple," he said. "Not the main gate. The side where they keep the flower sellers' carts. The lane behind it runs to the nullah road. You'll smell it before you see it."

"Cameras."

"Two. One's been dead since the monsoon. The municipality logged it in April and nobody's come. The other points at the temple steps, not the lane." He said it the way he said everything, without weight, a man reading out a grocery list. "Walk like you've walked it a thousand times. You have."

She had not. But she understood what he meant. The body knew how to belong to a place it had never been; that was the oldest lesson, older than the gun, older than the lock. Belong,

and the eye slides off you.

She went left at the temple.

The flower sellers' carts were chained and tarped, the marigolds inside them turning to rot, and the smell of them was sweet and corrupt at once, and then it gave way to the deeper stink of the nullah, the open drain that ran black behind the lane. She walked it as he had said, neither fast nor slow, her dupatta drawn up not against the cold but against the angle of the one live camera, which she found exactly where he had told her it would be, fixed on the temple steps, its housing streaked white with pigeon lime, blind to her by a margin of perhaps four feet.

It was a good margin. It was, she thought, a generous margin. Rudra did not deal in generous margins. He dealt in the smallest gap that would serve, because a large gap was a thing somebody had built, and a built thing could be found. Four feet was sloppy. Four feet was luck.

She let the thought go. He had been doing this longer than she had been alive. If he said four feet, then four feet was what the geometry gave, and the geometry did not care what she thought of it.

At the end of the lane a motorcycle stood against the wall, an old Splendor with a cracked tail-light, the kind of machine that existed in its tens of thousands in this city and was therefore invisible. The key was under the seat. He had told her that too. She did not start it. She wheeled it the last forty metres to the nullah road, mounted, and only then turned the engine over, so that the sound of it starting belonged to the road and not to the lane, to the flow and not to the source.

This was tradecraft. This was the thing she knew in her hands the way other people knew prayer. And yet underneath

it, all the way down, sat a small cold stone of wrongness that she could not name and would not look at, because looking at it would stop her, and she had decided not to stop.

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She rode for twenty minutes through the parts of the city that had no opinion about her. Wholesale markets shuttered for the night. A flyover with its underbelly full of sleepers. The long blank wall of a railway colony. Rudra had given her the route in fragments over weeks, never the whole of it at once, a turn here described as if in passing, a landmark there folded into some other conversation, so that she had assembled the map without ever being handed it. Now she rode it and found that every fragment fit. The petrol pump where she was to refuse the attendant and pay cash. The ANPR gantry on the ring road that she was to leave before, exiting one junction early onto a service lane that the number-plate cameras did not cover, because the contract for that stretch had lapsed and the new one was tangled in a tender dispute.

She knew about the tender dispute. Everyone in the trade knew the city's surveillance was a quilt with holes, that the holes moved as contracts lapsed and renewed, that the state's great eye blinked in a thousand small places. But she did not know how Rudra knew which junction, this week, on this night, was a hole. That was not the kind of thing the trade knew. That was the kind of thing somebody told you.

He told me, she thought. He's spent eighteen years learning what they don't watch. That is what he is. That is what he is for.

The service lane delivered her to the old industrial belt east of the river, and there, at a transformer yard behind a

defunct textile mill, she was to leave the motorcycle and wait.

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He came on foot, out of the dark between two dead buildings, and for a moment she did not recognise him, because he had changed his walk. Rudra had many walks. This one was a contractor's, heavy and entitled, a man who owned the ground he crossed. He shed it as he reached her, the way a man shrugs off a coat, and underneath it he was only himself again, tired and watchful and kind, and the sight of him undid something in her chest that she had been holding closed since the chemist's doorway.

"You're clean," he said. It was not a question. He had been behind her, she understood now, the whole way. Not following, the way a watcher follows, but paralleling, on streets she could not see, checking the checkers, making sure that no one had picked her up out of the lane. The care of it moved her. No one had ever stood behind her like that. Fateh had stood in front of her, handing her keys. Rudra stood behind.

"I'm clean," she said.

"There's a man at the goods siding with a truck going south. Cement. You'll ride in the cab. He doesn't know your name and he won't ask. He thinks you're a runaway bride. Let him think it." A pause. "It's not a kindness, the south. It's distance. You put four hundred kilometres between you and this city before the sun and you become a different problem, a problem for a different desk, and the different desk doesn't have your face yet."

"And then?"

He looked at her for a long moment. The transformer yard hummed behind him, the one sound in the world, a low

electric drone that she would remember for the rest of her life and never know why.

"And then you stop being mine," he said. "You stop being his. You stop being theirs. You become nobody's. Do you understand what I'm giving you? Not freedom. There's no freedom, not for us, we used that up before you could walk. I'm giving you the next thing. I'm giving you nobody."

She did understand. It was the most that any of them could offer another, and he was offering it to her, and the cold stone in her gut did not warm but it grew quiet, because what was wrongness against this. What was a generous camera margin against a man who had built her a road out of his own bones.

"Why," she said.

She had not meant to ask. The word came up out of the same place the stone lived.

"Why what."

"Why me. Why now. You could have walked yourself out of this a hundred times. You know every hole in the quilt. You taught me to taste food because you wanted me to have one thing that was mine before the end. You've been getting me ready to run since before I knew the unit was finished." She heard her own voice and did not like the steadiness of it; it was the steadiness she used over a target. "You knew it was finished before Fateh told me. You had the road built before there was anything to run from."

For just a moment something crossed his face that she could not read, and that was rare, because she could read everyone, it was the thing she was for. Then it was gone, smoothed over with the old tiredness, and he reached out and tucked a loose strand of her hair back under the dupatta, a

father's gesture, a gesture no one had taught either of them and that he made anyway.

"Because I owe it," he said. "Not to the unit. Not to him. To you. There's a debt, beti, and it's older than you, and I've carried it so long I stopped feeling the weight, the way you stop feeling a stone in your shoe if you walk on it for twenty years. You're how I set it down."

A debt older than her. She turned it over and found she could not make it fit anything she knew. But the men of her world all carried debts older than the people they paid them to; that was the architecture of the thing, that was how it stood up. She did not press. Pressing was for targets. This was Rudra.

"The truck leaves in forty minutes," he said. "I'll walk you to the siding."

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They went through the dead industrial belt together, and he talked, low and constant, the way he talked when he was settling her before a job, and she let the words run over her without holding all of them, because some of them she already knew and some of them she would need later and her tired mind sorted them without being asked.

The SIM she was to use, and the three she was to burn. The man in Hubli who would take her photograph for the new identity and ask nothing. The fact that her face was the cheapest thing she owned and the most expensive, that facial recognition in this country failed nine times in ten and on the tenth time it never failed at all, so she was to assume every camera was the tenth, every time, forever. The fact that the body was the trail now, not the documents; that you could buy a new Aadhaar and a new name and a new colour for

your hair, but you could not buy a new way of crossing a road, a new way of holding a cup, a new way of letting your eyes go flat when a stranger looked at you a half-second too long, and that those were the things that had killed every clever runner she had ever heard of. You did not get caught by your papers. You got caught by yourself.

"Recognition," she said. "You always come back to recognition."

"Because it's the only thing they can't strip and they can't fake," he said. "DNA, they have it or they don't, and if they don't, no amount of looking gives it to them. But the way you move, that's written on you, beti, it's written all the way through, and the only people who can read it are the people who taught you to move. So you stay away from them. You stay away from everyone who ever knew your hands." He stopped walking. They had reached the lip of the goods siding, the rails running off into the dark, a single sodium lamp making its small yellow island around a parked truck. "That includes me. After tonight, if you ever see me coming, you go the other way. You hear? If you ever see my face on a street, it means I've been turned, or taken, and I'm pointing them at you. So you run from me too. Promise me that."

She promised. She did not believe it, but she promised, because he needed it, and she had so little to give him.

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The truck driver was a thin man with paan-stained teeth who looked at her once and then resolutely did not look again, exactly as Rudra had said, and the cab smelled of diesel and incense and a marigold garland on the mirror, real ones, not the rotting kind in the lane, and she climbed in and pulled the door and the world narrowed to the windscreen

and the long road south.

Rudra stood in the yellow island of the lamp. He did not wave. Waving was a thing watchers remembered. He simply stood, his hands at his sides, and watched the truck make its turn, and she watched him in the wing mirror until the geometry took him, until the mirror held only the dark and the one lamp and then not even that.

It was somewhere past the second toll, with the city finally gone and the open country running black on either side, that the stone in her gut spoke up again, and this time she was too tired to keep her eyes off it.

She had asked him why the road was built before there was anything to run from, and he had answered with a debt. But that was not the wrongness. The wrongness was smaller and harder, and it had been sitting in her since the chemist's doorway, and now in the dark of the cab she let herself turn it over.

The camera at the temple. The dead one, logged in April, never repaired. He had known the live one's angle to four feet. He had known the ANPR contract on the ring road had lapsed, this week, this junction. He had known the patrol rotation in the colony, the chemist's closing hour, the maintenance schedule of a municipal pole. These were not the holes a man finds by watching for eighteen years. A man who watches finds where the eye is now. He does not find where the eye will not be on a Tuesday three weeks hence, because the eye moves, the contracts lapse and renew, the quilt shifts. To know the holes in advance, to lay a road through them weeks before the road was needed, you did not have to watch the quilt.

You had to be the one shifting it.

She held the thought the way she would hold a blade she had found in her own bedding, carefully, by the flat, looking at it. And then, because she was eighteen and very tired and had been awake for two days and had just been given the only act of love anyone had ever shown her, she put it down. Rudra was old and careful and had spent his life inside the machine; of course he knew its rhythms better than its makers did. That was not a hand on the quilt. That was a man who had read the same page so many times he could recite tomorrow's.

She told herself this. The truck carried her south into the dark, four hundred kilometres of it, toward becoming nobody, exactly as far and exactly in the direction he had measured, and she let herself believe she had chosen it.

Behind her, in a transformer yard that hummed all night to no one, Rudra took out a phone she had never seen him carry, a phone that was not on any list she had ever been shown, and he typed four words and sent them and broke the phone into its parts and dropped the parts, one by one, into the black water of the nullah as he walked back toward the lane she had come down.

She is on the road.

He did not write to whom.

Chapter 25

New Delhi · +39 days

The generator had been dead since dusk. Fateh worked by a single bulb run off the truck battery, because a house that drew current at three in the morning was a house announcing it had something worth staying awake for, and Lanka had survived eleven years by announcing nothing at all.

The notebook in front of him was a child's exercise book, forty pages, sewn and not glued, bought from a stall near Crawford Market where they did not ask for a number and did not keep a camera over the till. He trusted paper. Paper could be burned but not reached down a wire and wiped while you slept. On the left-hand pages he had built the timeline of the machine's foresight; on the right, the timeline of the thing itself. For the better part of an hour he had been moving one fact between the two columns the way a man worries a loose tooth, not because the position was in doubt but because of what it meant once it was fixed there for good.

TRINETRA had flagged the Andheri cell on a Tuesday. The booking of the second safe flat, the one the bombers never entered and never needed, had been made on the Monday, paid through a wallet that touched a node in Mauritius and went dark inside the hour. The machine had seen the flat. It had been shown the flat. A platform that could not, in the plain physical truth of the world, see tomorrow had been handed yesterday and instructed to call it tomorrow, and the men in the committee room had wept with gratitude and signed.

Run backward, the trail of prophecy was a confession. Whoever planted the proof of foresight had left, in the planting, the print of foreknowledge. You could not manufacture the one without committing the other. He had said this to no one, because there was no one left to say it to. Kaul would hear a finished man defending his own illegal unit. Sehgal routed the tasking, and in the last fortnight Fateh had begun to feel the routing the way you feel a palm at your back in a crowd, light, and exactly where it wants you to go.

And the hand was hers. He had stopped being able to pretend otherwise around the twentieth day. The method had a grain in it, a way of feeding a faction targets that served no faction, of running a man through a cut-out so clean the man believed the money came from Riyadh or Rawalpindi and never once thought to ask why the money knew so much. He had been taught that grain in a flat in another country, when they were both young enough to think the work was righteous. The dead leave no tradecraft. Only the living leave a signature, and her signature lay over all of it, and he had helped to bury her eighteen years ago and stood at the lip of the hole.

He had named the girl for the woman in that grave. He had believed, at the time, that he was honouring something. He understood now that he had taught his daughter every habit of the woman who consigned her, and called the teaching love, and that this was the longest of the things he had got wrong.

A sound came up from the lower yard that did not belong to the night, and he was on his feet with the bulb killed before he had finished deciding it was a sound at all. Old instinct, faster than judgement, which was the reason he was alive

when better men were not.

Then the second sound, and he knew it, and the knowing set a stone in his chest. The gate. Someone with a key, or someone who had been given one.

He went down the inner stair in the dark, the notebook flat inside his shirt against his spine, and found Rudra already in the kitchen passage with a torch held low and a pistol he had not raised but was carrying the way you carry a thing you mean to use.

"One vehicle," Rudra said. "Lights off. It came up the dry nala, not the road."

"How many."

"I make four. Could be six."

Fateh ran the arithmetic of his own house without sentiment. Three of his people asleep in the annexe. The girl gone four nights, run out along a route he had not built and had not blessed, which meant a route someone had built for her. The dry nala was a professional's line of approach. The state did not come up a dry nala. The state came with a warrant and a column and Kaul's name on the paper, loud, because the state wanted you to know that it was the state.

"Wake the others," Fateh said. "No light. Tell them it is not the service."

Rudra did not move at once. In the spill of the torch his face held a stillness Fateh had seen on him a hundred nights and read, every time, as steadiness. "And if it is her," Rudra said.

"Her."

"The girl. Come home."

Fateh looked at him. There was nothing in the words to catch on, a man asking after the child they had raised

between them, in the only way the night allowed. "Then we let her in," Fateh said, "and we ask her who walked her out."

Rudra went. Fateh crossed to the front room, to the slit in the shutter that gave him the yard, set his eye to it, and waited with the patience that was the last thing he owned which the years had not spent.

She came across the yard like water finding a channel. He knew the walk before he could see the face, the economy of it, no wasted height in the step, the hands loose and ready at her sides. He had built that walk into her across eighteen years, drill upon drill, the way you build anything you mean to outlast you. His throat did something he had no word for. She came to the door and did not knock, because they did not knock in this house, and he drew the bolt and let his daughter into the place he had made for her to be safe, and felt the whole night fold shut around the two of them like a hand.

"You came back," he said.

"I came for the truth." She stood just inside the door, clear of its frame, by instinct, by his teaching. In the failing dark her eyes ran over him once, throat to hands, the assessment he had drilled into her, and he was absurdly proud and absurdly afraid in the same breath. "You lied to me about the chain of command. There is no office above you. There never was. I want to hear it from your mouth."

"There is no office above me," he said. "That much is true."

"And the rest."

"Sit down, Sita." He used the name on purpose, the way you set an object on a table between two people. "There is very little time and a great deal to say. Some of it I will not be able to make you believe."

"Try."

So he tried, in the dark, with one ear on the yard. He told her she had been raised inside a programme that a clean man had sanctioned once, long ago, for a hard reason, and that it had died, and that he had carried her out of the wreck of it because there was no one else, and let it teach her things no child should be made to learn. He told her the cell she had hunted was not what it believed itself to be, that it was an instrument held in another hand, that the attack she had fled in the city had not been a failure of the state but a sale, a demonstration, a heap of the dead arranged so that a machine might look like a prophet and be bought.

"Meridian," she said. "Mira gave me the name."

"Meridian is a coat," he said. "There is a person inside the coat. I have spent twenty-seven years learning to read one hand, and I would know it on the far side of the world by the way it dresses a lie." He had not meant to give her even this much. The words came up from a place he had kept sealed since a grave in another country. "The machine flagged the bombers a full day after the second flat was paid for. A day after. You see what that is. It is not foresight. It is a man told yesterday's news and lying about the hour." He drew the notebook out from against his spine and held it across the dark. "It is all in here. The dates, the money, the one fact that cannot be explained except that the hand which built the proof was the hand that built the attack. I cannot carry it anywhere. Every road I have is watched. You are not in the system the way I am. You could carry it to someone who is."

She did not take it. "Who is the person inside the coat."

A vehicle door, in the yard, opening with the care of a man taught never to slam one. Fateh's whole skin went cold and quiet.

"Down," he said. "Now."

The first burst came through the shutter where his eye had been, a string of holes punched out of the night with the small flat cough of suppressed weapons, and the room filled with the smell of broken plaster. He had her by the collar and into the dead angle behind the masonry pillar before the second burst, and then the house was awake and answering, his three in the annexe doing the thing eleven years of drill had built into their hands, and for a moment, a long and ugly moment of muzzle flash and shouting and the particular flat crack of a round going home in a man, it was a fight and not a slaughter.

He reached the inner passage. He needed the others linked, he needed the back wall, he needed Rudra, who held the only other long weapon in the house and who knew the firing lanes of this place as surely as Fateh did. "Rudra," he called, low, into the kitchen dark. "The annexe. Get them onto the back wall. We hold the back wall and we go out through the cistern."

And Rudra answered him out of the dark, calm, in the same steadiness, and shot the boy nearest the annexe door through the back of the head.

The sound of it was no different from any other sound that night. That was the thing Fateh would carry into whatever came after, that it had been an ordinary sound. The boy folded. Rudra stepped over him into the firing lane Fateh had just named aloud and turned the long weapon on the second of his people as the man rose to hold the wall he had been ordered to hold, and the room turned with that one movement the way a tide turns, all at once and without argument, because the men who had come up the dry nala

were not assaulting a defended house. They were collecting one that had already been opened from the inside.

Fateh felt no surprise. That was the cruellest part of it, that there was no surprise left in him, only a vast and exhausted recognition, as though a door he had refused to look at for eleven years had been pushed open and behind it stood the thing he had always known was there. Rudra. The grain in the handling he had read and read and never thought to turn on his own kitchen. The corrosion he had watched eat the man for years and had called grief. The escape route built for the girl, calibrated to the metre, that Fateh had not built and had taken on faith because Rudra had stood beside it. The palm at his back in the crowd had been pouring his tea every morning, and teaching the child to eat slowly, and it had never once been the state's.

"You," Fateh said. It was not a question and Rudra did not treat it as one. For a moment the man's eyes went past Fateh to the pillar, to the girl folded behind it, and there was something in the look that was almost tenderness, the look of a man who believes he is keeping a promise. He had not come to kill her. He had come to take her out of a house, and the house was simply in the way.

Fateh raised his pistol. Rudra was faster, or Fateh was old, or the dark favoured the man who had chosen the ground. Two rounds took him low and hard, one through the side and one that broke something high in the chest, and the floor came up and met him with the indifference of all floors. The firing went on above him for a while, and then it thinned, and then it stopped, and the silence that followed was worse than any of the noise.

He could hear his own breath, which had gone wet and small. He could hear, very near, a different breathing, fast and held and fought down, the breathing of someone making herself be still. She was behind the pillar yet. She had not fired. She was watching and counting, because that was what he had built her to do, and he understood with the last clear part of his mind that this was the lesson he had never wanted her to be given.

He turned his head. He could see her in the muzzle-light that came and went from the yard. She was looking at Rudra. He watched her look at him, and he watched the look change, watched eighteen years of a man's careful kindness come apart in her face in the length of one breath, as she understood at last what the kindness had been for. The sanctuary. The open door. The route out, walked to the metre, that had carried her into the dark and brought the dark home behind her. Her coming back had been the signal. She was the light they had steered by. They had never needed to find Lanka. They had only needed to wait for the girl to come to it, because someone who knew her better than she knew herself had known that, in the end, she would.

"Sita." Her name cost him most of what he had left. "Take it."

He had kept the notebook through the fall, the animal part of him refusing to let it go while the rest of him let go of everything else. He pushed it across the floor toward her, the few feet of gritty concrete between them, and it left a dark smear behind it, and under the marbled paper inside the back cover was the card, and the card was the way in, and the way in was no use without the rest, and the rest he had no breath to give her. He had counted on having time. A man always

counts on having time.

She had crossed to him. The notebook was in her hand. Her other hand was at his chest, pressing, the way he had taught her to press a wound she could not close, and her face above him was the child's face and the killer's face and a third face he had spent his life unable to name, all of them at once.

"Who," she said. "You said one person. Who."

The name was behind his teeth. It had been there for twenty days, the truest and the worst of all the facts in the book, and he found that even now, even with the floor going cold against his cheek, the old buried tenderness in him flinched from being the one to set it in her hand. To say it was to give her the grave he had named her for. To say it was to put the architect and the lullaby in the same mouth. He had wanted, God help him, to spare her the arithmetic for one hour more, and the hour was the one thing he no longer had to give.

"The book," he managed. "It is all in the book. The card. The way in. Sundaram, the first one, he had it. He had found." The sentence would not finish. There was a clause that mattered more than his life, and the breath for it was simply not there, and what came out instead was air. He pushed the notebook the last inch into her grip and closed his hand over hers around it, hard, the way you press a thing into a child's fist when you need her to understand that it is hers now and that you will not be taking it back.

Above him, very far away, his daughter raised her head from his face and looked across the room at the man who had taught her to eat slowly. She did not weep. She did not speak. He watched the stillness come down over her like a sheet of glass, the assessment beginning behind her eyes, and he

knew, with the last working part of him, that she had already stopped looking at the dying and started counting the doors.

He had built that. It was the only thing of his that would walk out of the house. He let the floor take him, glad in the final illiterate animal way that her hand was the hand it was left in, and that the hand was already closing.

Chapter 26

New Delhi · +40 days

The room had no name on it and that was the point. She had paid the landlady three months forward in cash, an old woman with a milky eye who counted the notes twice and asked nothing, because a woman who took cash for a room above a shuttered tailor's shop in a town like this had learned long ago that questions were a luxury that cost custom. There was a charpoy, a steel almirah, a tap that ran brown for the first minute. A window onto a lane too narrow for a car. Sita had taken the room for the lane.

Forty days. She kept the count without meaning to, the way she kept her pulse, a thing the body did beneath the thinking. Forty days since Lanka. Forty days since the notebook had come into her hands warm and gone cold there.

She had done the disappearing properly, because vanishing was the one craft nobody had needed to teach her twice. The phone she carried out of the city she had not switched off; she had pulled the battery in a moving train and dropped the handset from the vestibule between Itarsi and somewhere with no platform, into scrub, at speed, where no one would walk. The SIM she had cut into four and posted across four states over four days, addressed to streets that did not exist, because a cut SIM in a dustbin was a cut SIM found, and a cut SIM in the dead-letter churn of the postal system was nothing at all. She had not touched a card since. Cards were a confession written in advance. UPI was worse; every rupee that moved through that bright little app left a

footprint stamped with a time and a tower, and the towers remembered, and the men who read the towers were patient. So she lived in cash, in the grey economy of vegetable carts and tea stalls and a landlady who asked nothing, in the one part of the country the grid had not yet finished eating.

The hard problem was the face. You could starve the phone and burn the cards and still the cameras took you alone, at junctions, at the doors of the better shops, on the concourses of the stations she now refused to enter. She knew the failure modes of the systems the way a poacher knows the keeper's hours: that the recognition was bad in the rain and worse in a crowd and useless on a face turned three-quarters down and shadowed under a dupatta; that it threw up a hundred false matches for every true one; that the men reading the screens grew tired and stopped trusting it by the third hour of a shift. So she walked with her chin low and her stride wrong, shorter than her body wanted, and she changed the parting of her hair, and she never twice took the same turning out of the lane. It was not invisibility. There was no invisibility, not in this country with its hunger for the citizen's number. It was friction. You could not vanish. You could only make yourself expensive to find, and trust that the men hunting had a budget.

That was the part she could do. The part she could not do sat on the steel trunk by the window, wrapped in the same oilcloth Fateh had wrapped it in, and she had not untied the string.

She made tea on the single ring and did not drink it. She sat on the charpoy with her back to the wall and looked at the oilcloth, and the oilcloth looked back.

Fateh's hand. She had carried it out of Lanka under her shirt against her ribs while the place burned the wrong way, burned from inside, and she had felt his blood go tacky on the cover before she understood it was his. He had pressed it on her with the last of the grip in him and said the thing about the card, said it twice, made her say it back, his eyes holding hers with a ferocity that was almost the old training, almost an order, and then not an order at all, because the thing in his face at the end was not command. It was apology. She had no shelf to put that on. In eighteen years he had never once apologised to her, because you did not apologise to an instrument, and she had understood at last, watching the light go out of him, that he had known exactly what she was and had made her anyway and had been sorry the whole time and had done it regardless, all of it at once. She had not known a man could hold both and keep walking. She was learning that they all could. That perhaps it was the only way any of them walked at all.

Open it, she told herself, and did not move.

She knew what untying the string would do. She had watched herself flinch from it for forty days and she had begun, lately, to be interested in the flinch, the way you became interested in a sound the house made at the same hour each night. She was not a woman who flinched. They had built that out of her early, at expense, with method; she had a body that did the necessary thing and a mind that watched it do so from a small clean distance. And yet here was the flinch, reliable as the tea going cold, every time her hand started for the string.

She made herself say why, because saying why was the new thing, and she was learning it the way a grown hand

learns to write with the wrong fingers: slowly, ashamed of the letters, alone.

Because Fateh's reconstruction would tell her who. The notebook was his working, his hunt, the long patient ugliness of it set down in his cramped private shorthand, and at the end of it, she did not doubt, there would be a name, or the shape of one, the thing he had chased through Salim Reza's tempo and the targets that served no faction's sense. He had found it. She had seen it in him those last weeks, the look of a man who has finally read the handwriting of his own catastrophe. He had put it in here and pressed it on her and died, and all she had to do was untie a piece of string.

And she would not, because she did not trust the answer.

That was the new vertigo, and she sat in it now on purpose, the way they had once made her sit in cold water until the body stopped fighting it: to learn the thing, to stop fearing it and start using the clarity it brought. She did not trust the answer because she no longer trusted the route by which any answer reached her. For eighteen years a man had set a room key on the table and slid it across to her, and she had taken it and gone where it sent her and killed who the room held, and she had called that her life. Every certainty inside it had come the same way, handed over the same clean table, signed for, expected back unbloodied. Her loyalties. Her enemies. The very grief she carried, polished daily, for a mother murdered before she could remember her, the mother she was named for. Even that. She had been told the grief and she had felt the grief and she had never once asked who told her, because the asking had not been a thing she contained.

She contained it now. That was what forty days alone in a room with brown water had done. It had given her the asking and taken away every place to point it.

Mira. She let the name surface and watched what the watching did, and what it did was the worst of all, because the name still came with warmth attached, an actual heat under the sternum, the only such heat she owned. Mira who had told her the truth at the dargah, who had sat in the noise of the qawwali and said the unsayable thing, that Fateh had made her, that her origin was a fiction, that she was a weapon dressed as a daughter. It had broken something open in Sita and the breaking had felt like air. She had believed it because it hurt in the right place and because the woman saying it had laid her own wound on the table beside it, a lost child, a loneliness Sita had recognised in her own gut.

She turned it over now, slowly, in the still clear space the room had made.

The wound on the table. The truth that hurt in the right place. The meeting in the noise where no one could be overheard. She had been the one assigned to assess Mira as a threat. She had walked into that assessment and walked out turned, and she had thought, leaving, that she had done it of her own broken will, and that was the thought she could no longer afford to keep. Because if a service could route her to a room for eighteen years, a service could route her a defector too. A truth, even. Especially a truth. A lie they could catch you in; a true thing arriving at the precise hour you were ready to be broken open by it, that was the better instrument, and she had been around the trade long enough now, awake long enough now, to see that the better instrument was the one a careful service would always reach for.

She did not believe Mira had lied. That was the cruelty of it. The thing Mira told her was almost certainly true. It was the timing she no longer trusted, the door standing open at the exact hour she was ready to walk through it. Mira might be just what she seemed, a tired honest woman with a hole in her, and have been used without ever knowing she was used, walked into Sita's path by a hand neither of them could see. There was no telling the two apart from inside the warmth. The warmth was the same either way. That was the point of the warmth.

So: not Mira. Not yet. Not a door she could walk back through. Nor the institution behind Mira, the service, Kaul, the whole grave apparatus that had decided Fateh was the liability and moved with such correctness to remove him, and in removing him had swept the board clean of the one man who saw the real shape of things. She did not know the half of that. She knew only that the state had come for Fateh as if he were the disease, and Fateh, whatever he was, however many times he had lied to her, had at the end been the one running toward the fire while everyone with a sanction ran the other way. Whatever was true, it was not the simple true thing the institution believed. She could not go to them. They would process her. They would put her in a room and read her and file her, and somewhere in the filing the same patient timing would reach in and arrange her, and she would never feel the hand.

She got up off the charpoy because the thinking had a momentum now and the body wanted to walk it. Four steps to the window, four back; the room gave no more. In the lane below a man was wheeling a cycle with a punctured tyre, the rim ringing on the stone. She watched him without seeing

him, the way she had been taught to watch a street, registering the wrongness of nothing, and she let the cold logic finish itself, because half-finished it would only sit in her chest and rot.

Everyone who had ever told her who she was had reason to lie. Fateh, who made her. Rudra, who. She stopped on Rudra and made herself stand in it, because that was the one she had not yet been able to stand in for longer than a breath.

Rudra had taught her to taste food. He had sat with her over a slow meal and made her put down the fork between mouthfuls and find the cardamom under the cream, had laughed at her, gently, the only gentleness in the whole architecture of her life that had asked nothing back. He had built her a way out years before she needed it, the route she had run on, the route that had worked so well, every leg of it ready, every door unlocked before she reached it. She had run it grateful. She had run it thinking, here at last is a thing that is mine, a freedom I am taking with my own hands. And the route had been perfect. That was what she could not get past. It had been too perfect. A way out that good was not a way out. A way out that good was a track laid for a train, and she had been the train, and she had felt the wind in the open door and called it the wind of her own choosing. At Lanka she had watched Rudra turn his weapon on Fateh's men, watched the man who taught her cardamom become the thing inside the gate, and she had understood, far too late, standing in the muzzle-flash, that the gentleness had been issued to her like everything else. A kindness signed out from stores. Expected back clean.

She put her forehead against the cool of the wall beside the window and breathed, once, the way they had taught her

to breathe before a shot, to take the tremor out of the hands. It did not take the tremor out. There was no shot to steady for. The tremor was just hers now, a private weather, and she let it pass through and counted it and did not despise it, because despising it was another order she had decided to stop obeying.

So that was the floor of it. There was no one. Not the warm one, not the dead one, not the institution, not the memory of the gentle one. Every voice that had ever named her had its hand on the scale. Which left only the woman in the room, who had been issued everything and now owned nothing she had not verified, and who had verified, so far, exactly nothing, because verifying was the muscle they had been most careful never to give her.

She would have to grow it now, late, with no one watching the letters take their crooked shape.

She looked at the oilcloth again. She understood, sitting back down on the edge of the charpoy and drawing the bundle onto her knees, that her refusal to open it had not been weakness and had not, entirely, been fear. It had been the one piece of tradecraft her training had never supplied and her solitude had. She had refused the answer because the answer came through Fateh, and Fateh had reason to lie, and a name pressed on her by a dying man she could not cross-check was only one more thing slid across the table for her to take on faith. And she had decided, in this room, that she would take nothing more on faith. She would not be aimed. Not by the living, not by the dead, not by love, not by grief. If there was a name in here she would not believe it because it was written; she would believe it, if she ever believed it, because she had walked the ground herself and

found it true under her own feet. That was the whole of her new religion and it had one commandment and the commandment was: check.

But she could open the cover. Opening the cover was not believing. It was only looking at the door.

She untied the string. Her fingers were steady now, the body remembering its competence even while the mind stood at the desk a beginner. The oilcloth fell back. The notebook was a cheap thing, ruled, the kind sold in any stationer's by the dozen, swollen where the blood had dried into the lower corner and stiffened the pages into a single dark wedge. She did not open it to the writing. She turned it in her hands and ran her thumb down the spine the way he had shown her with his eyes on hers, and there, under the glued cloth of the binding where a careless hand would never reach and a careful one would never think to, she felt it: a small hard rectangle, the size of a thumbnail, that belonged to no notebook. The card. He had named it twice and made her say it back, and the saying back had been the last thing she ever did at his order, and she had thought it was the order that mattered. It was not. The card was the thing. The notebook, the name, the reconstruction, all of it was what Fateh believed. The card was what Fateh could prove.

She did not pry it out. She held the notebook closed in both hands with the small hard truth of it under her thumb, and she sat very still in the failing light, and for the first time since the room above the tailor's had taken her in she was not hiding. She was deciding. Not what to believe. Where to put her feet.

Below in the lane the cycle bell had stopped. The man with the punctured tyre had gone wherever such men go. She

listened to the absence of him until she was certain it was only absence, then reached up and switched off the single bulb and sat on in the dark with the closed book on her knees, beginning, for the first time in her life, to think.

Chapter 27

New Delhi · +41 days

The Wi-Fi card had been physically removed from the laptop with a jeweller's screwdriver three nights ago, and Mira had kept the little screw in a film canister since, the way you keep a tooth. A machine with no way to talk to anyone could not be persuaded to lie about what it held. That was the only kind of witness she trusted now.

The flat belonged to a cousin who taught chemistry in Pune and came to Delhi twice a year. It smelled of naphthalene and old newspaper. She had drawn the curtains against the sodium glare of the colony lane, set the laptop on the dining table on a folded towel so the fan would not whine, and laid out beside it three printed pages and a telephone bill she was using as scratch paper. Forty-one days since the unit had been ordered shut. Eleven since the bomb. Four since the committee had voted the procurement through on the strength of a single, beautiful fact: that the machine had seen the men coming when the state had not.

She had sat in that room when they showed it. She had watched the Additional Secretary, Sehgal, let grief do the arguing for him, his voice low and decent, never once raising the temperature, and she had felt the decision close over the room like water over a dropped stone. Meridian's people had brought a sealed evidentiary annex, and because due diligence was her cover and her habit, she had asked the technical liaison, a tired NIA forensics man named Dalvi who owed her nothing but a cigarette in a stairwell two years ago,

for a forensic export of the demonstration object. Metadata only. Chain of custody. Nobody refuses chain of custody; it is the most boring word in the language and it had let her carry the thing out under everyone's nose.

The demonstration had a name. TRINETRA's people called it PROPHET in the deck, with the kind of unembarrassed self-regard that came of never having buried anyone. PROPHET was an entity escalation: a risk score, attached to a node the system had resolved to one of Salim Reza's cut-outs, crossing the action threshold at 02:14 on the ninth of November. The attack was the thirteenth. Four days. The whole sale, the whole shift of the constitutional argument, the whole appetite of a frightened country, balanced on those four days.

She did not doubt the four days. She doubted the architecture under them.

A prediction is not a fact. It is a sum. You feed the machine signals, it correlates them, and out the far end comes a number that means worry. The annex was proud of its signals. It listed three, fused, as the basis of the escalation: an IMSI activation on a clean SIM, a UPI transfer of forty-one thousand rupees routed through a mule account, and a geofence cluster, four handsets surfacing inside two hundred metres of the target over six hours. Three threads. Pull them together and you got a man worth killing on the ninth.

Mira pulled them apart.

She had the telco's CDR for the SIM, because the NIA had subpoenaed it after the fact and Dalvi's export carried the raw record in an annexe nobody had bothered to strip. The SIM, the one PROPHET named as the spine of its inference, had gone live on a tower in Kurla at 19:42 on the eleventh of

November. She read it twice. She read the field labels, in case the telco logged activation in some local convention, some offset she did not know. The record was in UTC, with the offset stamped beside it in the same row, the dull honest plus-five-thirty. The eleventh. Not the ninth.

She wrote it on the telephone bill. SIM: 11 Nov. PROPHET: 9 Nov.

The machine had used, to make a prediction on the ninth, a fact that did not enter the world until the eleventh.

She sat back. The fan turned. Somewhere below, a scooter coughed and failed and coughed and caught. Her first instinct was the instinct of a competent person, which is to assume she was the one who had made the error. There were a dozen innocent ways for two timestamps to drift apart. Display time versus storage time. A clock on the ingestion server running fast, never disciplined to a time source. An escalation that had been opened on the ninth as a low score and only updated to threshold later, the dashboard showing you the birth date of the record and dressing it in the latest number. Predictive platforms did that. They lived, the salesmen liked to say, in a state of continuous revision. The score you saw was the score now; the timestamp you saw was the score then; and a careless reader conflated the two.

She was not a careless reader. That was the one thing eighteen years had left her in place of a marriage.

So she did the other two threads, because one anomaly is a mistake and two is a pattern and three is a hand.

The UPI transfer. The annex dated the fused signal to the eighth, a day before escalation, which was at least the right side of the arithmetic. But the National Payments Corporation reference number was in the record, the full

string, and the NPCI stamps its own transactions, and that stamp was not the demonstration's to edit. She did not have a back channel into NPCI at midnight in a chemistry teacher's flat. She had the reference string, and the reference string encodes its own date. She decoded it by hand on the telephone bill, the way you do when you cannot trust a tool you did not build. The transaction had cleared on the tenth.

The geofence cluster, the four handsets near the target, was the worst of them. The annex put it on the ninth, the very engine of the escalation, the thing that made a watchlist entry into an alarm. The underlying location records were tower-derived, and the towers logged honestly because no salesman owned them. The cluster had not formed until the afternoon of the twelfth. One day before the bomb. Three days after the machine claimed to have seen it.

She lined the four numbers up on the bill, in her small upright hand, and looked at them for a long time.

PROPHET: 9 Nov. SIM: 11 Nov. UPI: 10 Nov. Cluster: 12 Nov.

The prophecy was older than everything it claimed to have read. The machine had not inferred the attack from the signals. The signals had arrived, obediently, after the verdict was already written, like witnesses turning up to a trial after the sentence had been carried out, to swear to a crime the court had decided in advance.

There was still a clean explanation, and she made herself walk to it because the dirty one was so large she did not yet trust her own wish to believe it. The clean explanation was the continuous-revision story again, scaled up. PROPHET was a living record. It had been opened on the ninth as a thin thing, a node and a low score, and then over the following

days the system had hung these signals on it as they came, and the dashboard, in its vanity, showed the opening date and the final dressing as if they were one moment. A sloppy demonstration, not a fraudulent one. Marketing, not murder.

She could kill that explanation. She only needed the bones under the dashboard.

The object store kept a ledger the dashboard could not touch. Every write to the record was a versioned event with its own digest, a hash of the bytes, chained so that no version could be inserted behind another without breaking the chain, the same dull cryptography that let a bank prove you had not edited your own statement. Dalvi's export, God bless his thoroughness and his grudge against people who made him feel stupid, had pulled the version history along with the chain of custody, because that was the part that made it evidence. She had skated past it the first night, taking it for noise. Now she opened it and read from the bottom, from the genesis write, the first time the record PROPHET had ever existed as bytes on a disk.

The genesis hash was timestamped, and the timestamp was disciplined to a hardware time source, because an immutable ledger that lies about when it was written is not immutable, and Meridian's engineers, whatever else they were, were not amateurs. They had built the strongroom honestly. They had only put a forged painting inside it.

PROPHET had first been written at 23:51 on the seventh of November.

The seventh. Two days before its own published birthday of the ninth, which had itself been a lie of convenience. Six days before the bomb. Five days before the cluster that was supposed to have raised the alarm. The record had come into

the world fully formed, the node named, the verdict set, on a night when not one of the three signals it cited as its reason yet existed anywhere on earth except inside the head of whoever typed it.

She put her hand flat on the table.

A machine cannot predict the contents of a database that has not been written. There is no model, no foresight, no clever fusion of exhaust that lets a system reason from data three days in its own future. The thing was not a prediction that had got lucky. It was a document, authored in advance, by someone who already knew the SIM that would be activated, the account that would move money, the corner where four phones would gather, the day a bomb would go off, because that someone had arranged all of it. You do not predict a thing you are building. You schedule it. And then, afterward, you point at the schedule and call it prophecy and ask a grieving nation to buy the prophet.

The proof of foresight was the proof of foreknowledge. The evidence that sold the machine was the confession that whoever ran the machine had ordered the dead.

She thought, without wanting to, of the file she had read weeks ago, the classified one, the dead operative's tradecraft she had recognised in Sehgal's handling and in Meridian's structure, the hand that flowed up through Almeida and lost itself above Mauritius into a principal with no name. She had smelled this hand for months and had owned proof of nothing, only a discipline of method she could not point at without sounding like a woman who had stayed too long in the dark. Now she had a number on a telephone bill that said a massacre had been written down before it happened. She still did not have the name. She had the seventh of

November. Sometimes that was the longer reach.

She did not sleep. At eight she put the laptop in a cloth bag with a kilo of onions on top of it, took two buses and a cycle-rickshaw she paid in cash, and came to Kaul's office the back way, through the annexe where the air handling was loud enough to drown a quiet conversation.

Kaul heard her out without interrupting, which was how she knew he understood. A man who does not follow you asks questions in the middle. A man who is ahead of you goes still. He stood at the window with his back to her while she laid it down in order, the four signals, the impossible arithmetic, the genesis write on the seventh. He let her finish. He let the silence run past the point of comfort, the way he did in interrogations, except that she was the one in the chair.

"Who has touched this," he said at last. Not a question about the crime. A question about the contagion.

"Dalvi pulled the export. He doesn't know what's in it; he thinks I'm checking provenance for the audit. The numbers are mine. The laptop has no radio in it. Nobody, sir."

"Keep it that way." He turned. He looked older than he had four days ago, which she had thought was not possible. "You understand what you are holding."

"I'm holding the only fact that matters. The machine didn't see the attack. The men who own the machine staged it. We bought a surveillance state, we changed the argument the courts are having about Aadhaar and lawful intercept and every phone in this country, on the strength of a document somebody wrote before the bomb went off."

"I understand the forensics," Kaul said. "I asked whether you understand what you are holding." He came back to the desk and sat, and she saw him choose his next sentence the

way a man chooses where to put his weight on bad ice. "Four days ago the procurement carried. The Cabinet Committee. The Prime Minister's office leaned across the table to make sure of it. There are condolence cheques signed. There is a memorial fund with a minister's name on the masthead. The whole apparatus of the country has decided that this machine is the answer to its grief." He folded his hands. "Now you bring me the seventh of November. And what you are asking me to carry to those same people is not that the machine is imperfect. It is that the company we have just handed the keys of the republic to murdered our citizens in order to win the contract, and that they did it past every system I run, and that I, four days ago, recommended we buy it. You are asking the state to indict itself for being the mark."

"I'm asking you to stop it before they're inside the wire."

"They are inside the wire," Kaul said quietly. "That happened on Tuesday."

She had known it walking up the stairs and had refused to know it, and hearing him say it out loud was like having a tooth confirmed by a second dentist. She kept her voice level. "Then we open it. NIA. A real forensic team on that object store, with a warrant, before they have a chance to roll the ledger."

"On what predicate." He said it gently, which was worse than if he had snapped. "Brought by whom. Signed by whom. I shut a rogue unit six weeks ago because I was advised, correctly, that the state could not answer for an unaccountable hand operating off the books. That advice has my signature under it. The man I shut down" he stopped, and she watched something move behind his face that she did not have a name for, and that she filed away "was, it now appears,

the only officer in this service who was actually hunting these people. If I reopen this, I am not exposing Meridian. The first body the inquiry finds is mine. The second is yours. We are the two people who can be shown to have known and to have built nothing on it but a private file in a borrowed flat. Meridian will say a disgruntled officer fabricated metadata to discredit a procurement she opposed, and they will have the grieving families and a minister and the whole architecture of the country's relief standing behind them, and they will be believed, because the alternative is too large for anyone in that building to hold in their hands and keep standing."

"So it walks."

"So I cannot move it through the door you are pointing at," Kaul said. "There is a difference. I would like you to believe there is a difference." But he did not promise her another door. He looked at the cloth bag with the onions on top of her witness, and for a moment he was simply a tired man who had given his life to an institution that had just demonstrated, with great courtesy, that it would defend itself before it defended the truth, because to the institution it could not tell the two apart.

She understood then. It arrived not as despair but as a narrowing, the way a corridor narrows and you stop looking at the walls and start looking at the door. The system would not arrest them. The system could not arrest them without arresting itself, and an organism does not do that; it has antibodies against exactly that. Every lawful channel ran uphill into the same closed room, and the room had decided. Sehgal's quiet decency was in that room. The minister's masthead was in that room. Her own loyalty had been in that room for eighteen years, and it had just been shown the exit.

There was one weapon left that did not require the room's permission. Not arrest. Arrest needed a predicate, a signature, a willing state. Exposure needed only a true thing and a way to let go of it. The seventh of November did not have to be admitted into evidence. It had to be made impossible to un-know, dropped into the open square where the country was already arguing about its own phones, where the privacy litigants and the journalists who had carried the Pegasus files and the people who had never wanted their lives fused into one searchable grid were waiting for exactly this and did not know it. You could not indict Meridian. You could make it so that no one would ever again be able to call the machine a prophet without someone, somewhere, saying the seventh.

It would cost her everything she had not already lost. They would say she fabricated it. They would empty her life onto a table and read it aloud. She would never again be a woman the service trusted in a quiet room.

"Sir," she said, standing, lifting the bag, settling the onions over the laptop with a care that was almost tender. "Thank you for your time."

Kaul looked at her, and he was not a stupid man, and she watched him decide not to ask her what she meant to do, because not asking was the last protection he could offer her and the last he could offer himself.

"Mira," he said, as she reached the door. Just her name. A warning, or a blessing, or the sound of a man letting go of a rope he could no longer hold.

She did not turn around. She went down the loud stairwell and out into the white morning, the bag heavy and innocent against her hip, and began, for the first time in her career, to

think about how a thing got out instead of how it stayed in.

Chapter 28

New Delhi · +43 days

The room smelled of someone else's cigarettes and the damp that came up through the floor of every cheap place south of the river. Sita had taken it for cash, a week paid forward, a name that matched nothing on any card she carried. The window gave onto a light well and a tangle of cable. She had wedged a chair under the door not because the chair would hold but because the scrape of it across the tile would wake her, and she had learned long ago to trust the small alarms over the large ones.

The notebook lay open under the lamp.

It was a cheap thing, the kind sold in stationers' by the gross, ruled faint, the cover gone soft at the corners from a pocket. Fateh had filled it the way he filled everything, in a hand so small and so disciplined that to a stranger it would read as a column of figures, an accountant's grudge against the world. She had watched that hand for eighteen years. She could read it the way she read weather.

She read it now slowly, because he had taught her that speed was where mistakes lived, and because reading it slowly was the only funeral she was going to be able to give him.

He did not write in sentences. He wrote in tempo. A date, a place reduced to two letters, an arrow, a word that meant a method and not a man. *Reza*, and then the marks she knew were his shorthand for the rhythm of an operation: how long between the order and the act, how the money moved,

whether the cut-out who carried it understood what he carried. She had seen these marks against her own jobs in the old debriefs and had hated the cold of them, the way they turned a night and a body into a line of notation. She understood the cold now. The cold was what let you keep looking.

What Fateh had been looking at, across twenty-seven days she could count in the dates, was a hand.

Not Salim Reza's. Reza was in the notebook the way a knife was in a wound, the instrument and not the intent. Above Reza there was a handler, and Fateh had drawn him small, a man taking money he believed came from a Gulf service, running a faction the way a faction wanted to be run, blind in the particular way that men are blind when the blindness is paid for. And above the handler there was nothing on the page. There was only a quality.

Fateh had a word for it. He had written it three times in twenty-seven days and underlined it once, and the underline was the loudest thing in the book.

Her.

Not a name. Just the pronoun, the way you would refer to someone in a room you were afraid might be listening. *Her tempo. Her cut-outs, three deep, the last one always a believer. Her habit of feeding a target that serves no one, so that no analyst can draw the line back, because the line back is to a person and not a cause.* Sita read it and felt the lamp too hot on the side of her face and did not move away from it.

She knew this woman.

That was the thing the notebook did to her, sitting there at two in the morning with the chair scraped under the door. She did not know her name, and Fateh in his discipline had

refused her the name, had carried it out of the world in his chest. But she knew the woman the way you know a teacher's hand in a student's work, the way she had once been able to tell, blindfold, which of the two instructors had laid the wire of a particular trap because one of them tied off left-handed and the other did not. The tradecraft in Fateh's reconstruction was not foreign to her. It was her own. It was the grammar she had been raised inside, the rules beneath the rules, the school that had built her finger by finger before she was old enough to refuse it.

Whoever had taught Salim Reza's handler had taught the people who taught her.

She sat with that for a long time. It frightened her more than the chair, more than the cable in the light well, more than the silence where Fateh's voice used to be. Because it meant the woman in the notebook was not an enemy she had stumbled into. The woman in the notebook was upstream of her own making. The cold that let Sita keep looking had been poured into her by the same vessel that was pouring it, now, into a city full of people who did not know they were already dead.

She got up, drank water from the tap with her hand because she would not drink from the glass the room provided, and came back to the book.

The middle of it was the part Fateh had not wanted to write. She could tell because the hand changed. The discipline cracked, just at the edges, the letters leaning where his certainty leaned. He had understood something across these pages, and the understanding had cost him, and he had written through the cost because that was the only kind of man he had ever managed to be.

He had understood the machine.

She did not have the language Mira had. She had never sat in the committee rooms, never read the procurement file, never watched the men in good suits argue about Aadhaar and NATGRID and the right of the state to know where every citizen slept. But Fateh had drawn it for her the way you draw a circuit for a child, in the plainest figures he had, because he must have known when he wrote it that the only reader he could count on was her.

The machine was sold on foresight. That was the word. *Foresight*. It had a name she had heard now in the mouths of frightened men, TRINETRA, the third eye, and the men who were buying it believed it could see a thing coming the way the old systems could not. After the bombing they had pointed to the machine and said, look, it flagged these men, it knew, our systems were blind and the machine saw, and now the state wanted the machine and the long argument about privacy was being buried under the small caskets in the news.

Fateh had drawn the flaw with a single arrow.

The machine, he wrote, did not see the attack coming. The machine was *told*. And the proof that the machine had foreseen the attack, the proof being waved in the committee rooms, the flagged names, the dated warnings, was a confession written in the machine's own hand. Because a warning that is true is also a thing that someone had to know in order to make. You cannot manufacture a record of foresight without manufacturing, at the same moment, a record of foreknowledge. The trail that sold the machine was the trail that hanged its builder. The architect had needed the proof to close the sale, and the proof was the rope.

Sita put her finger on the arrow and held it there as if it might move.

She had reached, from the wrong side of the table, the same place. She had not known the word PROPHET. She had not seen the evidence Mira had seen, the dates that lay in the wrong order and could not be made to lie straight. She had only the notebook and her own training and the cold. But the shape was the same. Mira had walked at it from the front, through the files and the committee and the audit trail. Sita had walked at it from the back, through a dead man's tempo notation and the recognition of a hand that had once arranged her own. They had met in the middle over a single fact: the foresight was false, and its falseness was a fingerprint, and the fingerprint belonged to a living woman the whole world believed was dead.

She had spent the better part of a season of her life deciding she would trust nothing she could not verify herself. She had said it to the empty room like a vow, the one religion she would keep. And here was the test of it, because everything in the notebook was Fateh's word, and Fateh had lied to her about everything that mattered for eighteen years, and a dead man's confession was not verification. It was only testimony.

So she went looking, in the notebook, for the thing she could touch.

It was near the back, after the tempo notation thinned and the dates ran out and there was only Fateh writing to her in the dark, knowing he was nearly finished. He had not written *I am sorry*, which she was grateful for, because she would not have believed it. He had written instructions, the way he always gave her instructions, flat and exact, a man handing

across a key.

The proof is real data, he wrote. Not the machine's word. The machine is only a mirror; what it knew, it was given, and what it was given went in through one door. There is a credential at the centre. One access. Without it the platform is a wall you cannot argue with; with it, you are standing where the architect stood, looking at what she looked at. Whoever holds the access holds the only version of the truth that cannot be talked away in a room. Not the machine's foresight. The hand that fed it.

And under that, the line she had read first and not understood, the line that had sent her to the card.

The card is the door. Do not use it where they can see you use it. Bring it to someone who can read what is behind it. You cannot do this alone. I built you to be alone. That was the mistake. Do not repeat it.

The card lay where she had put it when she opened the notebook, on the rim of the lamp's light, half in shadow. She had carried it three days against her skin in the lining where the body's warmth made it feel like nothing. It was unremarkable, the size of any of the cards a person carried now, a payment card, an identity card, the small plastic sacraments of a life lived inside the grid. There was no name on it. There was no logo. There was a chip and a strip and a string of numbers stamped without colour into the plastic, and Sita knew enough of the new tradecraft to know that the unremarkableness was the point, that the most dangerous object in the city would be built to look like the most ordinary, that this was true of cards and true of bombs and true, she thought, of women.

She held it up to the lamp and the numbers caught and went dark again as she turned it.

A door. He had said it twice, the dead man, and she had decided she would trust nothing she could not verify, and now she found that the only way to verify the door was to open it, and the only way to open it was to put it in a machine that would tell whoever owned the machine that the door had been opened. The card was a question she could not ask without announcing that she had asked it. This was the architect's signature too, she understood, sitting very still. The whole platform was built that way. To know was to be known. To look was to be seen looking. The woman in the notebook had built a world in which the act of finding the truth set off the alarm.

You cannot do this alone.

She set the card down and looked at her own hands in the lamplight, the steady, useful, terrible hands that the school had cooled to this temperature when she was too small to remember, and she made herself say the name she had spent three days not saying.

Mira.

The R&AW woman. The one who had come to her on a Thursday at a dargah with a wound in her she had decided to believe, and who had turned out to be a hand on a leash like all the other hands, an honest hand maybe, but a hand. The one she had been ordered, once, to assess for killing. The one who had told her a true thing at the moment she was broken enough to swallow it. Sita had every reason in the world she had been taught to put a knife in Mira and walk into the dark and trust no one, ever, and die clean and unverified.

But Fateh had built her to be alone, and Fateh had said, with the last of his hand, that it was the mistake.

And there was a worse logic than grief, a colder one, the one the school had given her. She did not need to trust Mira. She needed to verify, and verification asked for a second pair of eyes the architect's reach did not own. Mira read institutions the way Sita read a hand; between them they had already pinned one fact from two directions, and a fact two people hold from opposite sides of a city is harder to bury than a fact one frightened woman carries alone into the dark. The architect had built a world where to look was to be seen. The only answer to that was to be seen by someone the architect did not control, and to put the truth in two places at once, so that killing one did not kill it.

She did not trust Mira. She had decided to trust no one. But trust was not what the work required. The work required a copy.

It was not faith. It was tradecraft. It was, she realized with something that was almost a laugh and almost the other thing, exactly the kind of move the woman in the notebook would have made, the cut-out, the second copy, the door opened where the alarm could not reach. She had reached for the school's grammar to escape the school. There was no clean way out. There never had been. She had only the choice of whose hand was on the wire, and for the first time in eighteen years it was going to be her own.

She closed the notebook and held it flat under her palm for a moment, the way you hold a hand that has stopped moving.

Then she took the card from the rim of the light and worked it back into the lining against her skin, where it lay

warm and weightless and patient, the door and the proof and the one thing in the city the architect could not afford to let her open.

Outside, the first trucks were starting on the road above the light well, and the light that came down the cable-tangle was the grey that came before anyone decided it was morning. Sita sat in it and did not sleep. She was composing, in the part of her mind the school had built for it, the approach: the place, the time, the words that would make a woman who had every reason to arrest her instead listen long enough to look at a card. She would have to give Mira something true to get it. She knew now what the true thing was. It was not the card. It was the shape they had both found, from their separate dark, and the name neither of them had.

She did not have the name. She turned it over again, the quality in the notebook, *her*, the underlined pronoun, the tempo she had been raised inside, and felt the floor of herself tilt the way it had tilted all night, a vertigo with no object, a recognition reaching for a face and finding none. Somewhere upstream of her own making was a woman, alive, who built worlds where looking set off the alarm, and Sita was going to walk straight at her with the one door the woman had left open by accident, and she did not know, and could not yet let herself wonder, why the cold in her own hands had always felt less like something done to her than something she had been given.

She stood, took the chair from under the door, and went to find a phone that no one owned.

ACT FOUR

Light

Chapter 29

*New Delhi and undisclosed off-books sites in India; later the
unregistered birth of Meridian abroad · November 2008*

The drum in the courtyard had been burning since four, and by the time the light went out of the sky the cold had got into the brick and would not be persuaded out again. Fateh fed the fire by hand, a folder at a time, watching the staples catch and drop into the ash like small dying insects. He did not trust the shredder they had left him. A shredder made confetti, and confetti could be reassembled by a patient man with time and glue and a grievance, and he had trained enough patient men to know that nothing made of paper was ever truly beyond reach. Fire was honest. Fire left you nothing to argue with afterward.

The house carried no name on any lease he had ever seen. It sat at the dead end of a lane in a colony south of the ring road, behind a gate that some municipal register insisted belonged to a retired hosiery man from Ludhiana, a man who had been in his grave since 1994 and had never in life set foot in Delhi. That was the architecture of the thing. Every door in the program opened onto a person who did not exist, and every person who did not exist trailed paper thick enough to satisfy a clerk and thin enough to vanish in an afternoon. He had helped build that lattice. He had been proud of it once, the way a man is proud of a clean knot.

From the front room the television muttered. He had switched it on out of an old reflex and left it running because the news out of Bombay had a weight he could not bring

himself to turn off. Smoke standing in a column over the Taj. Men with rifles strolling a railway concourse as though they had bought the building and were waiting on the deeds. The anchors said the same six sentences in a loop because there were no other sentences yet to be had, and underneath the loop a country was learning, live and on the hour, that its walls were paper too. He let it run. It had nothing to do with him. His own war was smaller than that, and older, and it was ending tonight in a courtyard with a drum of fire, and no anchor would ever shape a single sentence about it.

The sanction was gone. That was the plain bones of it. Luthra had carried the program on his own back for eleven years, a clean man doing a dirty and necessary thing, and a clean man's back is a finite instrument. When the architect died, the back gave. There was no successor willing to put a name to off-books work in a season when names were being demanded in committee rooms, and so the order had come down through three cut-outs and a typed half-page with no letterhead: wind it up, lose the paper, scatter the people, forget the address. No medal, no thanks, no line conceding that the work had been work. Only the quiet municipal verb. Wind it up.

He had wound up most of it already. The analysts had gone back to their cover lives and their pensions inside other men's budgets. The two technicians were on a train east before the week turned. The site at Hisar stood emptied; the one outside Nagpur he had burned himself the week before, the same drum, the same staples dropping bright into the dark. What was left was here, in this house, in two cardboard cartons and a steel trunk, and in a cot in the back room where a child slept who belonged to no file in any registry on earth.

He did not go to the back room. He had been not going to it for three days.

Instead he lifted the architect's working papers out of the trunk, the ones that had no business surviving her, and set himself to read them one last time before they went into the fire. He owed her the reading. He had decided that much. Whatever else was owed or unowed between the living and the dead, he owed her that.

Janaki had written the way she ran an operation, in a hand so level it looked set in type, every margin squared, every contingency given its own indented life on the page. He had loved that hand once, in a room in another decade, with the recklessness of a younger man who believed intelligence work was a way of standing close to a person without ever having to say so. He had not let the word love into his mind in years. It belonged to a woman who was dead, taken on a road outside Muzaffarabad by men who had wanted her files and got her instead, and a dead woman is a closed account. You do not pay feeling into a closed account. He had taught that, too, to others, in this very house.

Halfway down the trunk, beneath the operational ledgers, he found the page.

It was not in her working hand. It was in the other one, the rounder and slower script she kept for nothing official, and it lay folded in three inside an envelope with no name on the face of it. The seal was a smear of candle wax pressed flat with the ball of a thumb. He studied the thumbprint a long while before he broke it.

It was a consignment. No other word would sit on it. In the level voice of a woman disposing of an asset she had made and would not live to see mature, the page set out the

placement of a child. Not by name. The child had no name on the page, only a date of birth and a weight and the cold notation: female, maternal line confirmed, no registration sought or to be sought. It gave the date of transfer and the manner of it. It instructed that no record be raised, no certificate entered, no claim lodged with any office of the state, that the child be carried clean out of the program's accounting and into the keeping of whoever survived to keep her. It was signed with a single initial he knew better than the shape of his own.

He read it three times. Then he sat down on the cold floor with his back against the trunk and the fire ticking lower at his side, and understood, in the slow way the worst things arrive, what was in his hands.

The child in the back room was hers.

Not an orphan of the program. Not a foundling swept up in the collapse and pressed on him by accident. Not the loose end he had taken her for when the technician set the cot in the car and said only, Janaki's instructions, sir, from before, and would not finish the sentence and would not meet his eye. Hers. By blood. And she had not been stolen from the mother. She had been set down by the mother, on purpose, in writing, with the same squared attention Janaki brought to a dead drop or a timed approach. No registration sought or to be sought. A girl made worthless to any man who might one day think to hold a daughter against the woman who bore her. There was a logic in it he could follow the whole way down, and the further down he followed, the colder the room grew around him, because it was the very logic he would have used himself.

He could prove it, if he wished. There were laboratories now that could read a man's blood and tell you whose son he was. Slow, lab-bound, a request that left a name on a form and a vial in a freezer and a technician with a memory; the precise opposite of no record. He would not do it. The page was proof enough for the trade they were in. In their trade you verified by document and by the word of a person you had trusted with your life, and he had trusted Janaki with his life for eleven years and she had never once spent it carelessly. He believed the page the way he believed the floor would hold him. He folded it back along its three creases and did not feed it to the fire.

The set in the front room had gone over to a man standing in the dark outside the Trident with a microphone and nothing new to tell. He stopped hearing it some minutes before he noticed he had stopped.

He had watched the school outlive her. That was the thing he turned in his hands now, sitting on the floor, because it bore on the child and on everything he was about to decide.

Six weeks before, ahead of the order to wind up, ahead of Bombay, he had run down a thread that ought not to have existed. A pattern in the Gulf, in the soft money moving through the free zones of the lower coast, dressed as logistics and risk consultancy and the guarding of pipelines. He had pulled it because the handling of it had snagged something in him, the way a sleeve snags on a nail you have walked past a hundred times without seeing. Cut-outs layered the way she layered them. Tempo set the way she set it, the deliberate unhurriedness that made an operation look like weather coming in off the sea. A faction fed targets that served no faction's purpose, only the purpose of whoever stood three

rooms back, counting.

He had gone himself, on a worked passport in the name of a freight agent out of Cochin, because there was no one left to send and because he had needed to see it with his own eyes. He had sat two days in the atrium of a new hotel in the emirate where the money came to ground, behind a folded newspaper and a coffee gone cold, and on the second afternoon he had watched a woman cross the marble below and run a meeting at a low table without once lifting her voice or raising her eyes to the room.

It was not Janaki. He had settled that inside the first minute, firmly, the way a man presses on a bruise to prove to himself it is only a bruise. Wrong height. Wrong age, near enough a generation wrong. A face he had never seen in his life. But the method coming off her was Janaki entire, the squared margins made flesh, the unhurriedness, the way she let the men around the table fill the silence she had built for exactly that purpose, then took up what fell into it. A protégé, he had decided. The architect had taught more than him. Somewhere across those eleven years she had raised another, off in the Gulf and off his ledger, and that one had carried the school out past the wreck and was raising a house on it. Some private concern of risk and information, deniable, foreign-flagged, its true owner a name on no document he would ever be cleared to read.

Watching her, he had felt a thing he was ashamed of, which was relief. The school had survived. The work had a future, even if the future was not his and not his country's. He had flown home on the strength of that small warm fact and put it away in a drawer of himself and filed nothing, because there was no longer anyone above him to file to, and because

a man does not report a feeling.

He had not let himself think the obvious thought. The thought waited at the edge of the room the way the television waited at the edge of hearing, and he kept it there by an act of will he was careful not to name as will. A dead woman is a closed account. He had identified the body, or what the road had left to identify; he had signed the page; he had put her in the ground under a name that was not even her own. You do not reopen that. To reopen that would be to take hold of a thread that ran back through eleven years and pull every certainty loose along its length, the certainty among them that he had loved her and lost her and was therefore permitted, now, tonight, to keep her daughter. He left the thought at the edge of the room. He had been leaving it there a long time, and he was good at it.

The last folder in the trunk was thin and gray and stamped in the corner with a single worked word that was neither quite English nor quite Sanskrit, a coinage of hers: ASHHEEN. He knew what it held before he opened it, because they had argued over it once, in the room with the squared margins, when it had still been theory and nothing under their hands had a pulse.

It was a schedule. Week by week, month by month, across the first years of a human life, it laid out a discipline for the raising of a child whose attachments would be made and broken on a timetable until the breaking left no mark a person could afterward find in herself, until the place where another being's love is meant to take hold had been planed flat and taught to take instructions in love's stead. It was monstrous and it was meticulous and it was, he saw with the old sick admiration rising in him, almost certainly sound. She

had engineered a method for manufacturing a person with no soft seam an enemy might press. She had engineered, he understood now, holding the gray folder out over the mouth of the drum with the consignment page still in his other hand, the very child asleep in the back room. The asset and the making of it. Mother and method, both in his two hands at the same moment.

He held the folder over the fire a long time. The honest thing was to burn it. The fire was right there, hungry and uncomplicated, and into it the schedule would go and the child would be only a child, registered tomorrow at some counter under some ordinary name, handed to some ordinary family, raised soft and seamed and human, lost to the work forever, which was to say saved from it.

He thought of the men on the railway concourse walking as though they held the deeds. He thought of paper walls. He thought, and this was the thought that decided him and that he would never afterward be able to unthink, that the world which had killed Janaki on a road and was at this hour killing strangers in a hotel a thousand miles south was not going to grow gentler, and that a child raised soft into it would simply be food, and that there was perhaps one thing a man could give a daughter in a world built like this one that was worth more than the love he was being asked to plane away, and that thing was the capacity to come through anything at all and still be standing.

It was the architect's argument. He knew it for hers even as he took it for his own. He had married her logic the way he had, years ago, very nearly married her, fully and without once admitting the act to himself.

He brought the folder back from the fire.

He fed the rest of the trunk in, the ledgers, the operational papers, the level typeset hand, all of it, until the drum roared and the courtyard wall stood orange and the staples fell glowing into the bed of ash. He kept two things out of the flames. The gray schedule. The consignment page with its thumbprint in candle wax.

Then he went to the back room.

The child was awake, lying without crying in a way that already, at this age, was not quite ordinary, watching the ceiling with the patience of someone far older waiting on instructions. He stood over the cot and made himself look at her properly for the first time in three days, and saw, or told himself he saw, the mother's stillness already settled in her, the squared margins of the face that would one day arrive. He lifted her. She did not startle. She fitted against his shoulder and considered him out of eyes that gave nothing back, and he found his hand was not entirely steady against the small warm weight of her skull.

A daughter should have a name. The state would raise her none; he had seen to that, or rather the mother had, no registration sought or to be sought, and so the naming fell to him as everything now fell to him. He stood in the cold with the child against him and reached for a name that was not a lie.

Long ago, in the room with the squared margins, in a softer hour than either of them ever afterward admitted to having had, Janaki had told him what she would call a daughter, if the work ever once let her have one. She had said it lightly, the way she said everything that cost her something, and he had filed it the way he filed everything, and he had carried it eleven years without knowing it was in him to carry.

It came back to him now, whole.

He said the name aloud to the child, once, to hear how it sat in the room. Then he gave it to her.

He named her for the woman he had buried. It was the only memorial he could raise that no office of the state would ever have the power to cancel, a dead mother's name laid quietly over a living child like a coat over a sleeping passenger on a night train, and he believed, holding her, that he was closing an account and not opening one. The woman was in the ground outside Muzaffarabad. The school was in the Gulf in a stranger's careful hands. The daughter was here, warm and watching and his, at the beginning of a life he would shape. He believed he was the last man left standing in a war that was already over.

In the front room the news had moved on to the cold arithmetic of the morning that had not yet come, a number that would only rise, read out flat by a man who had run out of anything else to say. The fire in the courtyard had burned down to a low red eye. Fateh held the girl against the cold and began, without marking the moment as a beginning, to keep the schedule.

Chapter 30

New Delhi · +45 days

The card was the size of a SIM tray's grandfather, a flat grey rectangle with a gold contact plate worn pale at one corner, and it went into the reader on the third try. She had taped the reader to the underside of the desk so that if she had to leave fast she could take the laptop and abandon the rest, and she sat now with her knees against the drawer and the screen tilted away from the window, watching a progress bar that meant nothing fill itself with light.

Outside, Mumbai did its evening business. A man two floors down was frying something in too much oil; the smell came up through the airshaft with a cricket commentary turned low, and somewhere a generator coughed and held. She had paid for the room in cash, four hundred a night, no register beyond a name she had never used and would never use again, and she had walked the last kilometre to be sure of the street. No camera on the stair. One on the lane corner, angled at the road, blind to the door. She had counted them the way Rudra had taught her to count them, and then she had made herself stop thinking Rudra's name with that particular warmth, because the warmth was a debt now and she did not yet know to whom.

The card was Fateh's. He had bled out telling her where it was sewn, precise even then, the coordinates of a hiding place delivered between one breath and the failure of the next, because precision was the only tenderness the work had left him. She did not trust him. She had decided in the notebook's

last pages that she would not trust him, nor Mira, nor the dead, nor the institution that had made all of them and disowned them in the same memo. She would trust what she could put her own hands on and turn over and see the underside of. That was the whole of her religion now. It fitted in a sentence and it asked everything.

The card was a credential, not a key to a lock she could pick, not a trick: an issued thing, a token some administrator in some clean office had once minted and bound to a name with rights. It did not open the door by force. It walked through because the door knew it. That distinction had kept her up. A forced door tells you nothing but that you are strong. A door that opens to your card tells you who you are supposed to be.

The bar finished. A directory tree unfolded down the left of the screen, grey on darker grey, and she breathed out through her nose and began to read.

She had expected ledgers. There were ledgers, of a kind, but they were the respectable surface of a holding company called Meridian Risk Group, registered in three jurisdictions, audited, dull, the corporate equivalent of a man in a good suit standing very still. Julian Mehta's name was on everything. Chief Executive. Signatory. The face on the cover of the in-flight magazine she had once seen in a lounge in Sharjah, talking about resilience and the future of trust. She moved past him into the layer behind, where the credential's rights ran deeper than a CEO's ought to, and she watched Julian Mehta become what she had already begun to suspect he was.

He signed. He did not decide. Every instrument bearing his signature had been drafted upstream of him, by a function the directory called only ADVISORY, and ADVISORY routed

to a service company in Mauritius, and the service company answered to a man named R. C. Almeida, who held powers of attorney the way some men held umbrellas, ready to be opened over any transaction and folded away after. Almeida appeared in the metadata and never in the photographs. And above Almeida the tree did not stop so much as refuse. There was a tier, and the tier held rights that exceeded his, and where the name of the person holding those rights should have sat there was a field the system had been told to render as a single character: a hyphen. A deliberate blank. Somebody had paid to have a name not be there.

She sat with that a while. The oil downstairs had stopped frying. The commentary had given way to a jingle, a loan you could get on your phone in ninety seconds with only your Aadhaar, and she thought, without wanting to, about how easy it had become to be found, how the whole country was being taught to leave its fingerprints on everything it touched and call it convenience. That was the world Meridian was selling itself into. TRINETRA was the thing that would stand on top of all those fingerprints and call the pattern a prophecy. She had read the pitch deck two layers up. Integration, it said. Foresight as a managed service. The state could not build it because the state was not allowed to. Meridian could build it because Meridian was permitted to be a private animal in a way the state was forbidden to be. The stall, the deck admitted in the careful language of risk, was political. Privacy. The litigation. The Big Brother smell. Mehta's face was paid to make the smell go away.

None of which told her who held the blank field. The data was honest about the shape of the thing and silent about its centre, the way a good cut-out is built to be: you can map the

whole organism and never reach the brain. She had spent her life as a hand at the end of exactly such an arm, and she recognised the architecture from the inside. It had a temperament. It liked distance. It did not improvise; it never left itself anywhere it could be touched. It built the room you would search and made sure you searched it thoroughly and went away satisfied.

She closed the laptop halfway, so the screen lit only her hands, and opened Fateh's notebook to the page she had decoded last, because verification meant reading the same thing until it stopped being able to surprise you.

He had written it in the running script he used when he did not want to be caught thinking it. The terror outfit's handling, twenty-seven days of it, tempo and target selection and the particular grammar of how the cell was being fed its work. And against it, in the margin, his hand had gone unsteady. *A method*, he had written. *Not a man's. Hers.* The way she cut a feint to make the eye go left. The way she would spend a small true thing to buy a large false one. He had named no name in the body of the text. He had been a professional to the last, and he had protected even his own ghost with a cut-out. But on the page where it broke him he had let one word stand, the word the old programme had hung on the woman who designed it, the school-name, the deity they had given her the way they gave names to everything they were ashamed of: SARASWATI. Goddess of what is learned. Patroness of the school that had unmade Sita before she had a self to defend.

He had believed her dead for eighteen years. The notebook said so in a dozen sideways admissions, in the load-bearing grief on which he had built his whole rogue

programme, half a war and half a memorial. And then the tradecraft had walked back into the room wearing its old face, and he had understood, alone, in a flat in the dark, that the woman whose legacy he had been tending was alive and had been steering the very network he was hunting, and that she had built it with the exact hand she had taught him, so that hunting it felt like reading her handwriting. It had not made him doubt the method. It had made him certain. You cannot forge another person's restraint.

That was Fateh's stream. A recognition. One man's certainty that a dead woman lived, founded on the only evidence that could not be planted, which was the shape of how she thought.

Sita did not trust Fateh. So a recognition was not enough. A recognition was a feeling with good manners. She needed it to touch something with a date on it, something a man's grief could not invent. She needed the second stream.

She checked the cheap phone, the one with the prepaid card she would snap and drop in three separate drains before midnight, and she put the laptop and the card and the notebook into the bag, and went to meet Mira.

The place was a Catholic cemetery off a road in the western suburbs, a green pause between two towers, where the dead lay under marble in a quiet the living could not afford to be near. Sita had chosen it because a cemetery has one kind of visitor and they do not look at each other, because the gate had a watchman who watched the cars and not the people, because the camera on the church across the lane pointed at the church's own door, vain as a saint. She had walked the perimeter once at four o'clock and again at five in

a different jacket. She sat now on a low wall near a family vault gone soft with rain, and she watched Mira come up the path the way she had asked her to come, slowly, on the far side, hands empty and in sight.

Mira sat at the other end of the wall, a careful metre of stone between them, and for a moment neither of them said the thing.

"You look thinner," Mira said. "You're not sleeping where you eat."

"I'm not sleeping," Sita said.

A crow walked between the graves, proprietorial. Somewhere a watering can knocked against stone and a woman murmured to a name on a slab.

"You have something," Mira said. "You wouldn't have called otherwise. You'd have gone to ground and let me read about you in a file."

"You have something too," Sita said. "Or you'd have come to take me in, and you came alone."

Mira's mouth did the thing that was not a smile. "I'm always alone. That's the job. You found that out on a Thursday at a shrine, the first time I told you the truth to get you to trust me. I'm not going to pretend that didn't happen. I used a real wound on you. Everything I said was real, and I said it because I'd been told to. Both of those are true and I've stopped being able to feel them as two things."

It was the sort of confession that disarmed by getting there first, and Sita knew it was, and let it land anyway, because she had decided that being used with her eyes open was a different country from being used blind, and she lived in the first country now and meant to learn its language.

"Tell me about PROPHET," Sita said.

Mira looked at the crowd. "PROPHET is the dataset Meridian showed the committee. The proof. The thing that flagged the attackers days before the bombing, the foresight the state's systems missed. It won them the contract. Grief did the rest, but PROPHET opened the door." She paused. "I pulled the build logs. Not the dataset, the logs. When the records were written. What gets touched when, and by what."

"And."

"The prophecy is dated before the attack. The evidence inside it is dated after." She said it flatly, the way you report a death. "The flags that were supposed to have caught the cell in advance contain material that didn't exist until the cell had already gone off. Phone identifiers only assigned the week of the blast. A vehicle that wasn't registered until two days before. You can't predict a number plate that hasn't been issued. PROPHET didn't see the future. Somebody wrote the future into it after it arrived and backdated the cover." She turned her hands over on her knees. "It's not a forecast. It's a staging diagram with the labels changed."

Sita let the city fill the space a moment. A bus on the road beyond the wall, the long exhalation of its brakes.

"That's a record," she said. "That's a date. That I can use." She watched Mira's face for the place where a lie would have to live and did not find it. "But it tells you the machine is a fraud. It doesn't tell you whose hand wrote it."

"No," Mira agreed. "I have a smell where the hand should be. I've had it for weeks and I can't put it in a report without sounding like a woman who's been in the work too long." She hesitated, then gave it up, because she had decided something too. "There's a file. Old. A deceased operative, ours, off-books, a programme that died and got sealed. When

I first read the way Meridian's structure was built, the way the shells nest, the way the principal hides above Mauritius, it read like that file. The same hand. I told myself it was a school. A style you could teach. People learn each other's habits."

"You told yourself it was a school," Sita said, "because the alternative is that a dead woman is running a billion-dollar company through a man who thinks he's the boss."

The words came out of her quietly and they changed the air on the wall. Mira went still in the particular way of someone who has been carrying a weight and feels another set of hands take the far end of it.

"Say the rest," Mira said.

"I have a man who hunted that outfit for twenty-seven days. He knew the dead woman. He built half his life as a memorial to her. He is not a man who wants her alive; her being alive cost him everything he understood about himself, and he wrote it down anyway because it was true. He didn't recognise a school. He recognised her. Not the method. The restraint inside the method. The choices a teacher makes that a student copies wrong." She took Fateh's stream and laid it beside Mira's the way she had laid the two halves of a broken thing on the desk to see whether the breaks matched. "Your timestamp says the prophecy is a fraud. His recognition says who is fraudulent enough and skilled enough and alive to build it. And the card says Mehta is a mask and Almeida is a glove and the hand inside the glove has paid to be a blank space in its own files. Three things. Three sources who don't know each other and would not lie the same way by accident."

"And they make one picture," Mira said.

"They make one picture."

The crow flew up. For a while neither of them said the picture out loud, because saying it would make it a thing in the world, and the world had been so much easier to bear when it had held only one liar.

"She's alive," Sita said at last. It was not a question and she did not let her voice climb into one. "The architect they buried. She runs Meridian from behind Mehta. She built the outfit and ran it through a handler who thinks the money is some foreign government's, and she built the attack so the machine could be shown to have seen it coming, and she did it because the sale was stalled and a frightened country buys what a calm country refuses. And the only reason any of it can be undone is that to make the machine look like it predicted the attack she had to leave proof that she knew the attack was coming. The lie has the truth folded inside it. You pull the one thread."

"You pull the one thread," Mira echoed, and there was something in her face that was almost relief, the relief of the long-paranoid finding the world agrees with them at last, and under it the colder thing that comes after, when you understand you were right.

They split the evidence the way Sita had come to insist on splitting everything: a copy each, carried apart, so that one body falling did not take the truth with it. Mira would hold the timestamp and the file. Sita would hold the card and the notebook. If one of them surfaced and burned, the other surfaced after. It was not trust. It was redundancy, which was what trust looked like when you had stopped being able to afford the real thing.

Mira went down the path first, unhurried, keeping to the wall's long shadow, her hands loose at her sides. Sita waited the full eleven minutes she had set herself and then walked out through the second gate, the one by the gardener's shed, and put the first half of the broken phone in the first drain.

She had a name now. That was the thing she carried away from the cemetery that she had not carried in. Not a true name; Saraswati was a costume the school had hung on a woman to make her holy and untouchable, and Sita knew enough about given names to know how little they told you. But it was a handle. It was a place to put the hatred so that the hatred could be aimed. For eighteen years she had been a hand at the end of an arm and never seen the shoulder. Now she had seen it. A woman, alive, who had taught a school how to make weapons out of children and then gone into the dark to run the world from behind a man's face, and who had fed an attack to a city to sell a machine that watched everyone.

She walked, and the city's cameras turned their patient blind heads at the traffic, and she stayed in their blind spots out of habit, and she thought a thought she could not yet finish.

The architect placed targets into Fateh's stream. The notebook said so; the card half-said so; it was how the outfit had been run, by feeding it work that looked organic and was not. And Fateh, not knowing the dead were alive, had taken those targets and broken them down and handed them out in his unit the only way he handed anything out, as a room key across a table.

She stopped on the bridge over the nullah where she had meant to drop the second half of the phone, and she did not drop it, because she was somewhere else. She was eighteen

years old in a hotel room with a man who had set out two glasses. A man who had been waiting for someone who never came. She had killed him on schedule and noticed the second glass and let Fateh teach her not to wonder about it. The man had found something. Men set out a glass for a guest who is coming to confirm a thing they have risked their lives to know. He had found something, and he had been waiting to pass it to the one person who would believe him, and instead the door had opened and it had been her.

She had silenced him. Her first key. Hers.

Sita stood very still on the bridge and felt the shape of it the way you feel a stair that isn't there in the dark. From the very first kill she had been the architect's hand and had not known it. The woman she was hunting had reached eighteen years into the past and turned Sita's own beginning into housekeeping, had used the weapon to bury a witness who had come too close to the secret of her own survival, and Sita had done it cleanly, beautifully, the best work she had ever done, the work that had made her.

The reach of it was almost admirable. That was the part that frightened her. She could feel how far the hand went, and she could not yet feel where it stopped.

She dropped the broken phone into the water and watched it go under, and she turned for the room, certain at last that she had taken the full measure of her enemy, and wrong about it in the one place she would never think to look.

Chapter 31

New Delhi · +46 days

The room had a ceiling fan that turned too slowly to move the heat, only to stir it, and a window that gave on to a lane where a man had been frying something in a wide black pan since before dawn. She had chosen the room for the lane. Two ways out of it, neither overlooked, and a stairwell that smelled of kerosene and old rain. She had paid in cash for four nights under a name that belonged to a schoolteacher in Nagpur who had lost her purse on a train in March and never reported it, and she had given the boy at the desk a face he would not remember because she had given him nothing to remember.

On the bed she had laid the papers out the way Fateh had taught her. Left to right, oldest to newest, so the hand could move without the eye losing the thread. It was the first thing he had drilled into her, before the weapons, before the locks. A workbench is a sentence, he used to say. Read it left to right and it will tell you what it is for.

She read it now.

At the left, the photocopies. The ASHHEEN schedule, forty pages of it, run off a machine in a stationer's shop in a town she had already left, the toner already fading at the gutter. A document built like a railway timetable. Week one: isolation of the infant for periods not to exceed. Week three: introduction and withdrawal of the caregiver on a varying interval, the variance itself specified, so that no rhythm could be learned, no expectation formed, no hand trusted to return.

Week nine. Month four. Month eleven. She had read it the first time as an operator reads an enemy's signature, with the flat professional attention you bring to another craftsman's work. It was good work. That was the thing she had not let herself say. It was beautiful work, in the way a trap is beautiful, every tension correct, nothing wasted, the whole apparatus bent to a single end: a child who would attach to no one, because a child who attaches can be made to grieve, and grief is a leak, and a leak is a flaw in the instrument.

She had been the instrument. She knew that now. She had known it for some days, the way you know a tooth is dying before the pain arrives.

In the centre, Fateh's notebook. Black oilcloth cover gone grey at the spine, the pages soft as cloth from his thumb. He had pushed it into her hands at Lanka with his blood already going dark on the floor and the breath whistling in him, and he had said the thing about the card, and then he had said her name, and the name had been the last clean word he managed. She had carried the notebook through eleven days and four towns and she had decoded the whole of it, the cut-outs and the funding chains and the shell over the shell, R. C. Almeida feeding the layer above Mauritius, the Mehta man out front with his good suits and his half a brain, knowing he was a mask and not letting himself look at the half that knew. She had read Fateh's hand turn from the clipped certainty of his prime into something smaller and more frightened as the years ran on and the pages filled. A man building a case against a ghost. A man recognising a ghost by the way it tied a knot.

At the right, the card. Matte, unmarked, the size of any other access credential in a country drowning in them, and

inside it the keys to the real data, the thing Mira had no proof of and the committee had not wanted to see. PROPHET. The machine that had flagged the dead before they died and called it foresight. She had walked its hierarchy of permissions the night before last and seen the truth of it from the inside: a record dressed as a prediction, the proof manufactured after the fact and back-dated by a hand that did not understand that a trail laid backward can be walked backward. They had built the miracle and left the scaffolding standing.

All of it pointed one way. A woman, alive, who should be dead. A woman running the whole of it from a place no document touched, a name on no certificate, no biometric on any gate, no face in any frame, because she had spent eighteen years scrubbing herself out of the physical world until the only thing left of her was her method. You could not photograph her. You could not lift her from a doorframe with a swab. You could only know her the way Fateh had known her, the way a man knows the hand of the teacher who taught him to write: by the slope of the letters, by the pressure on the down-stroke, by the small unbreakable habits a person cannot see in themselves and so can never hide.

Sita had that hand in front of her three times over and had not let herself lay the three side by side. She did it now because she had run out of other things to do, and because the man in the lane had stopped frying and the silence made her honest.

The ASHHEEN schedule. The variance specified to the half-day, the cruelty engineered with a tenderness for detail that no committee, no bureaucracy, no panel of men could have managed, because committees average and this did not

average, this was one mind, holding the whole shape of a human child in its head and machining it down.

Fateh's notebook, the page where he had broken. She had read it a dozen times and read past it each time because of what it cost. He had been tracking the terror outfit's tempo, Salim Reza taking targets that served no faction, and he had written, in a hand that shook: She is not dead. I buried a coffin. The knots are hers. God forgive me, the knots are hers. And then, lower on the page, smaller, the way a man writes a thing he does not want even the paper to hear, he had written the name. The name that appeared on no Meridian filing, no Mauritius register, no committee minute. The name he had carried for eighteen years as a grief and now carried as a terror.

Janaki.

She looked at it for a long time. The fan turned. Down in the lane a scooter coughed and would not start, coughed again.

Then she took the photograph out of the inner pocket where it had ridden against her ribs since she was small enough to need a thing to hold in the dark. It was the only soft thing she owned. The corners had gone round with handling; the emulsion had cracked across one shoulder where a thumb, hers, returning and returning, had worried it through the years of the schedule, the years of the withdrawal and the return, the years of learning not to expect a hand that came on a varying interval and then one day did not come at all.

A woman in the photograph, young, half-turned from a window, light on one side of her face, the other in shadow. The woman she had been raised to avenge. Murdered by the

enemy, Fateh had said, before you could walk. They took her and we could not get her back, and so we made you, and one day you will settle it. Every kill she had ever made she had laid, somewhere underneath the tradecraft, at the foot of that window, that light, that half-turned face. The dead mother was the floor of her. The whole building stood on it.

She turned the photograph over. She had not turned it over in years. There was no need; she knew the front by heart. On the back, in Fateh's hand, younger and surer than the hand in the notebook, the down-strokes firm, a single word.

Janaki.

The same name. The same hand. The name on no document in the world stood in two places in this room, and both of them were hers, and the man who had written both was dead, and he had written them eighteen years apart, once in love and once in horror, and he had not known, when he wrote the first, that he would have to write the second.

She did not move. She had been trained out of the gestures that betray, and the training held her now the way a splint holds a broken thing, upright, useless, in agony, intact. But her breath had gone, and she sat with the photograph in one hand and the notebook open under the other and let the floor of her come away.

The woman in the window was not dead. The woman in the window had made the schedule. The woman in the window had folded an infant into the apparatus and walked away on a varying interval and then on no interval at all, not because the enemy took her but because she chose it, because a child you abandon is a child no one can use against you, a child worth nothing to anyone is a child safe to leave alive, and so she had made her daughter worthless and that

worthlessness had dropped her into Fateh's hands like a coin into a slot, and Fateh had taken the coin and built it into a weapon to fight a war whose author was the woman he was mourning.

She made the weapon, Sita thought. Twice. Once with the schedule. Once by leaving.

And the rest came without anyone telling her, the way the back of a tapestry shows you all at once where the threads run that the front had kept apart.

The man on her eighteenth birthday. The hotel room, the keycard warm from Fateh's pocket, the clean exit. The second glass on the sill, the one that had snagged in her all these years, the glass set out for someone who never came. She had thought him a man waiting for a lover, or a contact, a small human softness she had not been able to file. He had not been waiting for a lover. He had been a man who had found something and was about to set it down where the world could see it: that the woman buried eighteen years ago was walking around alive. The lead had come into Fateh's stream as an honest Alpha target, and Fateh, not knowing she lived, had handed it to his daughter at a restaurant table with a slice of cake on the plate, and his daughter had gone and silenced the one man who had seen the truth. Her first kill. Her mother, reaching back through the only hand she trusted to bury the witness to her own survival. She had murdered a man to keep her mother dead. She had served the lie at the foot of the window before she even knew it was a lie.

The rebellion came next, and it came worst.

Because she had thought the rebellion was hers. She had thought it the one thing in the whole machined length of her life that she had authored herself. The decision to read

Fateh's evasions and understand the unit was off the books. The judgement she had been trusted with about Mira, the first time anyone had given her a will instead of an order, the moment she had felt herself become a person. The choice to run. Rudra's route, calibrated to the minute, the door held open at exactly the hour she needed it, the bag already packed, the legend already aged. She had suspected it even as she took it, and Rudra had smiled at her with the whole of his ruined tenderness and she had told herself it was love, and it had been love, that was the unbearable part, he had loved her and freed her and never known he was a hand on the lever, that the freedom was a corridor with a door at the end she could not see.

Every door had opened. The state had withdrawn. Fateh's last defence had been pulled. Rudra had been ready. Mira had been waiting with her arms full of welcome and a wound so genuine it had got past the wall. And behind all the open doors, the woman in the window, who did not predict the future because no machine could, who simply built it, target by target, door by door, grief by grief, and then sold the proof that she had seen it coming.

The attack. The dead in the concourse. The committee voting yes through their tears while Mira stood in the corner knowing and unable to say. All of it staged so that the machine could appear to have known, so the stalled sale would clear, so the state that could not legally build the eye would buy it from a woman who did not exist. And the proof of foresight, traced back, was a confession of foreknowledge, and the thread that sold the machine was the thread that hanged its builder, and she, Sita, was holding the thread, in a guesthouse room, over a frying-pan lane, with the back of a

photograph still warm under her thumb.

Even this. She felt it arrive and did not want it and could not stop it. Even this. The notebook, the card, the converging on Mira, the decision to break her own vow and make a second copy of the truth so it could not be buried with her. Was that hers? Or had it been left for her too, a last door, the cleanest of them, the one that flattered her with the feeling of choosing? She did not know. That was the wound the woman in the window had made deepest and last: not the abandonment, not the schedule, not the first kill. The not knowing. The permanent suspicion that nothing she had ever wanted had been her own wanting. Her mother had taken from her the one thing a person needs to go on living, which is the belief that when they reach for a thing, it is their own hand that reaches.

She became aware that she had been holding the photograph too tightly and that the crack across the shoulder had opened a little more. She loosened her grip with great care, the way you set down something live. She laid it on the bed at the far right of the row, past the card, newest of all, because it was. It was the newest thing in the room. She had only just learned what it was.

The fan turned. The scooter in the lane caught at last and pulled away and the ordinary noise of the morning came back, a child somewhere, a radio, a woman calling a name that was not hers.

Sita sat among the documents and let herself, once, all the way down, feel the size of it. The grief she had carried for a murder that had never happened. The eighteen years of avenging a death that was a costume. The first man, with his second glass set out for no one, who had died so that this

could go on being true. She felt it the way you feel a great weight lifted from a limb that has gone dead beneath it, which is to say she felt nothing, and then she felt everything, and her body, which had been trained never to betray her, betrayed her now: her hand went flat on the photograph, palm down, covering the half-lit face, the way you cover the eyes of the dead, or the way a child reaches in the dark for the one warm thing and finds it cold.

She left it there a moment. Then she took her hand away.

She looked at the row again, left to right, oldest to newest, the way he had taught her, and she read the sentence the workbench made, and she understood at last what it was for. Not vengeance. She had been built for that and the building had been a lie. Then for what. She turned the question over and found, underneath the grief, perfectly still, the only thing that had ever been entirely her own, the thing the schedule had tried to machine away and failed: the part of her that had snagged on a second glass and would not let it go.

She picked up the card. She set it square in the centre of the bed, alone, the photograph and the schedule and the notebook pushed to the margins, and she sat looking at it while the heat thickened and the man in the lane began, again, to fry.

She would not be reached for again. If there was one hand in all of this that was hers, it would close on this, and on the one person left alive who had believed her without owning her, and it would do the thing the woman in the window had not foreseen because the woman in the window had assumed, as she always had, that a thing she had abandoned could be moved but never chosen.

Sita reached for the burner. It was her own hand. She made herself believe it. It was the hardest thing she had ever done, and she did it the way she did everything, without a sound.

Chapter 32

New Delhi · +47 days

The number she had been given was for a public phone box outside a chemist in Dadar, and Mira called it from another box two kilometres east, both of them dead instruments with no name attached, and when it rang twice and stopped she understood that the meeting was on and that she had already been watched walking to it.

That was the first lesson the girl taught her without speaking. Mira had run the approach by the book: off the train one stop early, a circuit through the flower market where the crush of bodies and the wet reek of marigold defeated any lens, a change of the dupatta from grey to faded green in the dark of a stairwell, no phone live on her person, the live one powered down and foiled in her bag so it could not gossip its location to the towers. Eighteen years of habit, performed cleanly. And still she felt the girl's attention on her the whole way, the way you feel a draught in a sealed room and cannot find the gap.

The address resolved to a flat on the third floor of a building off Tulsi Pipe Road that the monsoon had been eating for forty years. The stairwell smelt of wet cement and frying. A child's cycle chained to the railing. On the landing a single bulb behind a cage of wire, and the door already open the width of a hand before she could knock, which meant the girl had heard her on the second flight and had been counting her footsteps the way you count rounds in a magazine.

"You came alone," Sita said. Not a question. She stood back from the door and let Mira pass, and Mira marked the room in the old reflex: one window, painted shut, the glass papered over from inside with newsprint so no silhouette would show against it; two plastic chairs; a bare bulb; nothing on the walls; a second exit through the kitchen to a service stair, the kind of room you could leave in four seconds from any point in it. No bag of the girl's anywhere. No coat. Nothing that could be left behind in a hurry and mourned.

She had scrubbed herself out of the world so completely that the room felt less inhabited than borrowed back from the dust.

"I came alone," Mira said. "There's no one. Kaul doesn't know I'm in the city. I told the desk I was visiting my mother in Pune."

"Is your mother in Pune."

"My mother is dead." It came out before she could dress it, and she saw the girl register the small true thing and file it, the way she filed everything, against the day she would need to know whether Mira lied for sport or only for work.

The rain found its rhythm on the window ledge. Somewhere below a pressure cooker began to scream and was throttled.

They sat. Two chairs, a yard of bare floor between them, no table, nothing to put their hands to or hide them under, which Mira understood was also deliberate. The girl wanted to see the hands. She had aged in the forty-seven days since the thing at Fateh's house had burned, not in the face but in the stillness; she held herself now like someone who had stopped expecting the next room to be safe and had made her peace with that, which was a thing Mira had seen happen to

men twice the girl's age and had never seen come on this fast or this complete.

"You brought me here to give me something," Mira said. "Then give it to me and let me go, and you never see me again. That's one way this goes. I'd want you to know the door's open."

"I brought you here," Sita said, "to find out if you'd lie to me one more time. Before I decide what you are."

Mira had rehearsed a dozen openings on the train and discarded each as it occurred to her, because every one of them had been a handle, a way to take hold of the conversation and steer it, and she had recognised in the rehearsing the exact shape of the thing she had come to confess. You did not stop being a case officer by deciding to. The instinct to manage the person in front of you ran deeper than intention. So she let the rehearsed words go, all of them, and sat with her hands open on her knees in the bad light and said the thing plainly, because plainness was the only currency the girl would not immediately convert into suspicion.

"I was sent," she said. "You know that. You've known it a while, or you wouldn't have made me walk through a flower market to get here. But you don't know the shape of it, and you should, because you've earned the whole shape and I've given you pieces. So. Kaul tasked me to bring you in. Not to kill you. To turn you, recruit you, save you, the words don't matter, the work was the same work. Find the lonely one and stand in the cold beside her until she's grateful for the company. That's the trade. That's all empathy is, in the trade. A way in that doesn't leave a mark."

She made herself keep going while the girl's face gave her nothing.

"The dargah was chosen for me. Thursday, the qawwali, the crowd, a place where two women sitting too long together is invisible and a place where you'd already be calm. I didn't pick it. I was told the day and the ground and I dressed the meeting to look like chance. I walked in there certain I was the one who'd arranged for us to breathe the same air. That's what the work lets you believe, that you're the one doing the arranging."

"And the child."

There it was. Mira had known it would come and had not known, until the word was in the room, that it would take the wind out of her like a body blow.

"Tell me about the child," Sita said, and her voice did not change, and that was the cruelty of it, that she could ask the one question that could open Mira to the bone and ask it in the tone you'd use for an address.

"I had a daughter," Mira said. "That part is not a legend. I'm not clever enough to have invented her. She lived nineteen days. There was a thing wrong with her heart that nobody saw until it was the only thing about her. I have never told that to a soul who wasn't drunk or dying, in twenty years, and I told it to you on a stone floor with the singers going, and I told it to you because it was the truest thing I owned and the truest thing is the best key. I want you to understand what I'm saying. They didn't make me invent a wound to win you. They sent me in with the real one and let me spend it." Her own hands had closed without permission; she opened them again. "I sat there and I grieved my daughter to you on purpose. That's the thing I came to say. Not that I lied. That

the part of me that wasn't lying was the part doing the work."

The cooker downstairs started again and ran a long time and stopped. The rain went on.

"You felt it," Sita said. "When you told me. You weren't performing it."

"No."

"But you knew, while you felt it, that it was working."

"Yes," Mira said. "Both. At the same time. That's the job. You hold the true feeling in one hand and the use of it in the other and you don't let either go, because if you let go of the true one it shows, it always shows, the false note carries further than the true one in a quiet room. So you stay honest and you stay a liar in the same breath, and you get good at it, and then one day you can't remember which of your feelings are yours."

She had not meant to say the last of it. It had come up out of the part of her she had stopped consulting years ago.

Sita stood. She crossed to the papered window and stood with her back to it, which a frightened person would never do, and Mira understood that the girl was not frightened of her, had perhaps never been frightened of her, that the wariness in the room was of a different and colder kind, the wariness of someone deciding a category.

"I was assessed," Sita said. "Did you know that. Before the dargah. The unit sent me to look at you, to decide whether you were a threat. I sat across from you and I built a file in my head, eye contact, micro-tells, the breaks in your breathing, and I came away certain I had read you and you had not read me. I was eighteen years trained to do exactly that and I walked out of our first meeting having been recruited without knowing it."

Mira sat very still while the floor went out from under the thing she had just confessed. She had walked into that courtyard believing she had set the ground. The girl had walked into it believing she was the one doing the looking. Two of them sent at each other, each certain of the steering, and neither had moved the other into that yard. Someone above both of them had set them at each other like two blades laid edge to edge, and Mira felt the old vertigo open under her, the same drop she had felt every time she traced a tasking back toward Sehgal and found his hand already warm on it before hers arrived. She did not say it. She had no proof of it, only the smell, and the girl had enough weight on her without Mira adding a shape she could not name.

"So you can stop confessing the cleverness of it," Sita said. "I lived the cleverness of it. What I want to know is simpler."

"Ask."

"When you held my daughter-story in one hand and the use of it in the other. Which hand won."

Mira had been ready for accusation, for the cold cataloguing voice, for the door slamming shut behind a young woman who had at last learned that no one in her life had come to her unsent. She had not been ready for the question to be merciful, and it took her a moment to see that it was, that the girl was offering her a way to be more than the operation, and that the offer cost the girl something, because to ask it at all was to admit she wanted an answer she could keep.

"At the start, the use," Mira said. "I won't pretend otherwise, you'd hear it. At the start you were a task with a sad mouth and I was going to do to you what I've done to forty others and sleep fine." She breathed. "And then it

stopped being that, and I can't give you the day it stopped because there wasn't one, there was just a morning some weeks in when I caught myself wanting to warn you about something that had nothing to do with the brief, just to keep you out of harm, and I knew I'd lost it. Lost the distance. You're trained to feel that go and step back from it. I felt it go and I didn't step back. I let it." She looked at the girl by the dead window. "That's the only honest thing I can give you and it's the thing that makes me useless to my service and worse than useless to you, because a handler who loves the asset can't see straight and gets the asset killed. So the bond is real. And the bond is a liability. Both hands. Always both."

For a long time the girl said nothing, and Mira sat in the long time and did not try to fill it, which was its own small mercy she could pay, to let the silence be the girl's to spend.

"There's a name," Sita said at last, "that I'm not going to give you."

Mira waited.

"You've found the architecture. The shells, the figurehead at the top who half-believes he's the one signing. You found that the machine made its prophecy after the thing it prophesied, that the proof was built backward. You found that the same hand reaching down through Sehgal reaches down through everything, and that the hand belongs to someone the files say is dead." Sita's voice was very level. "You got all the way to the wall. And you stopped at the wall, because past the wall there's a name, and you don't have it. I have it. And I'm keeping it. Not because I don't trust you. Because the name is mine to carry and putting it in your head would put you under the same headstone I'm standing on."

She was lying with the truth, Mira thought, the way I lie with the truth, she has learned it from somewhere or it was bred into her, this trick of telling you exactly enough that the withholding looks like protection. And then, on the heel of that, a second thought, quieter and worse: or she means it. Or the thing she's protecting me from is real and the kindness is real and I have spent so long inside the trade that I can no longer tell a closed door from a kindness, which was precisely the disease she had just confessed.

She let the name go. She would not chase it. Whatever was behind the wall had its own gravity, and Mira had felt enough of it through Sehgal's flinching and the dead operative's signature in the tradecraft to know she did not want to stand any nearer to it than the girl would let her.

"All right," she said. "Keep the name."

"That's it? You don't push?"

"I've spent my whole working life pushing people past the door they meant to keep shut," Mira said. "I came here to stop doing that to you. If I push now, the last hour was theatre."

Something moved in the girl's face then, the first thing in the whole meeting that had not been chosen and held. It was gone before Mira could name it. But it had been there, and the girl knew it had been seen, and instead of arming against it she let it stand, which was a kind of permission.

Sita reached into the waist of her trousers, behind the hip, and brought out a card the size of a transit pass and set it on the seat of the empty chair between them, and stepped back from it, so that taking it would be Mira's act and not a thing handed to her.

"That opens the real data," Sita said. "Not the prophecy they paraded to the committee. The substrate under it. The timestamps, the routing, the moment the threat went into the machine, which is the moment that proves a person put it there." She looked at it on the chair. "I've already done what I came into this country to do, or I'm going to, and there's a fair chance I don't come back from it. You have your evidence. The backward clock. I have this. If I'm taken, two copies in two heads is harder to bury than one. So now you have it too. Leak yours when you can. If I'm alive I'll get mine out my own way."

Mira looked at the card and did not pick it up.

"You understand what you're giving me," she said. "Not the access. The other thing. If I have this and you go dark, I become the person who has to carry it, and I'll want to carry it for you, and that's exactly the want that gets people killed. You're handing me the liability I just told you I'm made of."

"Yes," Sita said. "I know what you are. I'm choosing it anyway. That's the whole of what I came here to find out, whether I could choose a person knowing the worst of how they were made and have the choosing be mine." She almost smiled and did not. "You spent your real grief to get inside me. Fine. Then it was real, and the realest thing you own is in me now, and you don't get it back. That's not the lie surviving. That's the lie running out of road."

Mira picked up the card. It was warm from the girl's body. She held it a moment and then put it away inside her clothes, against the skin, where a thing is kept that you intend to die before you surrender.

"Whoever's behind your wall," she said, "is going to come for both of us when this surfaces. You know that. Standing

with you isn't a thing I do once in a room and then go home from."

"I know."

"Then I'm standing with you," Mira said. "Not as your handler. I'm finished being anyone's handler. As the other thing. The thing that doesn't have a tradecraft word, because the trade doesn't make room for it." She got to her feet, and her knees told her how long she had been sitting still and afraid. "You give a lonely person company to take her apart. That's the work. I'm offering you the opposite of the work. Company that isn't going anywhere and isn't reporting to anyone. It started as an operation. I can't change that it started as an operation. I can only tell you what it is now and let you call it whatever lets you sleep."

Sita went to the door and drew it back a few inches and listened to the building, the rain in the stairwell, a television two floors down, no footstep that didn't belong. Then she pulled it wide.

"Go out the way you came," she said. "Wait for the train, don't run for it. There's a man sells cut fruit at the foot of the bridge who'll remember a woman in a hurry. Don't give him anything to remember."

Mira stepped onto the landing under the caged bulb. The green dupatta, the dead phone in its foil, the warm card against her ribs. She turned back, because she could not help it, because the handler in her would die last of all the things in her and it wanted the last word, the small reassurance dropped at the threshold to bind the asset one turn tighter. She felt the want arrive and she let it go past her like a train she had decided not to board.

"For the record," she said instead, "the daughter's name was Tara. I never told you that part. So now there's something I gave you that nobody sent me to give."

She did not wait to see it land. She went down into the wet smell of the stairwell, and behind her she heard the door close, and the bolt, and then a second sound she could not have sworn to over the rain, that might have been the girl saying the name back to herself once, to keep it, or might only have been the building settling on its old bones toward another monsoon.

Chapter 33

New Delhi · +48 days

The custodian took the same room each time, on the eleventh floor of the Marker, the new business hotel off the Bandra Kurla flyover where the lifts read your face before they would carry you. Sita had watched him do it four nights running. R. C. Almeida was a man of habit in the way that careful men become habitual, mistaking the comfort of a routine for the safety of it. He arrived after nine, he ate in the room, he did not let housekeeping turn down the bed. He carried a slim aluminium case the size of a hardback that never left the crook of his arm in the lobby and never appeared on any luggage trolley, and inside it, she now believed, was the only object in the whole architecture of TRINETRA that could not be made twice.

She had learned that the way she had been taught to learn everything, by subtraction. Mira had brought her the shape of the system over three meetings in three different places, never the same teashop, never a phone left switched on. TRINETRA's selling point was that the state could not build it; its core, the live grid that fused the booking trails and the tower dumps and the Aadhaar-linked exhaust into the thing they were calling foresight, sat on a floor in this building that touched no public network at all. Air-gapped. Sovereign. The kind of paranoia she recognised because it was her mother's paranoia, the discipline of a woman who assumed that anything written down would one day be read aloud in a room she did not control. You could subpoena a server. You

could leak a database. You could turn a systems engineer with money or fear. What you could not do, if you built it the way the woman who made Sita built things, was copy the one credential you kept off every wire, the master key that you trusted to a single pair of hands and reissued to no one, because to reissue it was to confess it had been lost.

Almeida's hands. That was the elegance of it and the cruelty of it both. He was not the principal. He was the firewall between the man who believed he ran Meridian and the hand that actually did, a respectable proxy with a Mauritius letterbox and a clean Bandra flat and just enough knowledge to be useful and not enough to be dangerous. He half-knew what he carried. He did not let himself know the rest. She understood that posture exactly, having spent eighteen years living inside its twin.

At eleven minutes past ten she let herself out of the stairwell on the eleventh floor.

She had not come up in the lift. The lift wanted her face and gave her face to a hard drive somewhere, and she had spent her whole life making sure that no drive anywhere held her face attached to a name. The stairwell door on eleven took a maintenance card she had lifted from a housekeeping cart on the ninth two nights before and cloned in a back room in Kurla off a reader that cost her four thousand rupees and a story about a locked-out tenant. The corridor smelled of new carpet and the cold mineral nothing of overworked air conditioning. She wore the grey kurta of the agency that supplied the hotel's night staff, a lanyard with a photograph that was almost her, a tablet held against her chest the way a real auditor would hold it, screen dark.

Room 1107. She stood outside it and did the thing she always did, which was to become very still and let the building tell her who was awake. Television, low, the cadence of an English news channel arguing with itself about a procurement bill that was stalled in committee, about privacy, about whether a private company should be allowed to hold the nation's nervous system in its hand. She let herself notice the irony and then put it down. Below the television, the small domestic sounds of a man alone. A glass set on a hard surface. Ice.

A glass.

It came up through her without permission, the windowsill in the first room, eighteen years and a lifetime ago, the second glass standing full and warming beside the man she had killed on a schedule. She had been a girl with a keycard and a clean exit and a detail she could not file. He had been waiting for someone who never came. It had taken her all this time, all this wreckage, to learn who he had been waiting for and what he had carried in his head, which was the same thing she now stood outside a door to take by another route: proof. He had found proof that a dead woman was alive, and a key had been laid in his lock for him by a hand reaching out of the grave it had dug for itself, and a girl had been sent up to a room to make the proof stop breathing.

She breathed. She let the glass be only a glass.

The lock on 1107 was the same family as the lift, a proximity reader, and she did not have Almeida's face or Almeida's card. What she had was the thing the trade had always come down to under the gloss of the new machines, which was that a tired man in a hotel does not check the chain when the knock is soft and the voice is bored and says,

in the flat institutional Hindi of a person who does not want to be there either, that there is a water leak reported from the floor above and may she check beneath the window. She had run it on real auditors and real night managers and it worked because it was true to the texture of their lives. It worked on Almeida.

The chain was not on. He opened the door in his shirtsleeves with the remote still in one hand and the case nowhere she could see it, which told her where it was, because a man who carries a thing in the crook of his arm all day puts it down within reach of the bed and not a step further. He was older up close than the photographs, grey at the temple, soft at the jaw, a man who had once been hard and had let the hardness be bought off him by comfort. He looked at the lanyard and the tablet and the grey kurta and he saw the uniform and not the woman, which is the only mercy the uniform ever grants and the only one it ever needs to.

"Window," she said, and pointed with the dark tablet, and stepped past him before the word was finished, because the second of hesitation in which a man decides whether to be annoyed is the second in which you are already inside and the decision has been made for him.

The case was on the luggage bench, the aluminium catching the bedside lamp. She did not look at it. She crossed to the window and crouched and ran two fingers along the skirting where no leak was and made the small frown of a person finding nothing, and behind her she heard him let the door fall shut and go back to his glass and his argument on the screen, because she had become furniture, because that was the whole art, to make yourself into something the room already contained.

She could kill him.

The thought arrived the way a tool arrives in the hand of a craftsman, without heat, a simple inventory of what was available. He was sixty and slow and four feet from her and there were eleven ways from where she crouched and none of them would mark the carpet. She had a clear half hour before the floor's next patrol and the stairwell behind her and a face that lived on no drive. She could open the case over his body and take the key and be on a train out of Dadar before the housekeeping shift turned and the woman who made her would lose, in one night, the proxy and the credential both, and Sita could go on past that into the other thing the night offered, which was simply to keep going, to not stop at Dadar, to become one of the four hundred million names that move through this country every year leaving only the thin trail of a meal paid in cash, to disappear the way she had been promised she could disappear, the way Rudra had built her a door to disappear through before she understood whose hand was on the latch.

Three doors, then, in the small bright room. She could vanish. She could kill. She could take the thing on the bench and turn the machine inside out.

For most of her life there had only ever been one door and someone else's hand opening it. The novelty of three was almost unbearable.

She stood. She made the auditor's apologetic tilt of the head toward the bathroom, the universal request, and Almeida waved the remote at it without looking, and she went in and shut the door and ran the tap and stood in the small loud privacy of running water and let herself shake, once, hard, the way the body insists on doing the work the mind

refuses, and then stopped.

When she came out he had gone to the window himself, peering down past his own reflection at the wet sodium glow of the flyover, perhaps wondering after all whether there was a leak, perhaps only restless, a man with too much in his head and no one cleared to share it with. His back was to the bench. It would never be more open than this.

She did not take the case. She took what was inside it.

She had learned the catch from a photograph Mira had stolen of a photograph, the way everything in this trade now came at one remove, an image of an image of a thing. The case opened on a foam bed and in the foam, seated in its own moulded grave, lay the credential. She had built it in her mind as something grander, a thing with the weight of all it could do. It was a card. It was the exact size and the exact dead plastic feel of the keycard she had carried out of the first room at eighteen, the keycard she had wiped and dropped in a storm drain off the service road while a man lay cooling above her with his unanswered glass. It was a smartcard with a gold contact plate and no logo, no name, nothing a customs officer would query, a blank rectangle that opened the one floor in this building that the constitution of the republic could not reach, and through it the live record of what the machine had been told before it pretended to know.

The student becomes the one who decides.

She lifted it out and seated, in the foam where it had lain, the decoy Mira had made her, a dead card of the same weight scored with the same wear, good for the hours it would take a careful man to think to check, and she closed the case and pressed the catch until it gave its small expensive click, and the card went flat against her sternum beneath the grey kurta,

against the place where the old keycard had once ridden out of a room that smelled of another man's last drink.

Almeida turned from the window. "Anything?" he said, and she heard in the one word how badly he wanted there to be nothing, how much of his life was now organised around there being nothing wrong anywhere near him.

"No leak, sir," she said. "Condensation on the unit above. They will see to it." She moved to the door with the dark tablet against her chest and her hand was steady on the latch and her voice was the voice of a woman who would be forgotten before the lift reached the ground.

"Good," he said. "Good." And then, because even firewalls are lonely, because a man alone in a hotel will reach for any human thing, "Late to be working."

She paused with the door half open, the corridor's colder air on her face. She could have said anything. She chose the truth, since it cost nothing and he would never know it was the truth.

"It is the only honest hour," she said.

He smiled at that, the soft smile of a man who agreed and did not know with whom, and she stepped out and let the door close on him and on the case and on the dead card sleeping in the foam where the living one had been, and she did not run. She walked. She walked the way the uniform walked, unhurried, owed nothing, to the stairwell and down eleven floors with the credential a small flat cold weight over her heart, and at the bottom she came out into a service yard where the rain had started, fine and warm, and the city took her the way the city takes everyone, without a glance.

She did not go to the train. She went two streets and into the back of an autorickshaw whose driver she had paid that

afternoon to be parked at that corner at that hour and to ask no questions and remember no face, cash, no app, no record, and she sat in the dark of it with the rain ticking on the canvas and took the card out and held it in both hands and looked at it under the smeared light of a passing hoarding.

It was nothing. It was a piece of plastic. It was the heart of the thing her mother had built to make a nation afraid enough to buy its own surveillance, the one organ of the machine that the architect, who could manufacture a prophecy and manufacture a martyr and manufacture the foresight that sold them both, could not manufacture again, because there was only ever one and now it was here, in the hands of the daughter she had thrown away to make her into the instrument that would carry it.

Mira would have it copied by morning and the copy lodged where copies survive the people who make them. That was the plan, the redundant plan, the discipline of two hands holding one truth. But the card itself did only one thing, and the plan did not, in the end, decide what that thing would be. With it she could walk into the live grid and pull out, into the daylight, the timestamps that proved the prophet had been written after the murder, the hand that had known. She could turn the whole edifice inside out so that the country looking for foresight found instead a confession. Or she could keep it, the way you keep a knife, and use it once, quietly, on the only target it had ever truly been forged for, and disappear into the country with the key in her pocket and the woman who made her never knowing from which direction the end was coming.

Disappear. Kill. Expose. The three doors had not closed. They had only narrowed to fit through one card.

The thing about the assignments, she thought, watching the rain run sideways off the canvas, the thing she had not understood at eighteen and understood now with a completeness that left no warmth anywhere in her, was that the key had always already decided. Fateh would lay it on the table beside the bread and the choice would feel, to the girl reaching for it, like hers, and it never was, because the moment your fingers closed on the metal the door it opened was the only door. They had given her a key every time and called it a duty and she had carried each one up to its room believing, in the small free space behind her eyes, that she could have set it down.

This one she had taken with her own hand, off a sleeping case, past a sparing of a man she had been entirely able to kill. No one had laid it beside the bread. No one was waiting at a table to watch her lift it. The hand that had reached out of the grave eighteen years ago to put a key in a stranger's lock had not put this one anywhere. She had.

And that was the trap inside the gift, the thing her mother had not been able to engineer and would not have wanted to: that a key taken freely is a choice a person cannot give back. The card was warm now from her hands. It would open whatever she carried it to. The only question left in the whole long architecture of the lie was the one no one above her could answer and no one below her could be blamed for, the question the credential had made, by the simple fact of being in her grip and not another's, unavoidable.

She closed her fingers over it. The rickshaw pulled out into the wet river of headlights and the city folded around her, eight million keys turning in eight million locks, and she rode into it holding the only one that had ever, finally, been hers to

turn.

Chapter 34

New Delhi · +50 days

The message came as a single line of text to a phone she had bought that morning and switched on for ninety seconds, no more. An address in Worli, a floor, a time. No name beneath it, because none was needed. The number she had used to register the SIM existed nowhere; she had given a stranger's Aadhaar at the kiosk and a forged thumb of silicone, and still the message had found her inside the hour. That was the answer to the question she had not asked. She had wondered how long her mother had known the credential was gone. The arrival of the address told her: from the moment Almeida's card left the room.

So she went. There was no longer any sense in which going was a risk. The risk had been taken eighteen years ago by someone else, and she had only now been told the terms.

The building was the kind that explained nothing about itself. A glass slab among other glass slabs, a frosted lobby, a guard who looked at her identity card and not at her face, a turnstile that opened to a chip she did not own and yet opened anyway. The lift had no buttons above the thirty-first floor. She pressed nothing. It rose past the thirty-first and kept rising, and she understood that someone watching a screen had sent it up, the way a hand reaches down into a tank and lifts a fish without the fish consenting.

The doors opened on a corridor with no doors of its own, only one at the end, already ajar.

She stood a moment in the lift's mouth and let it learn that she would not be hurried. Then she went down the corridor, counting the cameras out of habit, four of them, recessed, the small black hemispheres she had been taught to find since before she could spell. There was no need to disable them. They were not there to catch her. They were there because the woman beyond the door had built a life in which not seeing was the only intolerable thing.

The room was larger than it had any right to be and almost bare. A long table of pale wood. Two chairs. Along the far wall, where another woman might have hung a painting or a window, there was a bank of screens, perhaps a dozen, dark now, their grey faces holding the room's reflection.

And a woman, standing with her back to the door, looking at the dark screens as though they were lit.

Sita had built this woman a hundred times in the privacy behind her own eyes and got her wrong every time. She had made her tall. She was not tall. She had made her hard in the face, scarred, marked by the work. The woman who turned from the screens was small and unremarkable and could have queued at any ration shop in any city in the country and been forgotten by the man behind her in the line. Grey hair cut short and practical. A cardigan. Reading glasses pushed up into the hair. The hands of a woman who did sums. Only the eyes did not fit the disguise, and Sita knew the eyes because she met them every morning in whatever mirror the safe house offered. They were her own eyes, returned to her across a room, thirty years older and entirely dry.

"You came in by the stair on the west side," the woman said. Not a greeting. An observation, offered the way one might tell a colleague the time. "The lobby camera lost you for

four seconds at the planters. You taught yourself that. No one taught you that."

"No one taught me that," Sita agreed.

"It's good." The woman, her mother, came to the table and rested two fingers on the back of the nearer chair, an invitation that was also a placement, here, sit here, I have decided where. "Sit. You've been standing since Bandra. I watched you stand."

Sita did not sit. The credential lay flat against her sternum under two layers of cloth, a small cold weight she had stopped feeling an hour ago and felt again now, sharp, as though the room had pressed it into her. She thought: she has not asked for it. She knows I have it and she has not asked. That is information too.

"You're alive," Sita said. It was a foolish thing to say to a woman standing four feet away, and she said it anyway, because some part of her that the conditioning had never reached needed to put it into the air and hear how it sounded. It sounded thin. The room ate it.

"Yes." A small nod, conceding a point of fact. "It was necessary. You'll want to understand the necessity. You've always wanted the mechanism more than the comfort. I built that. It's one of the things I'm most certain of in you."

"Tell me the mechanism, then."

The woman sat, since Sita would not. She folded her hands on the pale wood and spoke as Sita imagined she had spoken in a hundred rooms to men who held budgets, clear, unornamented, each sentence carrying exactly its freight and no more.

"They had me in a frame," she said. "Eighteen years ago. Luthra's program was collapsing, the sanction was being

withdrawn, and there were men, you don't need their names, who understood that the cleanest way to control me was to hold something I valued. They had begun to look for what that was." She turned one hand over, palm up, a small gesture of demonstration. "So I made certain I valued nothing they could find. I removed the asset from the board. I staged the death so completely that even the man who loved me believed it, and grieved it, and built his whole second life on the grief. And I took the one thing that could be used against me and I made it worthless to them."

"The one thing," Sita said.

"You." The word had no weight on it at all. "An unregistered infant has no value as leverage. A dead woman's orphan, consigned to a soldier with a conscience, has no value as leverage. I gave you away so that you could not be taken. Do you see the difference? Anyone can lose a child to the enemy. It takes design to place one beyond the enemy's reach." She paused, and for the first time something moved at the corner of her mouth, not warmth, Sita had no word for it, the satisfaction of an engineer whose bridge has held the load. "I put you in the safest hands in the country. Fateh's. And then I let the discipline do what I had written it to do."

Sita found she had walked to the window without deciding to. The city lay below in its evening haze, the sea going the colour of gunmetal, the Sea Link strung with lights, the slow crawl of headlamps along the reclamation. Somewhere down there a hundred million people were being counted, scanned, linked, their thumbs pressed to glass, their faces read by cameras that did not work as well as the men who sold them claimed. She had spent her life in the seams of that machine. Her mother had built the seams.

"The schedule," Sita said, without turning. "ASHHEEN. You wrote that before you left me."

"I wrote it for you specifically. Not in general. For you." Behind her, the voice did not rise or soften; it simply continued, as a tape continues. "Attachment is the weakness the trade cannot afford. Every operative I ever lost, I lost through an attachment they could not sever. So I removed it at the root, before it could form, before you had a face to fix it to. People hear that and they call it cruelty. It isn't cruelty. Cruelty is careless. This was the most careful thing I have ever done." A pause. "I forged you. The fire is not kind to the metal. The fire is not the metal's enemy."

Sita turned then. "And the man with the two glasses."

For a moment the woman was still, and Sita read the stillness, because reading stillness was the one skill she had that her mother could not take credit for, having never seen Sita learn it. The stillness was not guilt. It was retrieval. The woman was finding the file.

"Your first," her mother said. "Eighteenth birthday. He had found me. He had the proof, a photograph, a customs manifest, two documents that together said I had not died in the place the record said I died. He was a careful man and he was about to be careless with it, he was about to surface it to people who would have unmade everything." The hands unfolded, lay flat. "I put him into Fateh's stream as an Alpha lead. A clean target, properly sourced, exactly the kind your unit was built to action. Fateh assigned it. Fateh chose you for it, not knowing what it was, because you were the best he had. You closed it perfectly. You always close perfectly."

"You used your daughter to bury the proof you were alive."

"I used the instrument best suited to the task. That the instrument was you is the reason it was clean. Sentiment would have hesitated at the door. You did not hesitate. I watched you not hesitate." She tilted her head a degree. "You noticed the second glass. You wondered who he was waiting for. I read it in your debrief, the way you circled it. Even then you were trying to reconstruct the truth from the residue. I was proud of that. You were doing my work without knowing it was mine."

The word proud sat in the room like a coin of a currency neither of them could spend.

Sita came back to the table and put her hands on the back of the second chair, the one she had refused to sit in, and gripped it. "And the rest," she said. "Mira. The dargah. Rudra. The escape. You're going to tell me you wrote those too."

"I wrote the conditions." No hesitation, no relish, only the same flat completeness. "I did not script your sentences. I am not a god, Sita, whatever you've decided. I arranged the circumstance in which Mira would meet you, through tasking, through Sehgal's reach, without Mira ever knowing she was being moved. She thinks she found you. She was permitted to find you. Rudra came to me years ago, broken over what was done to you, what I had designed to be done to you, and he gave himself to me believing he was your one rescuer. He opened the door for your defection believing the door was his idea. It was mine." She looked at her daughter steadily. "You think your rebellion was the one thing in your life that was yours. I understand why you would need that to be true. It was the operation I am proudest of. I wrote you a cage so wide you could spend years walking it and call the walking freedom."

Sita's grip on the chair did not change. She had decided long ago, in a room with Fateh's notebook open on her knees, to trust only what she could verify with her own hands, and the discipline held even now, even here. She tested the claim the way she had been taught. Was it consistent? It was consistent. Did it explain the residue? Rudra's apparatus, too perfect, too aged. Mira's wound, arriving on cue. The withdrawal of the state at exactly the hour the door swung open. Every door that had opened for her had been oiled.

It was consistent. That was the horror of it. The woman had not invented a single new fact. She had merely named the ones Sita already carried.

"Why are you telling me," Sita said. "You don't confess. You've never in your life done a thing without a return on it. What is the return on this."

And here her mother stood, and crossed to the wall of screens, and did something at a small panel Sita had not seen, and the dozen grey faces woke.

Sita on a street in Mangaluru, three years ago, buying fish, glancing once over her shoulder.

Sita on a rooftop in the dark, younger, checking a weapon she had since retired.

Sita asleep in a safe house in Pune, the camera somewhere in the smoke alarm, the image green and grainy with low light.

Sita as a child, perhaps six, perhaps seven, in a courtyard Sita did not remember and could not have remembered, running, falling, getting up without crying because she had already been taught not to cry, and a date burned into the corner of the frame in the small grey numerals of a system that never blinked.

Twelve screens. Twelve windows into a life she had believed was, in its worst and loneliest moments, at least unwitnessed.

"I built TRINETRA to sell to the state," her mother said, and her voice had not changed, that was the thing Sita would carry out of the room and never set down, the voice had not changed at all. "That is true and I will not pretend it isn't. But I built it first, the first version, the small private version, for this." She lifted one hand toward the screens, toward the running child, toward all the years. "I never lost sight of you. Not once. From the courtyard to this room. I gave you away and I never once looked away. Do you understand what I am telling you?"

Sita looked at the screens, and at her mother's face lifted toward them, lit grey, and she understood. She understood with the total, sickened clarity of a lock turning that she had been waiting her whole life to hear turn, and finding, when it turned, that the door opened onto a wall.

Her mother believed she had just answered the question.

She believed that watching was the same as loving. That she had laid before her daughter the proof of a devotion so complete it had spanned eighteen years and a faked death and a continent of distance and never once flickered, and she did not know, she could not be made to know, that what she had laid before her daughter was the evidence in the case against her. To Janaki there was one circuit, and surveillance ran on it, and so did whatever she had instead of love, and she could not tell them apart because the instrument that would have told them apart had never been installed in her. It was the one process she could not model. She had built a machine to predict a nation and she could not predict the single thing

her daughter had needed, because she did not know it was a separate quantity. She thought the feed was the gift. She had brought her daughter to the highest room in the city to show her the gift, and she was, Sita saw, in the only way the woman was capable of being, waiting to be thanked.

"You watched me," Sita said. Her voice came out level, which surprised her, the training surfacing when nothing else would. "Eighteen years. You watched me kill the man who could prove you lived. You watched me believe you were murdered. You watched me lay flowers on the day of your death, the date you chose, and you watched me cry on that date, because I did cry on that date, I cried alone where no one could see, and you saw. You saw and you noted the camera angle."

"Yes." Her mother turned from the screens to her, and the grey light was on the side of her face, and her expression was the expression of a woman who has been understood at last. "Yes. I never left you."

"You were never with me," Sita said.

The two sentences passed each other in the air and did not touch. Sita watched her mother receive hers and fail to receive it, watched the words go in and find no surface to land on, watched them slide off the polished thing where the feeling should have been and fall to the floor of the room with the rest of the residue. Her mother's face did not change. There was no wound in it because there was nothing for the words to wound. That, finally, was the thing Sita had crossed the city to learn, and she had learned it, and it cost her exactly what she had been told from childhood that nothing would ever cost her again.

Her mother spoke into the silence, and what she offered was, in its way, the most that she had, and Sita understood that too.

"There is work," Janaki said. "Only you can do part of it. I have built something the country cannot build for itself and will not build for itself, out of squeamishness, out of the small fear they call privacy, and it is going to be theirs whether they consent or not, because the alternative is worse and I have run the alternative ten thousand times. I want you inside the design. Not as the instrument. Beside me. I have never offered that to anyone. I am offering it to you." The hands came together. "Stay."

And there it was, laid on the pale table between them: a place inside the machine, a seat beside the woman at the centre of the web, the highest room, the running feed, the all-seeing eye, and a mother who believed she had just said I love you and was waiting, with the patience of a system that does not tire, to be answered.

Sita reached up and through the cloth she touched the credential, the small cold rectangle with its gold contact plate, the one object in the entire architecture that could not be made twice, the key she had taken with her own hand from a hotel room so that no one could ever say again that the key had been laid out for her. She felt the weight of the three doors it opened. Vanish. Burn it all into the light. Or cross the room and close, the way she had been built to close, the way she had never once failed to close.

She did not take her hand away from the card. She looked at the woman who had watched her run as a child and had not gone to her, and she let the silence run long, longer than her mother would have predicted, long enough that the

prediction would have to be discarded, and she felt, somewhere under the conditioning, in the one place the schedule had never reached, the small unmodelled thing make its choice.

"No," she said. And then, because she had sworn an oath to verify everything with her own hands, she took the credential out into the light, where her mother could see it, where the cameras could see it, and she set it flat on the pale wood between the two chairs, and did not yet say which of the three doors it was.

Chapter 35

New Delhi · +51 days

The card weighed nothing. That was the thing Sita kept returning to, the way the body insists on a fact the mind has already filed. A sliver of polycarbonate the length of her thumb, a gold contact plate worn faintly bright at one corner where some technician's fingers had touched it a thousand times before Almeida ever carried it. It weighed nothing and it had taken eighteen years to lift.

The room Mira had found them was on the fourth floor of a leasing block off the Andheri-Kurla road, between a freight forwarder and a firm that did nothing she could name. Glass-walled cubicles, the carpet tiles curling at the seams, a server cabinet humming behind a door with a combination lock Mira had opened in under a minute. A maintenance contractor's tenancy, paid through a chain Mira swore was clean to four removes. Sita did not believe in clean to four removes. She believed in the next ninety minutes.

"It reads from the panel here." Mira had a laptop open on a folding table, an external smartcard reader cabled to its side, a thing the size of a cigarette packet with a slot and a single amber light. She did not look up. She had not looked up much since they arrived, and Sita understood that this was how Mira held herself together, by reducing the world to the next cable, the next prompt. "The credential authenticates the session. We don't crack anything. We knock and the door opens because the door thinks we're allowed in."

"And when it stops thinking that."

"Then we're out, whether we have it or not." Now Mira did look up. There was a grey under her eyes that no sleep would lift. "She knows the card is gone. You handed it to her face and walked. So we work as if the revocation is already moving up the chain. Minutes, Sita. Not hours."

Sita set the card on the table beside the reader and did not pick it up. Outside the window the evening had gone the colour of wet iron, the towers across the road lighting cubicle by cubicle as the cleaning crews moved through them, and somewhere above all of it, on a feed she would never see, a woman was watching her decide. She had stopped flinching at that thought. You could not flinch for eighteen years. At some point the watched animal simply lived its life in the eye of the thing that watched, and called the eye weather.

"You're sure of the store," Sita said.

"I'm sure of what I found." Mira pulled a second chair out with her foot. "PROPHET. The prediction layer. Every flagged-threat dossier carries two clocks. The event clock, when the thing happened in the world. And the record clock, when the dossier was written into the archive. The front end shows you the first. It tells the committee: here, TRINETRA saw the Marol attack forty days out, here are the men, here is the place. Foresight. The second clock is buried in the object metadata because nobody is meant to read it. The record clock on those dossiers is wrong."

"Wrong how."

"It predates the prediction." Mira said it flatly, the way you said a thing you had carried alone too long. "The dossier that flagged the attackers was written into the store before the intelligence it claims to be built on existed. The proof of foresight was filed before the things it foresaw. You don't

build a true prediction backward. You build a forgery backward. The clock she couldn't reach is the one the machine keeps on itself."

There it was. The fatal symmetry Sita had read first in a dead man's notebook in another room, in a hand she had loved. The act that sold the machine was the act that could hang the builder. Manufacture the proof of prescience and you manufacture, in the same stroke, the proof of foreknowledge. Janaki had authored a god that kept a diary, and the diary did not lie about when it had been written, because no one had thought the diary would ever be read by someone holding the key.

"Then we don't need to break anything," Sita said. "We need to copy the diary."

"We need to copy it and put it somewhere she can't follow." Mira turned the laptop a few degrees so the screen faced the slot. "Pulling it is the easy hour. The hard hour is after."

Sita picked up the card.

She had carried it against her sternum from the hotel where she took it, through the confrontation, through the drive south, a flat hard presence over her heart like a second, colder bone. She had thought, holding it then, that the worst of it was the choosing. Disappear, or kill, or open the eye. She had been wrong about that the way she had been wrong about most things people told her about herself. The choosing was not the weight. The weight was that a thing taken by your own hand could not be handed back. She slid the card into the reader, gold first, the way Almeida's fingers had taught it without ever knowing they were teaching anyone.

The amber light went green.

"In," Mira breathed.

The screen did not announce itself the way a film would have. No crest, no seal, no triumphant chord. A login shell, a dull institutional blue, a field that filled itself from the card. TRINETRA OPERATIONS. PRINCIPAL CONTEXT. A name that was not a name, a credential string and an access tier, the highest the system held, the tier that belonged to a woman who appeared on no document of the company she owned. Mira's hands were already moving. She had drilled this; Sita could see the drilling in the economy of it, the muscle memory of a person who had practised on a thing that looked like this and was not this, against a stopwatch, alone in some R&AW back room with nobody to tell whether she was right.

"Archive," Mira said, to herself. "PROPHET, threat-flag store, query window, the forty days before Marol." Her fingers stopped. "It's all here. Sita. It's all here, every dossier, the men, the route, the device profile. She had it all before. She didn't see it coming. She sent it."

"I know."

"You knew." A flicker of something across Mira's face, not quite accusation. They had agreed on the borders of what each would carry. Sita had given her the evidence and kept the name. The architect, Sita had said, and Mira had heard a stranger, a ghost out of a classified file, a woman the service had buried. She had not heard mother. Sita meant to keep it that way for as long as she could, and she was no longer certain whether that was mercy to Mira or cowardice toward the one fact she could not make herself say aloud, and the uncertainty was itself a kind of answer she did not want.

"Pull the metadata with each object," Sita said. "Not just the dossier. The record clock travels with it or this is nothing."

"I'm pulling the whole object. Manifest, payload, the audit envelope. If I strip it to make it small they'll say we forged it." Mira's jaw was tight. "We don't curate. We don't make it clean. The mess is the proof. A forger curates. We dump it raw and let the clocks speak."

The export bar crawled. Forty days of a manufactured prophecy, written backward by a hand that had never lost sight of either of them, copying itself out of the eye and into Mira's grey little machine one envelope at a time. Sita watched the percentage and made herself breathe to it. She thought of the man in the hotel room eighteen years ago, the second glass on the sill, the message with no reply. She had silenced him without knowing he was a witness to a living woman, the first proof, surfacing, of the thing she now sat copying. The architecture of her own life ran through this store somewhere, a dossier on a girl, a feed kept private, a daughter watched at nation-scale because the watcher could not build the smaller, ordinary instrument that other people called love. She did not look for her own file. She had decided that on the drive south. She would open the eye onto the world and she would not turn it, even for a second, onto herself, because the moment she did she would be using the machine the way Janaki used it, and then there would be nothing between them but scale.

"Forty per cent," Mira said.

The amber-green light flickered.

Both of them saw it. A single drop, a hundredth of a second, the reader's light guttering and catching like a candle

in a draught. Mira's hand froze over the trackpad.

"That's her," Sita said.

"That's the revocation reaching this node." Mira's voice had gone very even, the evenness of a person doing arithmetic at speed. "She's killing the credential tier by tier from the top. When it reaches us the session drops and the card is a piece of plastic. I can't tell you how long. Seconds. A minute."

"Then stop pulling the whole forty days."

"It's all or—"

"It's not all or nothing, it's whatever lands before the light dies." Sita had her hand flat on the table beside the reader, not touching it, the discipline of not touching it costing her. "Narrow the window. The seven days around the attack. The dossier that flagged the men, and its record clock, and the two on either side so the pattern shows. The thing that proves the clock runs backward. Drop everything else. Land that."

Mira did not argue. That was the thing Sita would remember about her afterward, in whatever afterward there was: that at the edge she did not argue, she changed the query. The window collapsed on the screen from forty days to seven, the object count from thousands to a few dozen, the export bar lurched back to zero and then began to climb again, faster now, a smaller truth racing a dying key.

"Where does it land," Sita said. "Tell me again where it lands."

"Three places at once." Mira talked while she watched the bar. "A staging share I can reach. From there, scripted, the moment it completes: a set of recipients who don't talk to each other. Two reporters who covered the Pegasus disclosures, one who has never taken a government call in her

life. The advocates running the privacy petition, the ones still in front of the bench on the surveillance question. And a mirror to an offshore host that doesn't answer Indian letters. If one is leaned on, the others have it. If they kill the reporters' copies the petition has it. If they seal the petition the offshore mirror is already abroad." Her eyes did not leave the screen. "You don't bury a thing that's in three hands that hate each other. That's the only kind of safe there is."

Light against the watchers. Not a bomb, not a name spoken in a sealed room, not a kill that would simply move the principal one chair to the left and seat a new front in the old one's place. The frontman model meant the head was replaceable; Mehta was already a mask, and behind Mehta the woman on no document could grow another mask in a season. Sita knew that. She had no illusion that this opened the eye forever. The appetite for fear-bought certainty would outlive tonight, outlive Janaki, outlive Sita. What she could do was smaller and the only true thing available to her. She could make the method visible. She could take the manufactured proof of foresight and turn it into the public confession of foreknowledge it had always secretly been, and put it where it could not be unmade, and let the country that was being sold the eye see, for once, the hand inside it.

"Seventy," Mira said.

The light flickered again. Longer this time. A full half-second of amber.

"Talk to it," Mira said, not to Sita, to the machine, the first unguarded thing Sita had heard her say all night. "Stay open. Stay open."

Sita watched the reader and not the screen. The discipline of her whole life had been to watch the wrong thing on

purpose, the door not the target, the exit not the kill, and she watched the little amber-green light now as if she could hold it steady with attention. Somewhere above them a woman was deciding how fast to close her own eye. Janaki would know exactly what was being pulled. She would be reading the export herself on some console, watching her daughter copy out the one record she could not scrub, and she would be weighing, in the cold full register of the only love she could compute, the value of the credential against the cost of being seen. She cannot model love, Sita thought. She is fast at everything except the thing that is happening in this room. And the thought was not triumph. The thought was grief, that the one blind spot in the most complete eye ever built was the precise shape of her own child, and that the blindness was the only door Sita had ever been able to walk through.

"Eighty-five."

The light went amber and stayed amber.

"It's dropping," Mira said. Her voice did not rise. Her hands moved faster. "Session's degrading. Sita, I'm going to lose principal context in seconds, I'm flushing what's pulled to the staging share now, raw, unverified, I'm not waiting for the last objects—"

"Flush it."

"If it's incomplete—"

"Flush it. Eighty-five of seven days is the pattern. The clock that runs backward is in the first dossier and you have it." Sita heard her own voice come out level and far away, the operational voice, the one Fateh had built into her, and for once she did not resent the man who built it. "Land what you have. Now."

Mira's finger came down.

The bar on the staging share filled in a single jump, the way a held breath leaves the body, and a script Mira had written somewhere in the small hours took the payload and broke it into three and threw it outward into the dark, to a reporter who answered no calls, to advocates standing in front of a bench arguing that the watching had a limit, to a host on the far side of an ocean that did not read Indian letters. The little terminal window scrolled a column of confirmations, dull, unceremonious, three destinations acknowledging receipt of a few dozen envelopes whose buried clocks said a prophecy had been filed before the future it foretold.

Then the reader's light went red, and the screen flushed grey, and a single line replaced the institutional blue.

CREDENTIAL REVOKED. PRINCIPAL CONTEXT TERMINATED.

The card in the slot was a piece of plastic.

Neither of them moved. The server cabinet hummed behind its locked door. Across the road the cleaning crews had reached the upper floors, the cubicles going dark one by one as the towers emptied for the night, ordinary people going home to ordinary suppers, none of them knowing that the weather had, for one narrow minute, been turned over to look at itself.

"It's out," Mira said at last. She sat back from the laptop as if from a fire. Her hands were shaking now that they had nothing to do, the steadiness spent all at once. "It's in three hands. It's abroad. She can kill the card. She can't kill what's abroad." She looked at Sita, and the grey under her eyes had not lifted but something behind it had, some weight that had ridden her since a sealed room where she first read a clock

running backward and had no one to tell. "We did it. Sita. We turned it around."

Sita reached into the dead reader and drew the card out by its edges. The gold plate caught the last grey light from the window, dull now, a thing that opened nothing. She had taken it with her own hand and she could not give it back, and she understood at last what that had meant. Not that the choice could not be returned. That she could not. Whatever she had been before the slot took the card, the hand of a war two men knew how to hold, the weapon her own abandonment had forged, the variable her mother refused to compute, she was not that now. She had opened the eye onto its maker and kept the maker's name behind her teeth, and she did not yet know whether that last silence was the one decent thing she had managed or the last leash she could not bring herself to cut.

Above them, on a feed neither would ever see, the watching went on. It would go on after tonight, after the petition, after the headlines that were already forming in three rooms that did not speak to each other. The appetite outlived the proof. The head was replaceable. Sita knew all of it, and she set the dead card down on the folding table between herself and Mira, gold plate up, and she did not look at the ceiling where she knew the eye still hung.

"We turned it around," she agreed. She found that her own hands were steady, and she did not know whether to trust that, or what it said about the thing eighteen years had made of her, that at the end of it her hands did not shake at all. "Now we find out what it costs."

Chapter 36

New Delhi · +53 days

The glass between the observation room and the interview suite was supposed to be one-way, but Sehgal had worked the building for nineteen years, and Mira supposed he knew where the watchers stood the way a man knows where the draught comes from in his own house. Twice in the last hour he had lifted his eyes from the table and brought them to rest on the exact place where she was standing, and held them there, as though the silvered pane were ordinary window. It was not. He could not see her. She told herself that and did not quite believe it, and the not-believing was its own kind of answer, because that was the thing about Arvind Sehgal the younger officers had never grasped and she had grasped too late. He left you to do the work of frightening yourself. He never said the thing. He let the room say it for him.

Inside, the two interviewers from the vigilance cell were working him by the manual, which was the wrong instrument for the man, and she watched them lose ground politely. They had laid the second phone on the table inside an evidence sleeve, the cheap dual-SIM handset she had photographed in his coat in March before she had any name for what it was, and they kept returning to it as though the object would speak on their behalf. Sehgal regarded it the way a man regards a coat he has already decided to give to the watchman. He answered in full sentences. He corrected their dates. When they put it to him that he had timed flagged intelligence into the Director-General's tray to turn Kaul

against Fateh's unit, he said only that he had forwarded what crossed his desk, in the order it crossed his desk, and that if they wished to argue with the order in which intelligence arrived, they should take it up with the people who had sent it.

That was the answer, and no one in the room could hear it. The people who had sent it. He would not give a name, and watching him, Mira thought it was not refusal but emptiness, a man who could not surrender a centre he had never been allowed to touch. He had been steered exactly as he had steered Kaul, by something that arrived dressed as coincidence and left wearing the clothes of policy. She had no proof of that. She had only the symmetry of it, and the symmetry was not evidence, and she had stopped trying to make it into evidence weeks ago.

"He won't give us the principal," said Bhatia beside her, arms folded across his chest. Bhatia ran the internal side now. He had aged a decade in nine weeks. "He'll give us procedure until we charge him, and then he'll give his lawyer procedure."

"He hasn't got the principal," Mira said.

"Everyone's got somebody."

"He's got a dead drop and a grievance and a mistake somebody buried for him a long time ago." She kept the rest behind her teeth. The rest was that she had spent three months chasing the shape of a thing with no face, up through the shell companies and the proxy in Mauritius and the man called Almeida who turned out to be a hand and not a head, and that at the very top there was a place where the documents simply stopped. No board minute. No wire. No settlor but a phrase. She had described it to Kaul in March as

a smell in a room, and watched him decide, kindly, that she was tired.

She had been right. It had changed nothing that she was right.

Bhatia's phone buzzed. He read it and breathed out through his nose. "Committee's reconvened. Procurement's dead. They're killing it formally at four."

"Then we should be in the room," Mira said, and turned away from the glass before Sehgal's eyes could come and find the place where she stood a third time. She did not want to give him the satisfaction, if it was satisfaction, of being found again. She would never know which it was. That was the whole craft of the man.

The corridor smelled of floor polish and old air conditioning, the institutional cold that hums everywhere and warms nothing. They walked it past the noticeboard with its curling advisory on social-media hygiene, past the framed chiefs going back to men whose operations were still sealed and whose faces meant nothing to the analysts who passed them twice a day. Somewhere in that line, she thought, there was a clean man, a colonel, who had once signed his name to a hard thing for the nation and had not lived to watch what it became. She did not know which face was his. The file that would have told her had been among the first things to go missing.

The committee met in the secure annexe, the windowless room with the white-noise generators humming in the corners like refrigerators. She had sat here nine weeks ago and watched these same men approve the thing they were about to bury. The reversal had the same furniture, the same faces, very nearly the same words, only inverted, and that was

what she would carry away from it afterward: how little the machine had to alter to travel from yes to no. The same joint secretary read the same kind of brief. The same retired general harrumphed. The grief that had carried the vote in March, the Marol dead, the photographs of the commuter platform laid out like a hand of cards, had simply been re-pointed. Now the dead were a reason for caution where before they had been a reason for speed.

The additional secretary's chair stood empty. No one mentioned it.

The brief was thorough and bloodless. She followed it the way she followed everything now, listening under the words for the thing the words were built to cover. Independent material had come into the possession of three uncoordinated parties, the brief said, and used that phrase, uncoordinated parties, with no apparent sense of how strange it was, how engineered, that proof should arrive everywhere at once and from nowhere a man could subpoena. A defence correspondent. An opposition member who sat on the home-affairs standing committee. An NIA officer who had, it was understood, gone to the registrar without first walking it up his own chain. The material concerned the predictive dossiers Meridian had presented as evidence of TRINETRA's foresight. The dossiers that had named the Marol cell days ahead of the blast. The proof that had won the contract.

The material disclosed, in the careful grammar of the brief, certain inconsistencies in the metadata. Certain creation timestamps that post-dated the events the dossiers claimed to have foreseen. The foresight had been composed after the fact. The prophecy had been written with the answer already in the writer's hand.

Mira had known this for weeks. She had known it the way you know a thing you cannot yet say aloud, and now it was a paragraph in a committee brief and the men around the table received it with the grave nodding of people learning officially what the country had already read on its phones. Someone said the word fabrication. Someone said the procurement could not proceed under a cloud. The retired general observed that this was precisely why he had always counselled caution with private vendors, which was not what he had said in March, and no one reminded him, because no one in the room had any appetite for remembering March.

The vote took four minutes. The procurement was suspended pending full review, which everyone present understood to mean dead, because a thing of this kind did not survive a full review; it survived only the absence of one. The joint secretary squared the edges of his folder. Tea was offered and declined. It was, Mira thought, the most expensive funeral she had ever attended, and the corpse was a contract, and not a soul in the room had loved it.

She found Kaul afterward in his office on the upper floor, at the window over the campus and the gulmohar going to seed, the red gone out of them. He had taken off his glasses and was holding them, which he did when he was tired and did not want the tiredness read in his eyes.

"You came up to say I told you so," he said, without turning.

"No, sir."

"You said it in March. You sat where you're standing and you told me the intelligence was arriving too neatly. That somebody was conducting it." He set the glasses back on his nose. "I decided you were carrying the girl too close. I decided

it was the asset talking through you." He let that rest. "I trusted Arvind. Understand what I'm telling you. Not relied on. Trusted. I've known him longer than I've known my son-in-law. Every step I took to put down a rogue unit that turns out to have been the only outfit in this country actually hunting the men who did Marol, I took on his counsel, and I took it gladly, because it was correct. Each step was correct."

"It was, sir. That's the part that doesn't sleep."

He looked at her then, and whatever he found made him gentler. "Fateh."

"Yes."

"You met him. The once."

"The once." She had not met him at all, in the way Kaul meant it, but she had spent nine weeks inside the wreckage of what the man had built, and he came up off the pages of it more sharply than people she had shared a desk with for years. A man who had taken an unaccountable thing and held it together with his own two hands because he believed no one else would, and had been right about the threat and wrong about almost everything around it, and had died in his own house with his own people turning their weapons on him, having seen the whole shape of it before any of them and been able to do nothing with the sight. The unit was ash. The case files were a homicide. There would be no citation, no quiet decoration carried across a desk to a widow, because on the books the man had run a death squad off them for eighteen years, and the state could not be seen to grieve him. He had been right. It had killed him, and it would not even be permitted to have killed him for a reason.

"There'll be a board," Kaul said. "On Sehgal. On the whole of it. It'll find procedures were not followed and lessons will

be learned. You know the shape it takes."

"I know the shape."

"And the company." He said company the way he might name an illness. "Meridian. They'll walk."

"Mehta's already walking, sir."

Kaul's jaw shifted. "I saw."

She had seen it that morning on the muted set in the analysts' bay. Julian Mehta in a good suit at a lectern, the clean grey logo behind him, the very picture of a man wounded by the conduct of others. Meridian Risk Group, the caption ran beneath him, was as appalled as the public by the allegations under examination. The company had retained independent counsel. The company had opened an internal review. Should that review find that any individual contractor or sub-vendor had engaged in the falsification of analytic product, that individual would face the full consequences, and Meridian would cooperate without reserve with the authorities of a nation it was proud to call a partner. He had used the word integrity four times; she had counted. He had looked, she thought, genuinely affronted, and that was the part that frightened her, because it meant he half believed it. He stood at the top of everything the country was allowed to see and seemed unable to turn his head toward the half of himself that knew he had been hired to be looked at. There was someone above him. There was always someone above, in the place where the paper ran out, and Mehta would never name that person, because to name them he would first have to admit they existed, and he had built his whole comfortable self on the conviction that he was the man in charge.

"He believes it," she said.

"What?"

"Mehta. When he says a rogue contractor deceived him. He believes it. That's the design. You build a man who reads as honest because he doesn't know he's the mask." She heard herself and stopped. This was the asset talking through her again, the girl's voice, the things the girl had come to understand about being made into an instrument by someone who let you believe the will was your own. She had carried Sita too close after all. The only difference was that Kaul would not say so now, because being right had at last cost a director his oldest friendship, and being right had finally become respectable.

He turned back to the glass. "The Americans had their NSO scandal and NSO is still trading. The graph databases, the prediction vendors, the men who sell you a photograph of next week. We took Aadhaar to a constitution bench and the data fusion went ahead anyway, under another name, with footnotes. You think this is the end of it." It was not a question.

"No, sir."

"Tell me why not. I want to hear it said so I can stop hoping."

Mira chose the words the way she chose footing on bad ground. "Because nothing that happened today touches the appetite. We proved one company faked one proof to sell one machine. We did not prove the country can live without the machine. The committee killed the contract because the proof was dirty, not because they decided they don't want to see everything. They still want to see everything. Marol is still the first thing in their minds, and the next attack will be real, and the morning after it some other grey logo will be in that room with a deck that says we could have stopped this, and the

proof will be clean, because the lesson the market took from today is not don't fake the foresight. It's don't get caught faking it. Backdate the timestamps properly." She stopped. "I had the procurement cell's inbox open this morning. Two unsolicited capability briefs already, from other firms. One of them is from a company that didn't exist in February. The deck is very good. It's stopped using the word prediction. It says resilience now. It learned."

Kaul said nothing for a while. Below, a gardener was playing a hose over the dying gulmohar, the water flaring where the low sun caught it.

"So we won," he said.

"We stopped the sale. Yes, sir. That part is finished and clean."

"And the man who built it. The principal. Your smell in the room." He came near to smiling, at his own old dismissal of her. "Will the board reach him."

"No," Mira said.

"You're certain."

She was certain in the way she had learned to despise, the certainty that came not from a document but from the shape of where a document should have been and was not. She had built the map with her own hands. Mehta at the visible summit. Almeida the proxy just under the waterline, a man who signed and did not decide. The Mauritius tier. And then the place where ownership thinned into nominees and the nominees into a trust whose settlor was a form of words, where the money came from everywhere and belonged to no one she could write onto a charge sheet. She had drawn the thread to its end and found at the end of it not a person but a method, a particular discipline in the running of cut-outs, an

elegance in the way each layer had been taught to be wholly true, so that every visible man honestly believed himself the last man in the chain. A signature with no hand behind it. The whole structure made honest at every level precisely so that no one inside it could ever betray a centre, because no one inside it had ever touched the centre.

She had read tradecraft of that grain once, years ago, in some closed file she could no longer place, and the resemblance had brushed her like a draught from a door she did not remember leaving open. She did not chase it. Resemblance was the cheapest thing in the trade; the discipline of the work was knowing when a likeness was a clue and when it was only the mind, tired and pattern-hungry, making a face out of a watermark. There was no face here. She had looked for one for three months and what she had found at the end was a way of doing things, not a person doing them, and she had made her peace with the difference because the difference was the point.

"I'm certain," she said. "We'll take the frontman, and we'll take Sehgal, and a contractor or two will be thrown to the review to keep Mehta's hands clean. And the head of it will not be marked, because the head of it was never written down anywhere. That was the whole architecture. You can't arrest a man who built the company precisely so that there'd be no man to arrest." She held his eye. "We didn't beat the architect, sir. We broke one of the things he made. He's still out there, and he still knows how to make the next one, and the next one won't leave the timestamps."

"He," Kaul said.

"I use the word for convenience. There's no man at the end of it; that was the design. Only a place where a person should

be." She let the pronoun stand where Kaul had set it and did not reach to correct it, because to correct it she would have had to put a shape in its place, and she had none. A he, a she, a committee, a ghost. The architecture had been built so the question had no answer you could serve a warrant on, and she had learned to leave the question lying where it was. "Whoever it is. The board will write he. It needs a he to acquit."

Kaul nodded slowly. A decent man used by the people he trusted to do a correct thing that had served the worst end, and he would carry that, she thought, longer than he carried any real mistake of his own, because his real mistakes had at least belonged to him. "Go home, Mira. You've been in this building since Tuesday."

She got as far as the door.

"The girl," Kaul said. "The asset. Sita." He set the name down carefully, testing whether it was safe to hold. "She did this. The leak. The three parties. It was her."

Mira had her hand on the door. "I don't know who did it, sir."

"Mira."

"I genuinely don't," she said, and it was almost true, which was the only kind of true the work had left her with. "Somebody got real data to three places at once, where it couldn't be reached and buried. Somebody who understood that the only answer to a machine that watches everything is to make it watch itself. That isn't in our doctrine. We never taught it." She opened the door onto the cold corridor. "Wherever she learned it, sir, she didn't learn it from us."

She kept the last of it for herself, and meant to go on keeping it. That the girl had walked out of the whole of it

alive, which was more than the right man had managed. That somewhere there was a name Sita had chosen not to speak, a silence she had bought and would go on paying for, and that Mira had known the shape of that silence the instant she stopped looking for it, because she had one of her own. That the machine would absorb today the way a body absorbs a bruise, the colour going from black to yellow to nothing, and that in a year the deck that said resilience would be in the windowless room and the men would lean toward it, and no one would recall that a man named Fateh had seen all of it first, and had died of being right.

The lift was slow in coming. When it came she rode it down alone, and through the narrowing gap as the doors closed she saw, pinned fresh on the noticeboard by the analysts' bay, the agenda for next month's threat-assessment review. Item four. Capability options for predictive integration. Vendor presentations to follow.

The doors closed over it. The lift went down.

Chapter 37

New Delhi · +60 days

The snow did not so much fall as arrive, fine as milled flour out of a sky the colour of wet slate, settling on the prayer flags until the printed mantras went soft and unreadable. She heard the bells before she saw the walls. Not the deep bronze of a temple in the plains but small things, copper and brass, strung along the eaves and struck by the wind so that the sound came in gusts, then stopped, then came again, as if the building itself were breathing through metal.

She had left the road at Manali two days before. From there a shared jeep to the last village that took diesel, then a bus that ran only because three Tibetans and a schoolteacher needed it to, and after the bus a path. She had paid cash everywhere, the way she always had, the rupees folded small and given without looking at the man taking them. No card, no scan, no number entered into a keypad. In the towns there were cameras now even here, bolted to electricity poles outside the liquor shops and the State Bank, and she had walked under them with her chin tucked into a borrowed shawl, reading their angles out of long habit, knowing that the habit was finished and reading them anyway.

That was the thing she had not expected. That the watching would not switch off when the reason for it did. She had spent the climb cataloguing the ridgeline for a man who might be following her and had found no one, and the finding of no one did not ease her. It only meant the search ran on, looking for nothing, the way a hand goes on closing around a

glass that is no longer there.

The gate was a gap in a stone wall, no gate at all. A boy of perhaps nine, monk-shaved, in a down jacket two sizes too large over his maroon robe, looked at her without surprise and said something she did not understand and then, seeing she had not understood, pointed with his whole arm down the length of the wall toward a low building where smoke came out of a tin chimney and lay flat on the wind.

She found him splitting wood.

She knew him before she saw his face, by the economy of it. The way a man holds an axe tells you everything; whether he has used one to work or to perform work. This one set each round on the block without looking at it, struck once, let the halves fall, and reached for the next while the halves were still rocking. No wasted lift. He wore a quilted jacket gone grey at the cuffs and a pair of army surplus trousers, and his hair had grown out and gone half to salt, and there was a stillness in him between the strokes that she recognised because she had been taught to manufacture it and had never managed to make it sit so quietly.

He finished the round he was on before he acknowledged her. Then he buried the axe head in the block, a small sure motion, and straightened, and looked at her across the woodpile with eyes that took her in the way she had taken in the cameras: angle, distance, intent, the location of her hands.

"You walked up," he said. In English. She had not said a word.

"From the village."

"Most people get a porter." He pulled the worn glove off one hand, finger by finger. "Most people who get a porter

aren't worth talking to."

She said nothing. The bells started up again along the eaves, a scatter of small notes, and were gone.

"You've come a long way to look at an old man cutting firewood," he said.

"I've come to see what's on the other side."

He understood her. She watched him understand her, and something moved in his face and was put away, the way a man pockets a thing he does not want to be seen holding. He picked up an armful of the split wood, balancing it against his chest, and tipped his head toward the building with the chimney.

"Then you'd better have tea," he said. "It's bad tea. You'll hate it."

The room was small and warm and smelled of butter and smoke and wet wool. A clay stove sat in the centre with its pipe running up through the roof, and along one wall a sleeping platform with a single folded blanket squared away on it with a precision that did not belong to a monastery. There were no photographs. There was a tin trunk, padlocked, and a row of pegs, and a window the size of a book through which the snow could be seen still arriving. She placed herself by instinct where she could see the door and the window both, and then saw that he had done the same, on the other side, and that there was no third place in the room that commanded either, and that he had built it that way.

He made the tea in a battered pan, the brick tea boiled black and then the salt and the rancid butter churned in until it came up the colour of weak coffee with a skin of fat on it. He poured two cups, wooden, and put one in front of her

without ceremony and sat with his back to the wall.

She drank. It was as bad as he had promised. She drank it anyway, slowly, the way she had been taught to do everything slowly now, by a dead man at a steel table who had told her to taste a thing before she swallowed it. The thought of Rudra came and she let it come and pass. She had stopped trying to keep the dead out. There were too many of them, and the door did not hold.

"You knew Luthra," she said.

He did not flinch at the name. That was its own answer. A man who flinched at a name was still negotiating with it.

"I knew Colonel Luthra," he said. "Yes."

"He sanctioned the thing that made me." She had decided on the climb that she would say it plainly, because she had spent eighteen years inside other people's careful sentences and she was done living in them. "A program. Off the books. He signed for it because it was a hard thing the country needed doing and he was the kind of man who would do a hard thing himself rather than make a younger man carry it. That's what I understand. Clean hands and one stain, and the stain was me."

"And you want to know," Kabir said, "what it costs to put down a man like that."

"I want to know what's left of the one who does it."

He turned the wooden cup a quarter turn on the boards in front of him and looked at it as if the answer were floating in the fat.

"He was teaching me to fish," he said. "Did you know that? Toward the end. A man who'd run half the dark corners of this country, and on Sunday mornings he wanted to stand in a cold river and not catch anything and call it peace." He

almost smiled. "I shot him to get to people I needed to be inside of. There was a calculation. The calculation was correct. I have gone over it many times and it does not come out differently." He lifted the cup, drank, set it down. "I tell you this so you understand I am not confessing. I made peace with the arithmetic. The arithmetic was never the problem."

"What was the problem."

"That arithmetic is not where people live."

The stove ticked. Outside a yak or a dzo lowed somewhere down the slope and was answered, and the small bells sounded and fell quiet.

"For a long time after," he said, "I waited to be either forgiven or destroyed. I thought those were the two doors. I thought the work would resolve, the way an operation resolves, into success or failure, and one of them would let me out." He shook his head slowly. "Neither door is real. You don't get punished and you don't get clean. You just go on being the person who did it, every morning, in an ordinary body that wants tea and gets cold. That's the part nobody briefs you on. There's no third act. There's only the residue."

She held the word. Residue. It was exactly right, and its rightness sat in her chest like the cold.

"I stopped a sale," she said. Quietly. It was the most she would give of it, and she would give it to him because he was the only living person who would not need the rest explained. "A machine that was being sold to the state. Built to see everything. They proved it could see by making the thing it claimed to have seen. People died so a graph could go up in a committee room. I broke it. I put the proof where they couldn't reach it, three different hands, none of them talking to the others." She looked at him. "And it changed nothing."

The contract is dead and the appetite isn't. There are men in those rooms already, this week, selling the next one, and they've learned to use softer words. I watched it happen. I stopped the thing and the thing went on without me, the way a river goes around a stone."

"Yes," he said. As if she had reported the weather.

"You knew it would."

"I know that shape, yes." Something passed behind his eyes, older than this conversation, the look of a man setting a thing she had described beside a thing of his own and deciding not to lay them side by side where she could see. He let it go. "Did you think breaking it would make you feel like the people who do this in films feel? At the end. When the music tells them they've won."

"For one night I thought I might."

"And."

"My hands were steady," she said. "That was all. I noticed my hands were steady and I waited for the rest of it to come, the part that would make the steadiness mean something. It never came. There was just the next morning, and the morning was very ordinary, and I had to decide what to do with it."

He nodded, slowly, and she saw that she had told him something he had long waited to hear another human being say, and that the hearing of it did not heal him either. It only made him less alone in it for the length of a cup of bad tea. That, she understood now, was the most that was on offer. Not absolution. Company.

They did not speak for a while. He refilled her cup without asking and she let him, and she drank it, and the second cup

was no better than the first and she found, to her surprise, that she did not mind. The light in the small window had gone the blue of late afternoon at altitude, the colour that comes just before the cold doubles. Somewhere in the building a horn sounded, long and flat, and then voices, low, a chant starting up without urgency, men who had done this at this hour ten thousand times.

"There was a man," she said. "My handler. He's dead now." She had not planned to say it. "He raised me to be the thing I was. Everything I am that's any good and everything that's a wound, he put it there with the same hand, and he meant it. He thought he was building me a future. He was building a weapon and calling it a daughter and he could not see the join, right up to the end. He died telling me where to find the truth." She stopped. "I don't know if I loved him. I don't have a clean way to test it. I only know that when I think of him not being in the world I have to put the cup down."

She had put the cup down. She noticed it on the board in front of her, her hand flat beside it.

Kabir watched her hand.

"That's the test," he said. "There isn't a cleaner one. They don't give us a cleaner one." He was quiet. "Luthra. When I let myself think of him standing in the river, I can't hold the rod. My hands won't do it. Twenty years of fieldcraft and I cannot tie a fishing fly because the man who would have taught me is the man I shot." He turned his palms up briefly and turned them back down. "That's not guilt. Guilt is a feeling, it comes and goes. This is just true. It's load-bearing. It's part of how the structure stands now."

"A person where a weapon stood," she said.

He looked at her sharply, the first quick movement he had made.

"Who told you that?"

"No one. It's what I've been trying to say since I started up the hill." She turned her own cup, the way he had, a quarter turn. "I was made to be a thing that acts. Point and it goes. And the whole way up here I kept checking the ridge for a man who isn't there, because the thing that acts doesn't know how to be off. And I'm starting to understand that the not-knowing is the work now. The work isn't out there anymore. There's no key on the table." She heard herself say it and did not explain it and he did not ask. "The work is learning to be the person the weapon was hiding inside the whole time. And no one trained me for that one. There's no schedule for it. I have to make it up every morning, badly, alone."

"Not entirely alone," he said. "You found me."

"I found one other person who knows the country has no roads," she said. "That's not the same as not being alone. But it's not nothing."

"No," he agreed. "It's not nothing."

The chant went on through the wall, rising and falling, indifferent to both of them, and she found that she wanted it to go on, that the wanting was a small clean thing without an angle to it, the first such thing she could remember wanting in a long time.

He walked her to the wall when the light was nearly gone. The snow had stopped. The clouds had pulled off the high ridges to the north and the peaks stood out hard and pink against a sky going to indigo, and the cold was the kind that

has weight, that presses on the face like a hand. The boy in the oversized jacket ran past them with another boy, both of them shrieking with laughter, sliding on the packed snow in their sandalled feet, and Kabir watched them go with an expression she could not name and did not try to.

"You'll go down in the dark," he said. "There's a hut an hour below the village. It's empty in winter. The door swells, you have to lift it."

She filed it. The reflex filing, the operator's intake of a fallback location, and she let it be what it was, ordinary information from one person to another, a kindness shaped like tradecraft because that was the only shape either of them knew how to make a kindness in.

"Will you stay here," she asked. "Now that I've seen you."

"Where would I go." It was not a question. "I cut wood. I carry water. I am bad at the chanting and they let me sit at the back. It isn't peace." He looked out at the pink going off the peaks. "Luthra was wrong about that part. Standing in the cold river was never going to be peace. But it's a place to put the residue down for an hour at a time. That turns out to be the whole of it. You put it down, you pick it up, you put it down again. I used to think that was failure. Now I think it might be the only honest way to carry a thing that doesn't go away."

She stood at the gap in the wall with the dark coming up the valley behind her and the small bells sounding, once, twice, along the eaves, then nothing.

"I came up here to find out if it gets better," she said.

"It doesn't get better," Kabir said. "It gets yours. There's a difference. It took me a long time to learn the difference." He put out his hand, not to shake hers, but with the worn glove

held in it, the second glove, the one he had pulled off his other hand by the woodpile that morning. "The path ices over the last stretch above the hut. You'll want both hands free and warm."

She looked at the glove. It was a stupid thing, a grey wool inner glove with a hole worn at the thumb, and she felt her eyes sting in the cold for a reason she could not have entered into any report. She took it. Their hands did not touch.

"Eat something at the hut," he said. "You haven't eaten since the village. Don't tell me you have, I watched you not eat. Whatever you've got in that bag, eat it slowly. Taste it first." He almost smiled again, and this time he let it finish. "Someone must have told you that once."

"Someone did," she said.

She put the glove on. It was warm still, from his hand, and the warmth would not last past the first switchback, and she knew that, and she wore it anyway and started down into the blue dark where the path was, one careful foot and then the next, listening, as she went, to the bells fail and gather and fail behind her, and to her own breath, which was the loudest thing in the world, and which was, she understood with something that was not quite triumph and was not quite grief but was entirely hers, the breath of a person, walking down a mountain, hungry.