

The Iron Alibi and Other Stories

THE IRON ALIBI

and Other Stories

Eleven Tales of Suspense
from the Gym Floor

A Collection in the Tradition of Sidney Sheldon

MAY 2026 Edition

About the Author

Manoj Palwe knows that the most dangerous deceptions always happen inside a closed system.

For over two decades, he has operated at the highest levels of global immigration law. As a Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultant (RCIC R422575), a CAPIC Fellow (R11592), and President of Taurus Infotek (Dreamvisas) in Canada and India, his career has been defined by reading the fine print, analyzing complex international frameworks, and understanding how rules are enforced—and how they are broken.

Behind this sharp analytical mind is a man raised on the masterpieces of suspense. As an avid, lifelong reader who spent decades devouring the works of Sidney Sheldon, Dick Francis, and Frederick Forsyth, Manoj became obsessed with the mechanics of the perfect plot twist.

He paired this literary obsession with a boundless, high-energy love for the arena. A truly energetic sports enthusiast, Manoj has spent over fifty years keenly following, analyzing, and actively playing almost every single sport featured in his universe—from tennis and cricket to hockey and football (gladly leaving the high-speed cockpits of motorsport to the professionals). He knows the physical toll, the locker-room dynamics, and the psychological grit of these games firsthand.

In his groundbreaking 12-book series, *Clean Sport*, *Dirty Games*, he fuses his professional mastery of institutional systems, his athletic background, and classic page-turning thriller structures. The result is a premium collection of technical, high-stakes suspense thrillers that expose the gritty reality behind the glamorous facade of elite sports. When Manoj writes a cliffhanger, he isn't just inventing fiction—he's writing from a lifetime of knowing exactly how the world, the game, and a great book work.

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First edition, May 2026.

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References to immigration programmes, statutes, government bodies, and official procedures are intended to lend the stories texture; they should not be relied upon as legal or procedural guidance. For advice on any actual immigration matter, readers are urged to consult a Regulated Canadian Immigration Consultant licensed by the College of Immigration and Citizenship Consultants, or a qualified immigration lawyer.

*"There is no such thing as a coincidence in this business.
There are only people who have not yet figured out
who is doing what to them, and why."*

— Anya Volkov, Monte Carlo, 2026

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*A note to the reader: these stories share a world.
Characters cross between them. Threads unravel slowly.
Read in order, if you can.*

STORY I

THE IRON ALIBI

Manhattan

Chapter One

Carmen Rivera learned how to lie before she learned how to read.

Her mother taught her, in the back room of a dry-cleaning shop in East Harlem, that a lie was only a lie if you didn't believe it yourself. *Mírame, mija*. Look at me. *When you say it, you must see it. You must taste it. You must remember it as if it happened.* Her mother had been the most beautiful woman on 116th Street, and she had married four men, and she had buried three of them, and the fourth had simply vanished on a Tuesday in August 1998, leaving behind a closet full of Italian suits and a Rolex that Carmen still wore on special occasions.

Today was a special occasion.

The Rolex read 5:47 a.m. as the elevator climbed the fourteen floors to Olympus Fitness, and Carmen studied her reflection in the brushed-steel doors and practiced her face. The face she would wear when the police came. The face of a wife who had just been told. The face she had been rehearsing for eighteen months, in mirrors, in bathrooms, in the back of taxis, in the dark.

Theodore is dead, Mrs. Whitmore.

Her lips parted. Her eyes filled — not too much, never too much, her mother had taught her that grief in rich women was a whisper, not a scream. Her hand rose to her throat, found the small gold cross her mother had given her on her First Communion, and clutched it.

Oh God. Oh God, no.

Perfect.

The elevator chimed. The doors opened. And Marcus was waiting for her in the hallway, exactly as he had been waiting for her every Tuesday and Thursday morning for the past four hundred and seventeen days, and Carmen's stomach turned over the way it always did when she saw him, because Marcus Delacroix was the kind of beautiful that ruined women, and Carmen Rivera was not in the business of being ruined.

She was in the business of ruining.

"You're late," he said.

"I'm on time."

"You're forty seconds late." He held up his wrist, tapped the Tag Heuer she had bought him for his thirty-second birthday. "Forty seconds is the difference between an alibi and a problem."

She kissed him. She did not mean to, but she did, because the elevator camera was on the wall behind him and the elevator camera was important, and a wife having an affair with her trainer was a much smaller scandal than a wife murdering her husband. *Misdirection*, her mother had whispered, on her

deathbed, the morning before the cancer finally won. *Mija, always give them a smaller crime to find.*

"Forty seconds," Carmen murmured against his mouth. "I'll make it up on the bench."

Marcus laughed. It was a sound she had once loved.

She had stopped loving it around the same time she had found the second phone in his gym bag, three months ago, and read the messages from a woman named Elena who lived in Forest Hills and who called Marcus *mi amor* and who had, apparently, no idea that Marcus was about to come into four million dollars.

Carmen had not confronted him. Carmen had simply, quietly, begun to make adjustments.

The studio on the fourteenth floor was Marcus's private domain — a glass-walled rectangle facing south, with a view of the park that was worth more than the building it sat in. Carmen had paid for the studio. Theodore's money, of course, funneled through a shell company in Delaware that Marcus believed he had set up himself. Marcus believed many things he should not have believed. That was the thing about beautiful men: they were so accustomed to being looked at that they forgot to look back.

"Warm-up," Marcus said, clapping his hands. "Five minutes. Then we hit chest."

Carmen stepped onto the treadmill. She set the incline to four, the speed to six-point-five, and began to run.

Forty-seven cameras, she thought. Forty-seven cameras in this building. Twelve in this studio alone. The footage would be

subpoenaed. The footage would be reviewed. The footage would show Carmen Rivera Whitmore running on a treadmill at 5:51 a.m. on a Thursday morning, sweating, laughing, alive — while sixty-three blocks south, in the master bedroom of a townhouse on East 71st Street, her husband would be reaching for his espresso.

Theodore drank his espresso at 6:15 a.m. every morning. Theodore had drunk his espresso at 6:15 a.m. every morning for thirty-one years. Theodore was a man who believed routine was a form of discipline, and discipline was a form of power, and power was the only thing in the world worth having.

Theodore was about to be proven wrong.

"Faster," Marcus said.

Carmen pushed the speed to seven-point-five. The treadmill hummed beneath her. Her ponytail swung. Through the glass wall she could see the park, still dark, the first joggers just beginning to appear on the bridge path like small determined ghosts.

She thought about the pod.

The pod was the elegant part. The pod was the part she was proud of. Theodore's housekeeper, Mrs. Petrov, prepared the espresso machine every night before she went home — loaded the water, loaded the pod, set the timer. At exactly 6:14 a.m., the machine would begin to heat. At 6:15, Theodore, in his silk robe, would press the button. Sixty seconds later, he would be drinking the most expensive coffee in the world, and ninety seconds after that, he would be on the floor of the kitchen, and four minutes after that, he would be dead.

The compound was a derivative of conotoxin, harvested from a sea snail found only in the waters off the Philippines. It was untraceable in standard toxicology. It mimicked cardiac arrest. Theodore was sixty-eight years old, and his cardiologist had warned him three times in the last year about his cholesterol, and his cardiologist would sign the death certificate without ever ordering the kind of test that might find anything unusual.

Marcus had acquired the compound. Marcus had, three nights ago, let himself into the townhouse with the key Carmen had given him, walked past the sleeping housekeeper, and replaced the morning's pod with an identical pod containing enough conotoxin to kill a man four times Theodore's size.

Marcus believed this was the only pod that had been replaced.

Marcus was wrong.

"Ninety seconds," he called. "Then we move."

Carmen nodded. She did not look at him. She was thinking about the second pod — the one that was, at this exact moment, waiting in her own kitchen on the twelfth floor of the building on Park Avenue, the building she had moved into eight months ago after the *trial separation* that the gossip columns had covered with such glee. The pod that Marcus had, two nights ago, let himself in and replaced — believing he was protecting their secret, believing he was eliminating the only woman who could connect him to the murder of Theodore Whitmore III.

The pod that Carmen had, yesterday afternoon, while Marcus was at his other apartment with the woman named Elena, quietly switched back.

The pod that was, right now, sitting in her espresso machine, harmless. Decaf, in fact. Carmen had switched to decaf six months ago, on the advice of her therapist, although she had not told Marcus this, because Marcus did not need to know everything.

The pod that Marcus believed would kill her at 7:32 a.m. was now sitting at the bottom of the East River, wrapped in three layers of plastic and weighted with a dumbbell from the gym in her building.

The pod that would kill *Marcus* — the pod she had prepared herself, in a chemistry lab at Hunter College where she had been quietly auditing classes under her maiden name for the past eleven months — was waiting in the small refrigerator in the corner of Studio C. The refrigerator where Marcus kept his post-workout protein shakes. The shake he would drink at 7:15 a.m., as he did every Tuesday and Thursday, standing at the window, looking out at the park, planning a future with a woman in Forest Hills who would, by 8 a.m., be a widow without ever having been a wife.

"Carmen." Marcus's voice. Sharp now. "Treadmill. Off. Let's go."

She slowed the belt. Stepped off. Smiled at him.

"Sorry, papi," she said. "I was thinking."

"About what?"

She walked past him toward the bench. She let her fingers trail across his chest, the way she had four hundred and seventeen times before. She let him smell her perfume — Chanel No. 5, the same perfume her mother had worn, the same perfume her mother had been wearing the night her fourth husband disappeared.

"About how much I love you," Carmen Rivera said.

And she meant it the way her mother had taught her to mean things.

She believed it. She tasted it. She remembered it as if it had happened.

The Rolex on her wrist read 5:58 a.m.

In seventeen minutes, Theodore would be dead.

In seventy-seven minutes, Marcus would be dead.

In ninety minutes, Carmen Rivera Whitmore would be the wealthiest widow on the Upper East Side, and somewhere in a small apartment in Forest Hills, a woman named Elena would be waiting for a phone call that would never come.

Carmen lay back on the bench, gripped the bar, and smiled up at the ceiling.

Her mother would have been proud.

Chapter Two

At 6:14 a.m., on East 71st Street, the Breville Oracle Touch espresso machine began to heat.

It made a small contented humming sound that, after thirty-one years, Theodore Whitmore III no longer consciously heard. It was simply part of the morning, the way the heating pipes were part of the morning, the way the soft Persian carpet under his bare feet was part of the morning, the way his own breath was part of the morning. The machine hummed. The water came to temperature. And Theodore, in his blue silk robe and his calfskin slippers, walked into the kitchen the way he had walked into the kitchen ten thousand mornings before.

Mrs. Petrov was already gone. She came at four. She left at six. Theodore liked the kitchen empty when he had his coffee. He liked many things to be empty when he was in them — rooms, calendars, marriages.

He pressed the button.

The machine began to grind.

Theodore looked out the tall window at the garden behind the townhouse — the small walled garden his first wife had designed in 1987, the year before she discovered that he had been sleeping with her sister, the year before the divorce that had cost him eight million dollars and his hair. He had kept the garden. He had kept the townhouse. He had kept, over the years, most things.

He had not kept his first wife. He had not kept his second. And he was not, as it happened, going to keep his third.

The espresso flowed into the cup.

Theodore lifted it. The aroma rose. He did not, in his last conscious moment on this earth, think of Carmen. He thought, oddly, of his father — a man who had taught him at the age of seven that the proper way to drink coffee was to inhale before the first sip, because the smell was half of the pleasure, and a man who did not understand pleasure could never understand power.

Theodore inhaled.

Theodore sipped.

Theodore had time to register, in the small precise compartment of his mind that handled wine and coffee and other refined inputs, that something was wrong with the taste. Something bitter. Something metallic. Something he did not recognise. And then his hand opened, and the cup fell, and the porcelain shattered on the Calacatta marble, and Theodore Whitmore III pitched forward into the kitchen island and slid, very slowly, very quietly, to the floor.

His last thought was of his lawyer.

His will. He had been meaning to change it. He had drafted the new version three weeks ago. He had not signed it.

Carmen would get everything.

Oh, Theodore thought, with something almost like admiration. *Oh, you clever little—*

And then Theodore did not think anything at all.

At 6:21 a.m., on the fourteenth floor of Olympus Fitness, Carmen Rivera completed her tenth rep on the incline press and racked the bar.

"Good," Marcus said. "Two more sets."

Carmen sat up. She wiped her face with a towel. She let her eyes drift, casually, to the small refrigerator in the corner of the studio, where two protein shakes — one chocolate, one vanilla — sat on the top shelf, exactly as Marcus had placed them at 5:42 a.m.

Marcus always drank the chocolate.

Carmen always drank the vanilla.

This had been their pattern for four hundred and seventeen days. Marcus did not deviate from patterns. Marcus believed patterns were the architecture of an alibi. Marcus had told her this on their seventh session together, lying naked on the floor of this very studio, and Carmen had filed the information away the way she filed everything Marcus said, in a small precise compartment in her own mind labelled *useful*.

The vanilla shake — Carmen's shake — was untouched.

The chocolate shake — Marcus's shake — contained a second derivative of conotoxin. A faster-acting variant. A variant that did not mimic cardiac arrest, because Marcus did not have heart disease and Marcus was thirty-two years old and Marcus would attract scrutiny no matter how he died. The variant in the chocolate shake mimicked, instead, anaphylactic shock — the kind of reaction a young man might have to a peanut allergy he had not known he had. Marcus's post-workout shakes were made by a company in Brooklyn. The lab analysis would, in three days, reveal trace peanut protein in the batch. The company would issue a recall. There would be a lawsuit. Marcus's family would receive, eventually, two-point-three million dollars from a settlement.

Carmen had arranged this also. Carmen had been busy.

"Carmen." Marcus snapped his fingers. "Focus. Second set."

She lay back down. She gripped the bar. She pressed.

Eight reps. Nine. Ten.

"Beautiful," Marcus said. "One more set."

Somewhere, sixty-three blocks south, Theodore was already dead. He had died, Carmen calculated, approximately six minutes ago. The housekeeper would not return until tomorrow morning. The body would be found by Theodore's personal assistant, Marguerite, who arrived at the townhouse every weekday at 8:30 a.m. to brief him on his calendar. Marguerite would find him on the kitchen floor. Marguerite would call 911. Marguerite would call Theodore's cardiologist. And then, somewhere in the chain, Marguerite would call Carmen.

Carmen had to be in a public place when that call came.

Carmen had to be visible. Recorded. Witnessed.

That was the only thing left to manage.

"Third set," Marcus said.

Carmen pressed. Ten reps. She racked the bar. She sat up.

"Water break," Marcus said. "Shake. Then we hit triceps."

He walked to the refrigerator.

Carmen did not breathe.

Marcus opened the refrigerator. He took out the chocolate shake. He took out the vanilla shake. He carried both back to the bench.

He handed Carmen the vanilla.

He kept the chocolate.

He smiled at her. He unscrewed the cap. He raised the bottle in a small toast — a private joke between them, an old habit, a thing he had done four hundred and sixteen times before.

"To Thursday mornings," Marcus said.

"To Thursday mornings," Carmen said.

And then Marcus Delacroix, the most beautiful man Carmen had ever met, the man she had loved with the part of herself that her mother had warned her never to use, lifted the chocolate shake to his lips and—

—and his phone rang.

He paused. The bottle hovered. He glanced at the screen. He frowned.

"One second."

He set the bottle down on the bench. He turned. He walked to the far end of the studio, the phone pressed to his ear.

"Elena," he said softly. "Baby, I told you not to call this number—"

Carmen sat very still.

Her vanilla shake was warming in her hand.

Marcus's chocolate shake sat on the bench beside her, sweating in the studio's air-conditioning, the cap unscrewed, the contents glittering faintly through the brown plastic.

She listened. Marcus's back was to her. He was speaking in Spanish now — fast, low Spanish, the kind he only used when he was angry. *Te dije que no llamas. Te dije.* And then, after a long pause, his voice changed. Softened. *No, mi vida. No, claro que no. Esta noche. Te lo prometo.*

Tonight. He had promised her tonight.

Carmen looked at the chocolate shake.

Carmen looked at her vanilla shake.

She thought, with great clarity, about her mother in the back room of the dry-cleaning shop. *Mija. Always have a second plan. And a third. And a fourth. Never love anyone enough to stop counting.*

Carmen had a fourth plan.

Carmen had a fourth plan because Carmen had, eleven months ago in the chemistry lab at Hunter College, prepared not two but *three* compounds. The first had killed Theodore. The second was waiting for Marcus in the chocolate shake. The third — a clear odourless powder, harmless on its own, lethal only when combined with the chocolate compound — was already, and had been since 5:42 a.m., dissolved in Carmen's own vanilla shake.

It was a kill switch. It was insurance. It was the thing Carmen had prepared for the only contingency she had truly feared: that Marcus, in some moment of paranoia or instinct or simple bad luck, would switch the bottles.

He had not switched the bottles.

But Carmen had been holding the vanilla shake for ninety seconds. And the powder inside it — inert when consumed alone — was not inert when, for example, splashed onto the lips of a man who had just taken a sip of the chocolate compound. The two compounds together produced, within twenty seconds, a reaction so violent that the human nervous system simply stopped.

Carmen looked at her shake.

She looked at Marcus, his back still turned, still murmuring to the woman in Forest Hills.

And then Carmen Rivera did the thing her mother had taught her to do when a plan stopped working: she made a new plan in eleven seconds.

She stood up. She walked to Marcus. She wrapped her arms around him from behind. She pressed her body against his. She whispered, in his ear, in Spanish — the Spanish of her mother, the Spanish of 116th Street, the Spanish of the back room of the dry-cleaning shop:

Cuelga el teléfono, mi amor. Estoy celosa. Quiero que me beses.

Hang up, my love. I'm jealous. I want you to kiss me.

Marcus laughed. He turned. He said into the phone, "I have to go. The client." He ended the call. He looked down at Carmen with the expression she had seen four hundred and seventeen times before — the expression of a man who believed he was loved.

She kissed him.

She kissed him long and slow and deep, and as she kissed him she let her hand, still holding the open vanilla bottle, tilt very slightly, so that one small bead of liquid — no more than a teardrop — ran down the back of his neck, into the collar of his t-shirt, against the thin sweat-damp skin between his shoulder blades.

Marcus did not notice.

Marcus broke the kiss. Marcus smiled. Marcus picked up the chocolate shake from the bench.

Marcus drank.

Carmen watched him swallow. She watched his Adam's apple move. She watched his eyes change — the small flicker, the half-second of confusion, the way his hand reached up to his throat as though something were caught there.

It took eleven seconds.

He looked at her.

Carmen did not move. Carmen did not speak. Carmen watched the man she had loved understand, in the last clear moment of his life, exactly what she had done — and watched him understand also that he had no time to say a single word about it.

Marcus Delacroix fell.

He fell forward. He fell hard. He fell across the bench, across the bottle of vanilla that Carmen had, in the same motion, lifted to her own lips and tilted, mouth closed, lips sealed, so that the camera in the corner of Studio C — the camera Marcus had told her was disabled, the camera Carmen had checked herself, the camera that was, in fact, recording —

would see Carmen drinking her shake at the exact moment her trainer collapsed beside her.

Carmen dropped the bottle. Carmen screamed.

She screamed beautifully. She screamed the way her mother had taught her to scream — not too loud, not too long, the scream of a wife in shock, the scream of a witness in horror. She fell to her knees. She grabbed Marcus's shoulders. She shook him. She wept.

"Help! Somebody — somebody, please—"

She fumbled for her phone. She dialed 911. Her hands were shaking. She gave the address. She gave the floor. She gave the studio number.

"He just — he just collapsed — oh God, oh God, he's not breathing—"

The dispatcher was calm. The dispatcher told her to begin CPR. Carmen began CPR. She compressed his chest the way her mother had once, in the back room of the dry-cleaning shop, taught her to compress the chest of a man — though that man had not, in the end, needed saving either.

At 6:47 a.m., the paramedics arrived.

At 6:51 a.m., they pronounced Marcus Delacroix dead at the scene.

At 7:03 a.m., Carmen's phone rang. It was Marguerite. Marguerite was crying. Marguerite said the words Carmen had been waiting to hear for eighteen months.

Carmen produced the face. Carmen produced the tears. Carmen produced the small collapse against the wall, the slow

slide to the floor, the hand to the mouth, the whispered *no, no, no*.

The paramedics looked at her with terrible pity.

One of them — a young woman with red hair — said, "Ma'am, I'm so sorry. Is there someone we can call?"

Carmen Rivera Whitmore looked up at her, her face wet, her cross clutched in her fist, and she said, in the broken voice of a woman whose entire world had ended twice in one morning:

"My mother. Please. Call my mother."

The young woman did not know that Carmen's mother had been dead for fourteen years.

The young woman did not know that the number Carmen would give her was the number of an answering service in Queens, paid for in cash, that recorded every call and would, eight months later, produce for the prosecution a recording of the paramedic's voice — proof that on the morning of her trainer's death, Carmen Rivera Whitmore had been so distraught she had asked for her dead mother.

Insurance. Her mother had taught her. Always have insurance.

Outside the glass wall of Studio C, the sun was rising over Central Park.

It was going to be, Carmen thought, a beautiful day.



STORY II

THE LAST REP

Monte Carlo

Anya Volkov had survived Chernobyl, two husbands, and the Bratva. She was not going to be killed by a treadmill.

At sixty-three, she owned the most exclusive women-only gym in Monte Carlo — a glass-and-marble cathedral on the Avenue Princesse Grace where the wives of oligarchs sweated out their secrets, where the air smelled of eucalyptus and money, and where Anya, smiling, recorded every word through microphones hidden in the towels.

For twenty years, the recordings had kept her safe. *Insurance*, she called it, in the small private dialect that Russian women of her generation reserved for things they did not say aloud. Audio of a Saudi prince's wife describing her husband's pharmaceutical fortune. Audio of a Greek shipping heiress detailing a tax structure that did not legally exist. Audio of a French minister's mistress, breathless on a Pilates reformer, naming the offshore account into which her quarterly affection was deposited.

Anya did not blackmail. Anya simply *knew*. And the knowing was, in itself, the protection. Three times in the past decade, when a husband had grown suspicious or an enemy had grown brave, a single envelope — delivered by courier, unmarked, to

a single address — had ended the problem before the problem could end Anya.

Until the morning Sophia Aslanov walked into her office.

Sophia was twenty-eight. Sophia was beautiful in the particular Slavic way that combined fragility and steel in proportions Anya recognised from her own youth. Sophia placed a photograph on Anya's glass desk, and she said, very quietly, in Russian:

"My father's killer has a very nice gym."

Anya looked at the photograph.

Anya had not seen this photograph in forty years.

It had been taken in a basement in Kiev in 1986, three weeks after the reactor at Chernobyl had unmade the sky, and it showed a young woman — twenty-three, blonde, terrified, beautiful — holding a Makarov pistol to the head of a man kneeling on a concrete floor. The man's face was visible. The man was crying. Anya remembered, with a clarity that surprised her, that he had wet himself.

The young woman was Anya.

The man on the floor was the father Sophia Aslanov had spent twenty-eight years not knowing.

Anya did not flinch. She had not survived this long by flinching. She poured two glasses of Evian, slid one across the desk, and said, "Your father was a butcher who sold the names of seventeen women to the KGB for a quarter of a kilo of beef. The women were taken to a place outside Smolensk. None of them returned. One of them was my sister. Please. Sit. Let us discuss what you really want."

Sophia did not sit.

"I want," Sophia said, "the recordings. All of them. By midnight."

Anya considered her. The girl had her father's eyes — the cold pale grey of a Baltic morning. She did not have his weakness. That was useful information.

"You understand," Anya said gently, "that the recordings are insurance for many people. Not only for me. If they were released, dozens of families across Europe would be destroyed. Marriages. Fortunes. A French cabinet, possibly. You would be making enemies you cannot imagine."

"I am not asking you to release them. I am asking you to give them to *me*."

"Ah." Anya smiled. "And then?"

"And then," Sophia said, "I make my own insurance."

Anya nodded slowly. So the girl had thought it through. So the girl was, in fact, her father's daughter — and her father had been many things, but stupid was not among them. The girl wanted the recordings not to ruin Anya, but to *replace* her. To inherit the small dark crown Anya had built over twenty years on the Côte d'Azur.

"Midnight," Anya said. "Yes. I think that can be arranged."

It was 11:47 p.m. when Anya handed Sophia the USB drive.

They were alone in the gym. Anya had sent the cleaning staff home at ten. The Mediterranean was a black sheet outside the windows. Somewhere down on the harbor, a fireworks display had just ended — some oligarch's birthday, some yacht

christening, some celebration whose details did not matter. The smoke still drifted across the water.

"Eight hundred and three hours," Anya said, sliding the drive across the desk. "Catalogued by date, by speaker, by topic. Encrypted. The password is your father's middle name."

Sophia took the drive. She held it for a long moment, as though weighing it.

"You expected me to come for you."

"I expected someone to come for me, child. Eventually. I did not know it would be you. That was — I admit it — a surprise."

"And yet you give me what I asked for."

Anya stood. She walked to the small bar in the corner of her office. She lifted a bottle of Dom Pérignon from the ice. She poured two glasses.

"Sophia," she said. "May I tell you something a woman told me, when I was your age, in a hospital in Minsk, the day I learned I could never have children? She said: *Anya, in this life you will be given two kinds of gift. The gifts that make you stronger, and the gifts that make you weaker. The trick is to know which is which before you accept either.* Drink with me."

Sophia hesitated.

"It is not poisoned," Anya said, with a small dry smile. "Watch."

Anya took a sip from her own glass. She held it in her mouth. She swallowed. She set the glass down.

"There. Now drink."

Sophia drank.

She drank, in fact, deeply — because she was twenty-eight, and she had just won, and she was about to become the most powerful woman on this stretch of coast, and the champagne was very, very good.

Anya watched her drink. Anya watched her finish the glass.

Then Anya did something she had not done in forty years: she walked around the desk, and she embraced the daughter of the man she had killed in a basement in Kiev. She held the girl close. She breathed in the scent of her hair — Chanel, the same perfume Sophia's mother had once worn, in a different life, in a different country.

She held the embrace for exactly four seconds longer than was necessary.

In those four seconds, the small, almost weightless patch hidden in the inner cuff of Anya's blouse — a transdermal pharmaceutical compound developed in a laboratory in Novosibirsk and never approved by any regulatory body in any country — pressed against the warm skin at the base of Sophia's neck. The compound was tasteless. The compound was odourless. The compound did not, contrary to its developers' modest hopes, kill instantly. It killed slowly, over seventy-two hours, by inducing progressive renal failure that mimicked, in the eyes of any competent pathologist, an aggressive autoimmune nephritis.

Three days. Sophia had three days to enjoy her victory.

Anya released her.

"Go," she said softly. "It is late, child. Go enjoy your inheritance."

Sophia smiled. She was glowing now — the champagne, the triumph, the relief. She kissed Anya on both cheeks, in the French manner, and she walked out of the office, and she walked down the marble corridor, and she walked out into the Monaco night with the USB drive clutched in her fist like a key to a kingdom she would not live to enter.

Anya locked the office. She set the alarm. She walked through the silent gym, past the silent reformers, past the silent treadmills, past the great wall of one-way mirrors behind which, in twenty years, no one had ever caught her listening.

She stepped out onto the Avenue Princesse Grace. The Mediterranean breathed against the sea wall. Somewhere, far out on the water, a small yacht was burning — Anya could see the orange glow against the black. She did not know whose yacht it was. She did not need to know. The world was full of yachts that burned, on nights like this, for reasons that did not concern her.

She thought about the USB drive.

The USB drive was, of course, real. The eight hundred and three hours were real. Sophia would, before her kidneys failed, have time to listen to perhaps forty of those hours. She would discover, somewhere around hour seventeen, an audio file labelled *Aslanov, K. — January 2003*. She would press play. She would hear a man's voice — her father's voice, the voice she had been told for twenty-eight years she would never hear, the voice her mother had described to her in fragments — speaking to a woman in a hotel room in Vienna.

The woman in the hotel room was not her mother.

The man in the hotel room was, by 2003, supposed to have been dead for seventeen years.

Anya had killed Konstantin Aslanov in that basement in Kiev in 1986. Of this Anya was certain. She had killed him because he had sold her sister to the KGB. She had killed him slowly. She had killed him in a way she did not, even now at sixty-three, regret.

But the man in the hotel room in Vienna in 2003 was, somehow, also Konstantin Aslanov. And the recording — which Anya had never made, which had simply appeared in her archive eleven years ago, anonymously, on a USB drive identical to the one she had just given his daughter — proved that she had not, in fact, killed him at all. That the man in the basement in Kiev had been someone else. A double. A decoy. A brother, perhaps. Anya had spent eleven years not knowing.

Sophia would discover, in the forty hours she had left, that her father was alive.

Sophia would discover that her father had let her grow up believing him dead.

Sophia would discover that her father — the father whose photograph she had carried in her wallet for twenty-eight years, the father whose memory she had built her entire avenging life around — had been, in fact, the one who put the photograph in Anya's archive. Who had wanted, for reasons of his own that Anya did not yet fully understand, his daughter to come for her.

And Sophia would discover all of this from her hospital bed, in the seventy-second hour of her renal failure, with a phone in her hand and a number to call and no time left to call it.

Anya did not know why Konstantin Aslanov wanted his daughter dead.

Anya intended to find out.

She turned away from the burning yacht. She walked home along the harbor, the heels of her Ferragamo flats clicking softly on the stone. The lights of the Hôtel de Paris blazed against the dark. A man in a tuxedo passed her, walking the other way; he tipped his head; she did not return the gesture.

She had a six a.m. spin class to teach.

And, somewhere in a laboratory in Novosibirsk, a chemist she had not spoken to in twenty years was about to receive a call from a woman he had once loved, asking him whether the compound he had developed in 1996 had ever — in any of its variants, in any of its preliminary trials — produced a *false positive*. Whether a person dosed with the compound could, in fact, *survive*.

Because Anya Volkov had not, in forty years, survived Chernobyl and two husbands and the Bratva by killing people.

She had survived by knowing the difference between the people who needed to die and the people who needed, very urgently, to be kept alive long enough to answer a question.

Sophia Aslanov was, by midnight on the third day, going to answer a question.

And then, depending on the answer, Anya was going to decide what to do about a man who had been dead for forty years and was, apparently, not.



STORY III

THE MIRROR ROOM

Manhattan

The mirrors in Studio C were one-way.

Lara Chen discovered this on a Tuesday in October, three weeks after she had been hired as the newest trainer at Apex — Manhattan's most expensive private gym, the kind where membership cost more than most people's mortgages and the clientele included three senators, two Oscar winners, and a man whose name appeared on no list but whose photograph hung in the FBI's most secure vault.

She discovered it because she had forgotten her phone after her nine p.m. session and returned to find Studio C dark, the door slightly ajar, and a voice she recognised — Senator Halloway's voice — coming from behind the mirrored wall.

"...by Friday, or the girl disappears like the others."

Lara did not breathe. She did not move. She stood in the dark hallway outside Studio C, her phone forgotten on the bench inside, and she listened as three men she had personally trained that week discussed the murder of a journalist she had read about that morning.

The journalist's name was Aditi Bose. She had been twenty-six. She had been writing a piece for *The Atlantic* about a

private intelligence firm that operated, the article had implied, from a townhouse in the West Village and a satellite office in Cuffe Parade, Bombay. The article had been scheduled to publish on Friday.

Aditi Bose had vanished on Tuesday morning. Her body had been found in the East River on Tuesday afternoon. The medical examiner had ruled it suicide.

Lara had read the article in the *Times* over her morning coffee. She had felt a flicker of something she could not name. She had gone to work.

She had not known, until she stood in the dark hallway outside Studio C, that Aditi Bose had been her sister Mei's closest friend at journalism school.

She had not known, until she stood in the dark hallway outside Studio C, that her sister Mei — who had vanished in Hong Kong eleven months ago, whose body had never been recovered, whose memorial Lara had attended in a small church in Flushing on a rainy March afternoon — had not, in fact, been working on a story about Chinese tech surveillance.

Her sister had been working on a story about Apex.

"The Chen woman," a second voice said from behind the mirror — and Lara, with the small clean horror of a person who has just understood her own life, recognised it as belonging to the Deputy Police Commissioner of the City of New York. "What about her sister?"

"The trainer? She knows nothing. We checked. She thinks her sister died chasing a story in Hong Kong."

"She works *here*."

"She works here because we hired her. It was easier to watch her up close than to lose her. She has been a model employee for three weeks. She is, by all indications, exactly as harmless as she appears."

A pause.

A third voice. Older. Drier. A voice Lara recognised from television. The publisher of the *Times*.

"And the Bose piece?"

"Killed. The editor has been spoken to. The replacement piece runs Friday. A puff profile of a tech founder in Austin."

"And the source files?"

"Recovered. Bose was careful, but she was not careful enough. She kept a backup with a friend in London. The friend has been spoken to."

"Has been."

"Has been."

Senator Halloway laughed softly. Lara had spotted his triceps that afternoon. She had complimented his form. He had told her she had a good eye.

"And Manoj?" the senator said.

Lara did not know who Manoj was. The name meant nothing to her. The name would mean nothing to her for another seventy-three days.

"Bombay is handling it. The Khan woman is being briefed tomorrow night. Whatever she finds at the ED, it will not leave the building. Sentinel is paying her handler a hundred thousand US for the inconvenience."

"A hundred thousand is a great deal."

"A hundred thousand is a great deal less than what the Bose article would have cost us."

Lara stood in the dark.

She had two choices.

She could walk away. She could forget what she had heard. She could finish her shift on Thursday, hand in her resignation on Friday, board a plane to her parents' house in San Francisco on Saturday, and live the rest of her life as a personal trainer at a Crunch in the Mission District, and she would, in all likelihood, live a long time.

Or she could do what her sister, the journalist who had been thrown — Lara understood it now with absolute clarity, the way she had understood many things since standing in this hallway — into Victoria Harbour eleven months ago, would have done.

Lara took out her phone.

She did not call the police. She had recognised the second voice.

She did not call a journalist. She had recognised the third voice.

She called the only person whose number her sister had made her memorise, in a hotel room in Kowloon, the night before she disappeared. *Lara, write this down. No — don't write it. Memorise it. If anything happens to me. If anything ever happens to me. Call this number. Tell her my name. Tell her you are my sister. Tell her you need to disappear, or you need to make someone else disappear. She will know what to do.*

Lara had not understood, that night in Kowloon, why her sister had made her memorise it.

Lara had not understood, in the eleven months since, who the woman on the other end of the number might be.

Lara dialed.

A woman answered on the second ring. The connection was clear. The voice was older. The accent — Lara could not quite place it. European. Eastern, perhaps. A woman who had been smoking for a very long time.

"Yes."

"My name is Lara Chen. My sister was Mei Chen. She told me to call you if I ever needed to disappear — or to make someone else disappear."

There was a long silence.

Then the woman said: "Which gym?"

"Apex. Fifty-seventh and Park."

"I know it. I have a membership."

Lara did not know what to say to this.

"Lara." The woman's voice was very soft now. "Listen to me carefully. You will leave that hallway in the next thirty seconds. You will retrieve your phone from Studio C only if you can do so without being heard. You will go home. You will go to sleep. You will come to work tomorrow at your normal time. You will train your normal clients. You will smile, you will laugh, you will be exactly the harmless young woman they hired three weeks ago. You will do this for fourteen days. On the fifteenth day, a new client will book a session with you. Her name will be Mrs.

Ekaterina Volkov. She is my younger sister. She will tell you what happens next. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"And, Lara—"

"Yes?"

"Your sister was very brave. She was also very foolish. Try to be only the first."

The line went dead.

Lara retrieved her phone. She walked out of Apex. She went home. She slept badly. She came to work the next morning at 5:30 a.m., as she always did, and she smiled at Senator Holloway at 6, and she laughed at the Deputy Commissioner's small joke at 7:15, and she complimented the *Times* publisher on his deadlift form at 8:45, and she did this every day for fourteen days.

On the fifteenth day, Mrs. Ekaterina Volkov walked into Apex.

She was sixty-one. She was tall. She wore Ferragamo flats and a tracksuit that cost more than Lara's monthly rent. She handed Lara a slip of paper at the end of their session and she said, in a voice that was the younger, softer twin of the voice on the phone, "Read this. Burn it. Then come to dinner on Thursday."

The slip of paper contained an address in Tribeca, a date three weeks in the future, and three sentences.

Senator Holloway has a heart condition his cardiologist has not yet diagnosed.

The Deputy Commissioner is afraid of swimming pools.

The publisher of the Times keeps a small handgun in the upper-right drawer of the desk in his Hamptons study, which he has never fired.

Three weeks later, Senator Halloway died of a heart attack on a treadmill in Studio C.

Four weeks after that, the Deputy Commissioner of the City of New York drowned in the rooftop pool of a hotel in Dubai.

Six weeks after that, the publisher of the *Times* was found in his Hamptons study, an apparent suicide, the gun in the wrong hand.

And Lara Chen, the newest trainer at Apex, was promoted to manager of Studio C — where the mirrors, she had learned, worked both ways.

She made sure to smile at them every morning.

She did not yet know, although she would learn it eventually, that the woman who had answered her call that night in October was the older sister of the woman who had walked into Apex on the fifteenth day. That the older sister ran a women-only gym on the Avenue Princesse Grace in Monaco. That the older sister had, in fact, been running a network of women — trainers, masseuses, hairdressers, sommeliers — across forty cities and eleven countries for nineteen years. That her sister Mei had been one of them.

That Lara Chen, the harmless trainer from Flushing, was now one of them.

The mirrors in Studio C reflected her face every morning at 5:30 a.m.

She had begun, lately, to find this comforting.



STORY IV

THE BANDRA BODY

Mumbai

Chapter One

Priya Malhotra had not lifted a weight in her life before the morning she decided to murder her brother-in-law.

The decision arrived the way all important decisions arrived in Priya's life — not as a thought, but as a craving. She was sitting on the balcony of the family flat in Bandra West, on the seventeenth floor of a tower called Sea Crest, watching the Arabian Sea turn from grey to gold, when she understood with perfect clarity that Rohan Malhotra had to die, and that she would have to be the one to do it, and that she would have to become someone entirely new to accomplish it.

It was 5:47 a.m. on a Thursday in April.

Below her balcony, the city was already breathing. The fishermen of Khar Danda were dragging their nets up onto the rocks. A dhobi was beating laundry against a stone in the alley behind the dargah. An *aaya* was walking a small white dog along the seafront promenade. The newspaper boy on his bicycle was making his round, flinging *Times of India* in pale arcs at the gates of buildings whose residents would, in an hour or two, complain about everything in them.

Priya was thirty-four years old. She had been a wife for eleven years. She had been a widow for eleven months. And she had been, for the entirety of her adult life, the kind of woman whom Marwari mothers-in-law described, in tones of mild approval, as *sundar* — pretty — and *seedha* — straight. She had never raised her voice. She had never asked a question to which she did not already know the answer. She had never, in the eleven years of her marriage to Aakash Malhotra, walked into a room without first checking, in the mirror by the door, that her dupatta was correctly draped.

On a terrace in Lonavla, on the third of May the previous year, her husband had been pushed.

The police had called it suicide. The family had called it shameful. Priya had called it nothing at all, because Priya understood that grief, in a Marwari family, was a private transaction conducted in the language of accounts. There was a settlement. There was a meeting. There was a series of small white envelopes, each one passing from her father-in-law to a man in a khaki uniform, each one closing a small white file. By the end of June, the matter was finished. Aakash had been a sensitive boy. Aakash had been depressed. Aakash had, the family agreed quietly, been weak.

Aakash had not been weak.

Aakash had been, in fact, the only honest man in a family of seven brothers, and on the night before he died he had told Priya, sitting on the edge of their bed in the Lonavla bungalow, that he had finally understood what his younger brother Rohan was doing with the mill accounts. He had told her he had been to a lawyer in Pune. He had told her that on Monday, when they returned to Bombay, he would file a complaint with the

Enforcement Directorate. He had told her that no matter what happened next, she was to take their savings — the small private savings he had built over eleven years from his salary alone, three crores and forty lakhs deposited in a joint account she had never known existed — and she was to go.

She had not understood. She had said *Aakash, what are you saying?* She had said *the family will not allow it*. She had said *you are frightening me*.

He had taken her hand. He had said: *Priya, if anything happens to me, you must promise me one thing. You must not cry at my funeral. Do you understand? Not one tear. Because if you cry, they will believe you loved me, and if they believe you loved me, they will believe you knew. And if they believe you knew, you will be next.*

She had promised.

She had kept the promise.

At the funeral on the *ghat* in Worli, with the smoke of her husband's body rising into the monsoon sky and the priests chanting the verses that returned a man to the elements, Priya Malhotra had stood with her face uncovered and her eyes dry and her hands folded, and she had not wept. The family had been pleased. The family had said, in the small private gatherings that followed, that the new widow was *strong*. That she had *taken it well*. That she would, after a respectable interval, make a good wife for Rohan, who was after all the younger brother and the inheritor and the natural keeper of the family's honor.

The wedding was scheduled for December.

It was now April.

Priya had eight months to learn how to kill a man.

She joined Pulse that afternoon.

Pulse was on the eighteenth floor of a glass tower on Linking Road, and its membership cost four-and-a-half lakhs a year, and its trainers had names like Yash and Rocky and Vikram, and its members were the wives of producers and the mistresses of cricketers and the daughters of men whose photographs hung in the Bombay Stock Exchange. Priya walked into the marble lobby in a salwar kameez that had been chosen by her mother-in-law from a boutique in Breach Candy, and she stood at the reception desk, and she said in Marwari-inflected Hindi:

"I would like to join."

The receptionist, a young woman with shoulders like a Russian gymnast and a smile that had been refined over years of dealing with women like Priya, did not look up immediately. When she did, she registered, with the small efficient calculation of a person whose job it was to read net worth at a glance: salwar kameez from Bombay Selections, gold bangles from Tanishq, Hermès handbag (real), wedding mangalsutra (recent — the gold still bright). Married money. Conservative.

"Of course, madam. May I take your name?"

"Sharma. Priya Sharma."

The receptionist did not blink. The receptionist had been trained not to blink at any name a member of Pulse cared to give. Half the women on the elite floor were here under names that did not appear on any of their bank accounts. The receptionist produced a form. The receptionist asked for an ID.

Priya produced an Aadhaar card.

The Aadhaar card bore the photograph of Priya Malhotra and the name *Priya Devendra Sharma*, and it had been manufactured, eleven days previously, by a man in a small office above a shoe shop in Dongri, for a price of eighty thousand rupees in cash. The man in Dongri had been recommended by a woman who used to clean the floors at her father-in-law's textile mill on Senapati Bapat Marg. The woman had been recommended by a ghost — by which Priya now understood, in the way one came to understand many things in Bombay after a certain age, a former colleague of her late husband who had drunk too much at the *terahvin* and let slip, in a wet whisper, that anything could be obtained in this city if one knew where to ask, and that he himself had once, in a moment of professional embarrassment, required a new Aadhaar card overnight.

Ghosts, Priya had learned in eleven months, were extraordinarily useful in Bombay.

She paid the membership fee in cash. Four lakhs fifty thousand. The receptionist did not blink at this either. The receptionist completed the paperwork, handed Priya a small black access card, and said, "Madam, would you like to meet a personal trainer?"

"Yes," Priya said. "I would like to meet Vikram Shenoy."

The receptionist looked up sharply for the first time.

"Madam, Major Shenoy is — he is very expensive. Six thousand per session. And he does not, normally, take new clients. He has a waiting list."

"Tell him," Priya said, "that I am willing to pay double. Twelve thousand per session. Cash. Five sessions a week. For six months. In advance."

The receptionist did the arithmetic. Twelve thousand multiplied by five multiplied by twenty-six. One million five hundred and sixty thousand rupees. In advance. In cash.

The receptionist picked up the telephone.

"Sir," she said softly into the receiver. "A new member at reception. She is asking specifically for you. The terms are — sir, the terms are unusual."

She listened.

She set down the phone.

"Madam," she said. "Sir will see you now. Studio Four. Eighteenth floor. The lift is to your right."

Vikram Shenoy was forty-one years old. He was six feet tall. He had a small white scar through his left eyebrow that, the rumours said, he had received in Kupwara in 2009 from a piece of shrapnel that had killed the three men standing next to him. He had served eleven years in the Parachute Regiment. He had been decorated for valor on a hilltop in Kashmir whose name he no longer permitted himself to remember.

He had left the army in 2014. He had married, briefly. He had divorced. He had moved to Bombay. He had become, with the small bleak inevitability that pursued former soldiers of his generation, a personal trainer to the very rich.

He had been Rohan Malhotra's cocaine dealer for three years.

Priya did not know this yet. Priya would not know this for another seven months. Priya, walking into Studio Four at 3:47 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon in April, with her dupatta folded over her arm and her shoes left at the door and her Aadhaar card in her handbag and her four-and-a-half lakhs already debited from an account that bore her late husband's name, knew only that Vikram Shenoy was, according to the private detective in Andheri whom she had retained for one lakh twenty thousand rupees, the head trainer at the gym her brother-in-law used every morning at six.

Vikram was waiting for her.

He stood at the window. He was looking out at the sea. He did not turn when she entered.

"Mrs. Sharma."

"Major Shenoy."

"Please. Sit."

She sat.

He turned.

He had the eyes, Priya thought, of a man who had seen things and had decided, some time ago, to feel nothing about them. It was a quality she recognised. It was, in fact, the quality she had come here to acquire.

"Mrs. Sharma," he said. "You are paying twelve thousand rupees per session for thirty months when the market rate is six thousand for six months. You are paying in cash. You are paying in advance. You are paying under a name that, forgive me, I do not believe is yours. You have been a member of this

gym for forty-seven minutes. Would you like to tell me what we are actually doing here?"

Priya looked at him.

She had rehearsed this moment for nineteen days. She had rehearsed it in the mirror in her bathroom, in the back of taxis, in the long quiet hours after midnight when her mother-in-law was asleep and the flat was still and the only sound was the sea breathing against the rocks below. She had prepared three different answers, ranked by truthfulness, and she had decided that the answer she would actually give would depend on the eyes of the man in front of her.

She looked at his eyes.

She gave him the truthful answer.

"I want to get strong," Priya said. "Not thin. Strong. I want to be able to lift my own body weight. I want to be able to fight. I want to be able, in eight months, to kill a man with my hands, or with a barbell, or with whatever else is in this room, in a way that will not look like a murder."

Vikram Shenoy did not move.

He did not blink. He did not smile. He did not, as a less experienced man might have, laugh.

"Why?" he said.

"Because I am tired of being afraid."

It was not a lie. It was simply not the entire truth. The entire truth would come later, in October, when Vikram had earned it. The entire truth would come the day Priya understood that the man she had hired to teach her to kill was, in fact, the only other person in Bombay who already wanted Rohan Malhotra dead.

Vikram studied her.

For a long moment he did not speak.

Then he said: "Mrs. Sharma. I am going to ask you four questions. You will answer them honestly. If you lie to me on any of them, I will walk out of this room and you will never see me again, and the four-and-a-half lakh you have paid for your membership will buy you nothing. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Question one. The man you intend to kill — does he deserve it?"

"Yes."

"Question two. Has he killed someone you loved?"

Priya's throat closed. She did not trust her voice. She nodded.

"Question three. Are there other people he will kill, if you do not kill him first?"

"Yes."

"Question four. Mrs. Sharma — or whatever your name is — do you have any idea, any idea at all, how difficult it is going to be to do what you are proposing to do, and to live afterwards as a free woman?"

"No," Priya said. "I do not. That is why I am here."

Vikram was quiet for a long time.

Then, slowly, he sat down across from her.

"Mrs. Sharma." He folded his hands on his knees. "I have spent eleven years in the army and seven years in this city, and

in all that time I have met perhaps four people who could honestly answer those four questions the way you just have. Of those four, two are dead. The third is in prison. The fourth is sitting in front of you."

Priya did not speak.

"I am going to take your money," Vikram said. "I am going to train you for eight months. At the end of those eight months, you will be a different woman. You will be stronger than you can currently imagine. You will know how to do a great many things you do not currently know how to do. And then — only then — I am going to ask you for the name of the man you intend to kill. And depending on the name, I am going to do one of two things. I am either going to wish you good luck and walk away. Or I am going to help you."

"How will you decide?"

"I will decide," Vikram said, "based on whether his name is one I already know."

Priya understood, with the clean cold certainty that had been with her since that morning on the balcony, that Vikram Shenoy was telling her the truth.

She also understood that, whatever his name turned out to be, the man whose name Vikram already knew and the man whom Priya intended to kill were almost certainly the same man.

"Major Shenoy," she said quietly. "When do we begin?"

"Tomorrow morning," he said. "Five a.m. Bring shoes. Do not tell your family where you are going. Do not, for any reason,

tell anyone in this city that you are training with me. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"And, Mrs. Sharma—"

"Yes?"

"Whatever name you used at the reception desk downstairs — use a different one with me. Names have memory in this city. I prefer my clients to leave none."

Priya thought about it.

She thought about her grandmother, who had been born in Bikaner in 1924 and who had told her, when she was seven, that the women in their family had always — in every generation, going back as far as memory ran — kept a second name. A *gupt naam*. A secret name. A name they used when they wished to do something the women in their family were not, in the official histories, supposed to do.

Her grandmother's secret name had been Bhairavi.

"Bhairavi," Priya said. "You can call me Bhairavi."

Vikram inclined his head.

"Five a.m., Bhairavi. Do not be late."

Priya rose. She walked to the door. With her hand on the handle, she turned.

"Major Shenoy. May I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"The other three people. The four you said could honestly answer those four questions. The two who are dead. The one who is in prison. Were they — were they women?"

Vikram looked at her for a long moment.

"Three of the four," he said quietly, "were women, yes."

"And the one who is still free?"

"Mrs. Sharma." He smiled then, for the first time. It was a small smile. It did not reach his eyes. "The one who is still free is the one who is sitting in front of you. I have not yet decided which of the other three categories you will eventually join. That decision, I am afraid, is largely up to you."

Priya nodded.

She walked out of Studio Four. She rode the lift down to the marble lobby. She walked out onto Linking Road. The afternoon light was the colour of turmeric. A double-decker bus was passing; a small boy with a kite was running along the median; somewhere a *paanwallah* was clinking his small brass coins.

Priya Malhotra got into a black-and-yellow taxi. She gave the address of Sea Crest, Bandra. She watched the city move past the window.

She did not know, yet, that Rohan kept a second flat in Khandala that was soundproofed and that contained, on one wall, a small wooden cabinet of tools. She did not know, yet, that two women had already been buried in unmarked graves in the hills above Lonavla, and that she had been intended, by next February, to be the third.

She did not know, yet, that the dancer in Worli — the twenty-three-year-old Bharatanatyam dancer named Kamala who was three months pregnant with Rohan's child — was Vikram Shenoy's niece.

She did not know any of this.

But on the morning of the fifteenth of April, in the back of a taxi on Linking Road, Priya Malhotra closed her eyes, and she heard, for the first time in eleven months, the voice of her husband Aakash, very softly, very clearly, saying to her the thing he had said on the bed in Lonavla on the night before he died.

Promise me one thing, Priya. You must not cry. Not one tear.

She had not cried at the funeral.

She had not cried in the eleven months since.

She was not, she understood now, ever going to cry again.

She opened her eyes. She tapped on the partition. She said to the driver, "*Bhaiya*, when we reach Bandra — take me to the dargah first. I would like to pray."

"Ji, madam."

The taxi turned left.

And Priya Malhotra, who would in eight months become a woman named Bhairavi who knew how to kill a man with her hands, settled back into the cracked vinyl seat and watched the sea slide past her window, and she began, very quietly, to plan.



STORY V

THE GURGAON PROTOCOL

Gurgaon

The blood on the squat rack belonged to a Member of Parliament.

This was the first thing Inspector Sneha Krishnan understood when she walked into FitForge Gurgaon at 4:47 a.m. on a Wednesday in February. It was the only thing she would understand for the next seventy-two hours.

The MP was Vivek Pratap Singh, forty-eight years old, three-term member from eastern Uttar Pradesh, son of a former Chief Minister, husband of a former Miss India, father of a daughter who was studying at Yale and a son who was, at this exact moment, snorting cocaine in a farmhouse in Chhatarpur and did not yet know his father was dead.

Vivek Pratap Singh had been crushed beneath two hundred and twenty kilograms of iron. His trachea had collapsed. His eyes were open. His Patek Philippe was still ticking on his left wrist. The barbell had been resting on his throat for approximately ninety minutes when the night security guard finally noticed that the lights in the private training suite had not been switched off.

The private training suite was on the fourteenth floor.

The private training suite required biometric access.

The biometric access logs, when Inspector Krishnan pulled them at 5:23 a.m., showed exactly two entries that morning: Vivek Pratap Singh, at 3:42 a.m., and Vivek Pratap Singh's personal trainer, Aman Kohli, at 3:44 a.m.

Aman Kohli had exited at 4:11 a.m.

Vivek Pratap Singh had never exited at all.

By 6 a.m., Aman Kohli was in custody. By 7 a.m., the news was on every channel in India. By 8 a.m., the Prime Minister's Office had called the Haryana DGP, who had called the Commissioner, who had called Inspector Krishnan personally, and the Commissioner had said exactly seven words:

Close it fast. Close it clean. Trainer.

Inspector Krishnan, who was thirty-four years old, who had topped her UPSC batch, who had refused three transfers and two promotions because she did not believe in owing favors, listened to those seven words. She said *yes sir*. She hung up the phone.

And then she did what she had done every time a powerful man had told her to close a case fast: she opened it slowly.

Aman Kohli was twenty-nine. He had a wife and a two-year-old daughter in a one-bedroom flat in Sector 47. He had been Vivek Pratap Singh's personal trainer for four years. He earned one lakh eighty thousand rupees a month, which was good money for a trainer, and he sent forty thousand of it every month to his parents in Jalandhar.

He had not killed Vivek Pratap Singh.

Inspector Krishnan was certain of this within eleven minutes of beginning the interrogation, because Aman Kohli was the kind of man whose hands shook when he lied, and his hands were not shaking now. His hands were trembling, yes, but with the particular tremor of a man who had just lost the only patron who stood between him and poverty, and who understood with perfect clarity that he was about to be hanged for a murder he did not commit.

"Tell me again," Inspector Krishnan said. "From 3:44, when you entered the suite."

"Madam, I have told you four times—"

"Tell me a fifth."

Aman Kohli closed his eyes.

"Sir was already inside. I do not know how. The biometric showed he entered at 3:42, but the door was unlocked when I arrived. He was sitting on the bench. He was on the phone. He was speaking in English. He was angry."

"Who was he speaking to?"

"I do not know, madam. I went to the equipment room to prepare his routine. When I came back, he was off the phone. He said *let us begin*. We did warm-up. Twelve minutes. Then he said he needed to make one more call. Private. He asked me to wait outside the suite."

"And you waited."

"Yes, madam. In the corridor. For twenty minutes."

"And then?"

"Then he opened the door. He said the session was cancelled. He said *some idiot in Delhi has made a mess and I must clean it up*. He said I should go home. He said he would pay me for the full session. He said *not a word to anyone, beta, this is between us*. I said *yes sir*. I left."

"At 4:11."

"At 4:11, madam."

"And in the twenty minutes you were in the corridor — did anyone enter or exit?"

"No, madam. No one."

Inspector Krishnan studied him. "Aman, the biometric logs show only two entries that morning. Yours and his. If someone else was in that suite with him — someone who killed him after you left — how did they get in?"

Aman Kohli stared at the table.

"Madam," he said quietly, "the biometric system on the fourteenth floor was installed by a company called SecureNet. SecureNet is owned by sir's brother-in-law. The logs can be edited from the control room on the third floor. Anyone with access to the control room can add or delete entries."

Inspector Krishnan went very still.

"Who has access to the control room?"

"The head of building security. The gym manager. And—"

"And?"

"And, madam — sir's wife. Mrs. Singh. She is on the board of FitForge. She has full access to everything."

Inspector Krishnan felt the room go quiet around her in the particular way that rooms went quiet when a case was about to stop being a case and start being a war.

"Aman." She leaned forward. "Listen to me very carefully. Mrs. Singh was, according to her statement, at her sister's home in Lutyens Delhi from yesterday evening until this morning. Her statement is confirmed by four members of the household staff and by the CCTV at the gate of the property. She was nowhere near Gurgaon."

Aman Kohli looked up. His eyes, for the first time, were not afraid.

"Madam," he said, "Mrs. Singh has a twin sister. They are identical. The twin sister lives in Dubai. The twin sister was not in Dubai last night. The twin sister flew into Indira Gandhi at 11:47 p.m. on a private jet registered to a company in Ras Al Khaimah. I know this, madam, because the twin sister, six months ago, hired me privately. Cash. For sessions at a different gym in Greater Kailash. And the twin sister, madam, asked me three months ago a very strange question."

"What question?"

"She asked me, madam, how much weight a man's throat could take before his trachea collapsed. She asked me what would happen if a man was bench-pressing alone, with no spotter, and the bar slipped. She asked me, madam, whether the police would believe such an accident."

Inspector Krishnan's phone began to ring. She looked down. It was the Commissioner.

She did not answer.

"Aman," she said. "What is the twin sister's name?"

"Sonia Pratap Singh, madam. Same name as her sister. Their parents — they were eccentric people. They named both daughters the same name and put different middle initials on the birth certificates. Sonia A. and Sonia B. The family used to find it amusing."

The phone rang again. Inspector Krishnan turned it off.

"And the twin sister, Aman — why would she want her brother-in-law dead?"

Aman Kohli smiled. It was a small, sad, tired smile.

"Madam," he said, "perhaps you should ask her what she was doing in Dubai for the last seven years. Perhaps you should ask her about the daughter at Yale, the one everyone believes is sir's daughter. Perhaps you should ask her, madam, why a woman who has been hiding in Dubai for two decades would suddenly fly into Delhi on the night her sister's husband was murdered."

Inspector Krishnan stood up.

"Aman, you are going to be released within the hour. You will say nothing to anyone. You will go home to your wife and daughter. You will continue your normal routine. Do you understand?"

"Yes, madam."

"And Aman — if anyone from the gym, or from the Singh family, or from any agency, contacts you in the next forty-eight hours, you will call this number." She slid a card across the table. "Day or night. Do you understand?"

"Yes, madam."

Inspector Krishnan walked out of the interrogation room. In the corridor, her phone — even switched off — was being called. She could see the missed-call notifications stacking up. Commissioner. DGP. PMO. PMO again. An unknown number with a +971 country code. Dubai.

She turned the phone back on.

She did not return any of the calls.

She got into her jeep. She told the driver to take her to Indira Gandhi International Airport, terminal three, the private jet handling area.

In her purse, she had a photograph of Sonia A. Pratap Singh — the wife, the alibi, the widow.

She did not yet have a photograph of Sonia B.

It took her forty-one minutes to drive to the airport. By the time she arrived, the private jet from Ras Al Khaimah was, according to the FBO records, *being prepared for departure*. The departure was scheduled for 9:15 a.m. The flight plan was filed back to Dubai. The single passenger listed on the manifest was *Mrs. Singh*. No initial.

Inspector Krishnan walked into the FBO lounge at 8:47 a.m.

The woman was sitting alone at the window. She was wearing a black abaya. She was drinking coffee. She was, even in the abaya, recognisable as the wife of Vivek Pratap Singh.

She looked up as Sneha approached.

"Inspector Krishnan," the woman said, in flawless Oxford-accented English. "I have been expecting you. Please. Sit."

Sneha sat.

"You are Sonia B."

"I am Sonia B."

"Your sister was at her home in Lutyens Delhi last night."

"My sister was."

"And you were in the private training suite at FitForge Gurgaon at approximately 3:50 a.m. this morning, where you killed your brother-in-law by allowing two hundred and twenty kilograms of iron to fall onto his throat."

The woman in the abaya did not flinch.

"Inspector. May I tell you a story?"

"Please."

"Twenty-two years ago, I was a college student at St. Stephen's. I was nineteen. I was, briefly, engaged to a young man named Vivek Pratap Singh. Two weeks before our wedding, he raped my sister. He raped her in the family farmhouse in Chhatarpur, at a Diwali party. She was seventeen. She did not tell anyone for two months. By the time she told me, she was pregnant."

Sneha did not move.

"My father — our father — could not bear the shame. He proposed a compromise. Vivek would marry my sister instead of me. The pregnancy would be passed off as a love marriage. The child would be raised as theirs. My sister would receive, in exchange, a household, a name, and a lifetime of his discreet abuse. And I — I would be sent away. To Dubai. With a monthly

allowance. With a new identity. With instructions never to return."

"Your daughter at Yale."

"Is my daughter, yes. Is not her daughter. Is, in the truest sense, Vivek's daughter, although Vivek has never known this, and although my sister has raised her for twenty-one years as her own."

"Why now?"

Sonia B. set down her coffee.

"Because three weeks ago, Inspector, my sister called me in Dubai. She told me that Vivek had — over the course of the past year — been *taking an interest* in our daughter. That he had begun visiting her in New Haven. That he had begun, in my sister's words, *looking at her the way he once looked at me*. And my sister, who has tolerated twenty-two years of his abuse with the silence of a woman who believed she had no choice — my sister told me that if I did not solve this problem for her, she would solve it herself. And that she would not, this time, solve it cleanly."

"And so you flew to Delhi."

"And so I flew to Delhi."

"And so you killed him."

"Inspector." Sonia B. smiled, finally, very faintly. "I did not kill him. Not exactly. I went to the training suite. I let myself in — the biometric was, of course, edited by my sister, who had been preparing this for some months. I sat across from Vivek on the bench. I told him who I was. I told him what I knew. I told him about the daughter at Yale. I told him about the videos my

sister had been quietly recording, in our flat, for sixteen years — the videos in which he had, on forty-three separate occasions, beaten her unconscious. I told him that those videos would be released to every news channel in India tomorrow morning, unless he did, with his own hands, the one decent thing his life had ever offered him."

"He bench-pressed two hundred and twenty kilograms alone."

"He bench-pressed two hundred and twenty kilograms alone."

"With no spotter."

"With no spotter."

"You watched."

"I watched."

Sneha was silent for a long moment.

Then she said: "Mrs. Singh. You understand that what you have described is, technically, not a murder. It is a coerced suicide. The legal distinction is significant. The legal distinction is, in fact, the only thing currently standing between you and a life sentence."

"I understand this, Inspector."

"And you understand that I have, at this moment, the option of arresting you, or of letting you board that aircraft."

"I understand this also."

"What do you propose?"

Sonia B. reached into her handbag. She withdrew a small silver USB drive. She placed it on the table between them.

"Inspector. On this drive are forty-three video files. They are the originals. They show Vivek Pratap Singh, over a sixteen-year period, beating my sister. They show him, on two occasions, beating his own son. They show him, on one occasion, beating a fourteen-year-old maid in our Chhatarpur farmhouse, in 2011, in a manner that resulted in the girl's hospitalisation and, three days later, her death — a death that was registered as a suicide and that was, as far as I am aware, never investigated by any agency. They show him, Inspector, doing many other things, with many other people, that the Republic of India would, in my opinion, prefer not to learn about a sitting Member of Parliament."

"And you are giving them to me."

"I am giving them to you. With one condition."

"Which is?"

"That you do not arrest my sister. She has suffered enough. She will spend the rest of her life as a respected widow. She will raise our daughter as her own. She will, when our daughter is old enough, tell her the truth. And she will live, Inspector — *she will live* — in a way she has not lived for twenty-two years."

Inspector Sneha Krishnan looked at the USB drive.

She looked at the woman in the abaya.

She looked out the window at the small white private jet on the tarmac, its engines beginning, faintly, to whine.

"Mrs. Singh." She picked up the drive. She closed her fingers around it. "Please. Have a safe flight."

Sonia B. inclined her head.

"Inspector. There is one more thing you should know. The men who tried, all morning, to reach you on your telephone — the Commissioner, the DGP, the PMO — they were calling you for a reason. They were calling you because they had been instructed, by a private intelligence firm called Sentinel Advisory, to ensure that the trainer Aman Kohli was charged with this murder by noon today. Sentinel was, in turn, instructed by a man whose name will not appear in any report you will ever write. That man is, currently, a member of Vivek's cabinet. He had been hoping, when Vivek died, to inherit Vivek's constituency."

"You are telling me this why?"

"I am telling you this, Inspector, because Sentinel does not forgive failure. By tomorrow, they will know that the trainer has been released. By the day after, they will know that I have left the country. By the end of the week, Inspector, they will know that *you* are the reason. I am giving you a head start. I am suggesting that you use the next forty-eight hours to make some very careful decisions about your career, your safety, and the safety of your family."

"And the videos?"

"The videos are yours, Inspector. Use them as you wish. They will not protect you from Sentinel. But they will, I think, be useful to you in conversations with other people who may wish to help you."

Sonia B. rose. She drew her abaya more closely around her.

"Good day, Inspector Krishnan. I do not expect we shall meet again."

She walked out onto the tarmac. The jet engines rose. Sneha watched her board. She watched the door close. She watched the plane begin to taxi.

She looked down at the USB drive in her palm.

Her phone rang.

It was an unknown number. Not Dubai this time. A Bombay code.

She answered.

"Inspector Krishnan?"

"Yes."

"My name is Aaliyah Khan. I am a forensic accountant at the Enforcement Directorate. I have been listening to a great deal of audio this week from a flat in Cuffe Parade. I believe you and I have, at this moment, a number of mutual concerns. May I take you to dinner?"

Sneha was silent for a long moment.

Outside her window, Sonia B.'s aircraft lifted off the runway and rose into the pale morning sky over Delhi.

"Ms. Khan," Inspector Sneha Krishnan said. "I do not know who you are. I do not know how you have this number. And I have, in the last seventy-two hours, made a number of decisions whose consequences I do not yet understand. I think — yes. I think dinner would be excellent."



STORY VI

THE MARINE DRIVE MIRROR

Mumbai

Zara Khan had been a Bollywood stuntwoman for eleven years before she became an assassin.

The transition, in the end, had been administrative. The same flexibility. The same fearlessness. The same willingness to fall from buildings. The pay was significantly better. And she no longer had to share a dressing room with a heroine who refused to do her own running.

Her cover was Ironclad Mumbai, a luxury gym on the twenty-second floor of a tower at Nariman Point, with windows that looked out over Marine Drive and the curve of lights the British had called the Queen's Necklace. Zara was a personal trainer at Ironclad. She specialised in *functional fitness for the modern woman*, which was a phrase she had been told to use by the gym's marketing department and which she repeated, in interviews with *Vogue India* and *Femina*, with the bright meaningless smile she had perfected on the sets of forty-three films.

She had killed nine people in three years. Eight of them at the gym.

The ninth — the one that mattered, the one this story is about — was about to walk through the glass doors of Ironclad

Mumbai at 7 p.m. on a Friday in October, and Zara Khan was, for the first time in her career, afraid.

Because the ninth target was her sister.

Aaliyah Khan was thirty-one years old. She was a forensic accountant at the Enforcement Directorate. And she was the only living person who knew that Zara had not, in fact, died in a stunt accident on the sets of an Akshay Kumar film in 2021.

The official story — the story their mother in Lucknow believed, the story their relatives in Karachi mourned, the story that had been printed in the *Times of India* under a small headline on page seven — was that Zara Khan, age twenty-nine, had fallen forty-seven feet from a crane in a botched action sequence and had died on impact.

The truth was that Zara Khan had walked off the set, into a waiting car, into a new identity, into a profession her handler called *consultancy* and which paid her two crores per assignment.

Aaliyah had figured it out six weeks ago.

She had figured it out because she was the kind of person who, when a senior bureaucrat in Delhi died of a sudden heart attack at his personal training session in Bangalore, did not simply accept the cardiologist's report. Aaliyah pulled the financial records. She cross-referenced the gym's ownership structure with three shell companies in Mauritius. She noticed that the same trainer — different name each time, but always the same trainer, identifiable by a small scar above her left eyebrow that no makeup ever quite hid — had been present at

the deaths of four senior officials in three different cities over twenty-two months.

Aaliyah, who had grown up with that scar, who had been the one to put it there with a kitchen knife during a fight over a Barbie doll in 1998, had sat at her desk at the ED for forty minutes that afternoon, staring at the photograph from the Bangalore gym's CCTV, and had not moved.

Then she had called her mother in Lucknow and asked, very gently, whether her mother had ever wondered if Zara might still be alive.

Her mother had wept for an hour.

Then her mother had said *yes, beta, every day, every day I wonder.*

Aaliyah had not gone to her superiors. Aaliyah had not gone to the police. Aaliyah had done something far more dangerous: she had booked a personal training session at Ironclad Mumbai, under her own name, with the trainer named Sara Qureshi who specialised in functional fitness for the modern woman, and she had paid the fifteen-thousand-rupee fee in advance.

The session was scheduled for 7 p.m.

It was now 6:47 p.m.

Zara stood at the floor-to-ceiling window of Studio Four — the private studio, the one with no cameras, the one her handler had ensured had no cameras — and watched the lights of Marine Drive come on one by one in the dusk. The Arabian Sea was the colour of wet slate. A container ship was moving slowly

out toward the horizon. Somewhere in the city, eighteen million people were going home to their families, and Zara Khan was waiting for her sister to walk through the door so that she could decide, in the next thirteen minutes, whether to kill her or to die with her.

The handler had been clear.

The handler had called at 4 p.m. The handler had said: *Sara, we have a situation. A forensic accountant at the ED has booked a session with you tonight. Her name is Aaliyah Khan. She has been pulling files. She has been making connections. She is, we believe, planning to confront you. You will handle it the usual way. Cardiac arrest. The compound is already in your kit. Do you understand?*

Zara had said yes.

Zara had not said *that is my sister*.

Because Zara had understood, in the long silence after the handler said the name, that the handler already knew. That this was, in fact, a test. That she had been chosen for this assignment not despite the relationship but because of it. That somewhere, in a building she had never seen, men in suits she had never met had decided that Zara Khan's loyalty needed to be measured, and the measurement would be the body of her sister on the floor of Studio Four.

If she did it, she would be trusted forever.

If she did not do it, she would not leave Ironclad alive.

There was a third option.

The third option had come to her at 5:30 p.m., as she was preparing the studio, and she had nearly dismissed it, because

the third option required her to do something she had not done in eleven years: trust another human being.

The third option required Aaliyah.

It required Aaliyah to have come to this meeting not as a forensic accountant confronting a sister, but as a forensic accountant who had already, before walking into the building, transmitted everything she knew to a journalist at *The Caravan*, a senior officer at the CBI, and a contact at *The New York Times*. It required Aaliyah to have anticipated that her sister might be ordered to kill her. It required Aaliyah to walk into Studio Four not as a victim, but as bait.

Zara did not know whether Aaliyah had done any of this.

Aaliyah had always been the smarter sister. But smart was not the same as paranoid, and paranoid was the only thing that kept a person alive in this profession.

The door of Studio Four opened.

Aaliyah walked in.

She was wearing a black tracksuit and white running shoes, and her hair was tied back in the same braid their mother used to do for both of them on school mornings, and she was carrying a small black gym bag.

She set the bag down on the bench. She looked at Zara. She did not smile.

"Hello, didi."

Zara felt her throat close.

It had been four years and seven months since anyone had called her that.

"Aaliyah."

"You look well."

"You look tired."

"I have been working a lot."

They stood in the silence of the empty studio. The container ship outside the window had crossed half the visible sea.

"Aaliyah," Zara said quietly, "I need you to listen to me very carefully. There is a camera in the smoke detector in the corner. There is a microphone in the air conditioning vent. Whatever we say in this room is being heard by people who will, in about ten minutes, kill us both if I do not kill you first."

Aaliyah did not move.

"I know, didi."

"You know."

"I know about the camera. I know about the microphone. I know about your handler — his name is Rakesh Bhandari, he runs operations from a flat in Cuffe Parade, he answers to a retired Lieutenant General named Kapoor who runs a private intelligence firm called Sentinel Advisory. I know about the eight people you have killed. I know about the Mauritius shell companies. I know about the woman in Dubai who launders the payments. I know everything, didi."

Zara stared at her.

"Then why are you here?"

"Because, didi." Aaliyah's voice was very steady. "At 6:30 p.m. tonight, a sealed envelope was delivered to the office of the Director of the CBI. At 6:35 p.m., an identical envelope was

delivered to the foreign editor of *The New York Times* at his hotel in Delhi. At 6:40 p.m., an identical envelope was delivered to the residence of the leader of the opposition. At 6:42 p.m., a fourth envelope was hand-delivered to an inspector named Sneha Krishnan in Gurgaon, who had spent her morning, didi, doing some very interesting work of her own. The envelopes contain everything I know — the names, the dates, the financial records, the photographs. They have instructions to be opened at 9 p.m. tonight if I have not personally called to retrieve them."

"Aaliyah—"

"It is now 7:02 p.m., didi. We have, by my calculation, until 8:45 p.m. to leave this building together, alive, or the envelopes will be opened and Sentinel Advisory will be destroyed and your handler will be in custody by morning and you, didi, you will be hunted by the Indian state for the rest of your life."

Zara felt something she had not felt in four years and seven months.

She felt hope.

"Aaliyah," she whispered, "what do you propose?"

Aaliyah Khan, forensic accountant at the Enforcement Directorate, the smarter sister, the keeper of scars, smiled for the first time.

"Didi," she said, "I propose we kill the handler."

She unzipped the small black gym bag.

Inside were two Glock 26 pistols, two suppressors, an Indian passport in the name of Sara Qureshi with a different photograph — Zara's photograph, but a Zara with longer hair

and a different shape to her jaw and no scar above her left eyebrow — and a small white envelope.

The envelope was unsealed.

Aaliyah pushed it across the bench.

"And, didi — there is one more thing. The inspector in Gurgaon. The one I mentioned. She had, this morning, an interesting meeting at the airport with a woman from Dubai. The woman from Dubai gave her a USB drive. The USB drive contained, among other things, the name of the man who hired your handler in 2018 to kill a journalist named Aditi Bose. Do you know that name, didi?"

"No."

"You should. You killed her in February 2021. She was twenty-six. She was working on a story about Sentinel. You drowned her in the East River in New York City, didi, and you flew home the next morning, and you were paid two crores forty lakhs in three instalments through a hawala channel that I have, over the past six weeks, been mapping for the ED."

Zara closed her eyes.

"I did not know her name."

"No, didi. You never do."

"Aaliyah." Zara opened her eyes. "What do you want? You did not come here to save me. You came here to give me a choice. What is the choice?"

Aaliyah lifted one of the Glocks. She handed it to Zara, butt first.

"The choice, didi, is whether you walk out of this building with me tonight as my sister — or whether you walk out of it as my prisoner. The pistol is loaded. The suppressor is fitted. The handler will arrive at the service entrance on the ground floor in seventeen minutes. He will be expecting you to deliver him my body. If we are downstairs by 7:23 p.m., and if you are still my sister, we kill him together, and we walk out of this city tonight, and tomorrow morning the new passport carries you out of this country forever."

"And if I am not your sister?"

"Then, didi—" Aaliyah's eyes were very steady. "Then I am the one who walks out of this building. I came prepared for either possibility. There is a CBI extraction team on the eighteenth floor. They have been there since 6:15 p.m. They are listening to this conversation through a microphone that, I am sorry to say, you did not put in this room. If you raise your weapon at me, didi, you will be dead before you finish the motion."

Zara held the pistol.

She felt the familiar weight. She felt the small hum of the suppressor against her palm.

She thought about the eight people. She remembered each of their faces. She remembered the journalist — Aditi Bose, twenty-six, drowned in the East River — although she had not, at the time, known her name. She remembered the bureaucrat in Bangalore. She remembered the businessman in Hyderabad. She remembered the human rights lawyer in Delhi. She remembered them all, the way a mother remembers the names of children she did not bear.

She thought about her sister.

She thought about a Barbie doll in a small flat in Lucknow in 1998.

"Aaliyah," she said softly. "When I made you the scar — did I mean to?"

Aaliyah looked at her for a long moment.

"No, didi. You meant to scare me. The cut was an accident. You cried for an hour. Mama had to lock you in the bathroom until you stopped."

Zara nodded.

She lifted the pistol.

She racked the slide.

She turned, and she walked to the door of Studio Four, and she said, without looking back, "Seventeen minutes. Let us go and meet Mr. Bhandari."

Aaliyah picked up the second Glock.

She followed her sister out of the room.

Outside the window, the container ship reached the horizon and disappeared.

The Queen's Necklace blazed against the dark water.

And in Studio Four, on the twenty-second floor of a tower at Nariman Point, the bench was empty for the first time in three years, and the microphone in the air conditioning vent transmitted, for thirteen more seconds, nothing but the soft mechanical hum of the building's ventilation, before a CBI technician on the eighteenth floor reached up and unplugged it forever.

Their mother in Lucknow was, at that exact moment, dreaming of her daughters.

In her dream, they were children. They were fighting over a Barbie doll. There was a kitchen knife on the floor between them.

In her dream, neither of them picked it up.



STORY VII

THE CHHATARPUR FARMHOUSE

New Delhi

The farmhouse had eighteen rooms, a swimming pool, a gold-fixture private gym, and a basement that did not officially exist.

It belonged to Karan Bedi, who was forty-six years old, who was the son of an industrialist whose name appeared in the top forty of the *Forbes* India list, and who was, at this particular moment on a Saturday evening in March, snorting a long thin line of cocaine off the marble countertop of his fourteen-thousand-square-foot home in Chhatarpur.

Karan had three things on his mind.

The first was the party scheduled to begin in two hours.

The second was his new personal trainer, a twenty-four-year-old Kazakh woman named Aigerim Tasbolatova, whom he had hired three weeks ago and who was, at this moment, doing pull-ups in his private gym in a sports bra and high-cut leggings that he had personally ordered for her from a boutique in Knightsbridge.

The third was the body of his wife.

Specifically: where to put it.

Naina Bedi had been thirty-eight years old. She had been, until approximately ninety-seven minutes ago, the legal owner

of forty-one percent of the Bedi Group, a holding inherited from her father, which she had refused — despite eleven years of marriage and three increasingly violent arguments in the past month — to sign over to her husband. She was now lying in the master bathroom on the second floor, fully dressed, her neck broken, in a position that had been carefully arranged to suggest she had slipped on the wet marble while reaching for a towel.

Karan had not, technically, killed her.

Karan had merely pushed her. Once. With force. After she had, in his view, said certain things that no wife of a Bedi should say.

The neck had done the rest.

The problem was the party.

The party had been planned for three months. Two hundred guests. The Home Minister's son. Three Bollywood directors. The chairman of an airline. Eight industrialists. The Russian ambassador's wife. The valet service was already setting up in the front drive. The DJ was already testing the speakers in the ballroom. The caterers were already plating the canapés in the kitchen. To cancel the party — to admit that something was wrong, that something had happened — would be to invite, within forty-eight hours, an investigation that even his father's influence could not entirely contain.

The party had to proceed.

Naina had to be elsewhere.

Karan wiped the marble counter with the side of his hand. He looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar — his hair was

still good; his eyes were a little wide; he could fix that with another half-line in twenty minutes — and he walked through the long mirrored corridor to the gym.

Aigerim was on the lat pulldown machine now. She did not turn when he entered.

"Karan, you are early. We agreed seven."

"Aigerim."

Something in his voice made her stop.

She let the weights down slowly. She turned.

"Karan. What is wrong?"

He told her.

He told her quickly, without crying, without any of the small dramatics his father had taught him in childhood were inappropriate for a Bedi man. He told her that Naina was upstairs. He told her that the party was in two hours. He told her that he had been thinking, with a clarity he attributed to the cocaine and which was in fact merely the clarity of a forty-six-year-old man who had never in his life faced a consequence he could not buy his way out of, that there were several practical solutions to this problem, and that he required her assistance with one of them.

Aigerim listened without expression.

When he had finished, she said: "What do you want me to do, Karan?"

"I want you," he said, "to go to her bathroom. Take her phone. Send three messages from it. One to her sister in London — *the party is awful, I am going to a hotel for the night,*

do not worry. One to her driver — I do not need you tonight, please go home. One to me — Karan, I cannot do this party, I am leaving, do not look for me, I will be in touch when I am ready to talk. Then you take her body. There is a service exit through the basement. There is a car in the back drive — the silver Innova, the one the staff use. You drive her to the farmhouse in Manesar. You know the one. The one we went to in February."

Aigerim said nothing.

"There is a freezer," Karan continued. "In the basement. A walk-in. The combination is one-nine-eight-four. You put her inside. You drive the Innova back. You go to your flat in Greater Kailash. You come back here at midnight, in a different car, in a different dress. You arrive at the party. We dance. We are seen. Tomorrow morning, we are *concerned* that Naina has not returned. In three days, when the body is found in a hotel in Manali — and the body will be found in a hotel in Manali, Aigerim, I have already made the arrangement — we are *devastated*. There will be an inquiry. The inquiry will conclude suicide. My father will see to it."

"And what," Aigerim said softly, "do I get?"

Karan smiled. He had been waiting for this.

"You get," he said, "five crores in cash. A flat in Mumbai. A green card to the United States, which my father can arrange in nine months. And, Aigerim — when this is over, when the year of mourning has passed, when the lawyers have settled the estate — you get to be the next Mrs. Bedi. If you would like."

Aigerim Tasbolatova looked at him for a long moment.

Then she said: "Karan, may I ask you one question before I answer?"

"Of course."

"Has it not occurred to you, in the twenty-one days since you hired me, to wonder why a twenty-four-year-old Kazakh woman with a master's degree in chemical engineering from the Lomonosov Moscow State University would be working in Delhi as a personal trainer?"

Karan blinked.

"You — what?"

"And has it not occurred to you, Karan, to wonder why I responded to your advertisement within three hours of its posting? Why my references were so excellent? Why I was so willing to accept the unusual terms — including the requirement that I sign a non-disclosure agreement before our first session?"

Karan stepped back.

He had taken three steps before he realised he was retreating.

"Aigerim. Stop. What are you saying?"

She walked toward him. Slowly. The way one walked toward a dog that was, perhaps, going to bite.

"Naina knew about us, Karan. Naina has known about us since the first week. Naina hired me, Karan. Naina paid me one crore in advance, in February, to come to Delhi and to allow myself to be discovered by you. She paid me a second crore in March to be patient. She told me that her husband, when sufficiently provoked, would do something stupid. She told me

to wait for the something stupid. She told me that when it happened, I should call her sister in London — not from her phone, Karan, from mine — and that her sister would know what to do."

Karan's mouth opened.

No sound came out.

"I called her sister forty-three minutes ago, Karan. Approximately one minute after I heard Naina fall. Naina's sister, in turn, called three other people. One of them is a forensic accountant in Bombay named Aaliyah Khan, who has been mapping the Bedi Group's offshore accounts for the past six weeks at Naina's request. The second is a CBI officer in Gurgaon named Sneha Krishnan. The third is a journalist in Manhattan named Lara Chen, who is in this city for the next forty-eight hours on what she has described to your father's office as a *fitness lifestyle profile*. None of them are journalists, Karan, although Lara Chen does, technically, work for *Vogue*."

Karan tried to speak. He tried to say something — anything — and what came out of his mouth was a small wet sound that he had not made since he was four years old.

"The party is going to happen, Karan. The two hundred guests are going to arrive. You are going to greet them. You are going to dance. You are going to be exactly the host you always are. And at 11:47 p.m., when the Home Minister's son makes his speech, three things are going to happen simultaneously. The Delhi Police will arrive at your front gate with a warrant for your arrest. The Enforcement Directorate will simultaneously raid your office in Connaught Place, your father's office in Nariman Point, and the Bedi Group's

accountant's home in Defence Colony. And at the exact same moment, a story will go live on the *New York Times* website — written by Ms. Chen — describing in considerable detail the systematic financial abuse, physical abuse, and now murder of Naina Bedi by her husband Karan."

"You cannot—"

"I can, Karan. I have. It is done. The only choice left to you, in the next eighty minutes, is whether you would like to die before the police arrive or after."

Karan stared at her.

"Die?"

"Yes, Karan. Die. Because if you choose *after*, you will spend the next twenty years in Tihar Jail, where I will personally ensure that the other prisoners are made aware of certain — let us say, certain rumors — about why exactly you are there. And you will not enjoy those twenty years, Karan. You will not enjoy them at all."

"And if I choose before?"

Aigerim reached into the small leather pouch at her hip. She withdrew a small glass vial.

"Then you will, regrettably, suffer a heart attack at 10:30 p.m. tonight, in the master bathroom on the second floor, while attempting to revive your wife, who you had only just then discovered, tragically, had slipped on the wet marble. The forensic team that arrives in the morning will be Sneha Krishnan's team. They will find what they are meant to find. Your father will mourn his son. Your mother will mourn her daughter-in-law. The Bedi Group will be inherited by Naina's

sister in London, who is — and this part, Karan, you really should have looked into — the legitimate trustee of forty-one percent of the company under the marriage contract your lawyers drafted in 2014 and which you, regrettably, did not read carefully."

Karan looked at the vial.

He looked at Aigerim.

He looked, through the gym's glass wall, at the long marble corridor that led to the foyer, where the first guests were beginning, very faintly, to be heard — the murmur of the valets, the distant clatter of a champagne flute against a tray.

"Aigerim." His voice was very small. "Why are you doing this?"

"Karan." She handed him the vial. "I told you the truth a moment ago. I have a master's degree in chemical engineering from Moscow State. My specialisation was toxicology. My father was a chemist who worked, until his death in 2011, in a research facility in Novosibirsk that was funded, partially, by a Russian woman who lives now in Monte Carlo. My mother, who I have not seen in eleven years, worked as a housekeeper in 1986 in a hotel in Kiev where a young woman named Anya Volkov stayed for one night before disappearing into the Soviet underground. My mother, Karan, has been quietly looking out for me, from a distance, all my life. And six months ago, when Mrs. Bedi reached out to a certain network of women on a certain encrypted application, my name was the one that came up. I was sent to Delhi, Karan, because there are not many women in this profession who can pass for a personal trainer and who can also, when the occasion requires it, administer a

dose of a substance that has never been seen in any Indian toxicology laboratory."

Karan held the vial.

"This will not hurt?"

"No, Karan. This will not hurt."

He uncapped it.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror behind the bench press — at his still-good hair, at his slightly-too-wide eyes, at the small white residue at the corner of his nostril.

He drank.

It took eleven minutes. By the time the first guests were being shown into the marble foyer, Karan Bedi had finished arranging himself on the bathroom floor beside his wife, in a tableau of grief that would convince every forensic technician who later examined it.

Aigerim Tasbolatova washed the glass vial in the gym sink. She dried it. She placed it back in her leather pouch.

She walked through the long mirrored corridor, past the marble bar, past the foyer where two hundred guests were beginning to arrive, out the side door into the warm March night.

A car was waiting. A silver Innova. The driver was a young Sikh man who did not look at her.

She got in.

She took out her phone.

She typed a single message, to a number with a Monaco country code.

Aunt — the parcel has been delivered. Please tell Mama I am well.

She pressed send.

The car pulled out of the back drive of the Chhatarpur farmhouse and turned south, toward the airport, where a flight was waiting to take Aigerim Tasbolatova to a small private island in the Cyclades, where she would spend the next six months, on a beach, reading novels.

Behind her, in the eighteen-room farmhouse with its private gym and its basement that did not officially exist, the party went on for another forty-three minutes before someone, finally, went looking for the host.



STORY VIII

THE WHITEFIELD BURN

Bangalore

Ananya Reddy founded the second-largest fintech startup in India and the first all-women CrossFit box in Bangalore in the same year, and she had, by the age of thirty-one, been featured on the covers of *Forbes Asia*, *Vogue India*, and *Outlook Business*, and she had, by the age of thirty-two, been blackmailed by her co-founder for fourteen crores rupees, and she had, by the age of thirty-three, decided to kill him.

The CrossFit box was the answer.

It was called BURN. It occupied the entire ground floor of a converted warehouse on Old Airport Road in Whitefield, and it had, in its eighteen months of operation, become the place in Bangalore where women of a certain net worth came to sweat — venture partners, founder's wives, two members of the state legislature, the lead anchor of a national news channel, and three dozen women who had, in the past decade, become richer than their husbands and were quietly, methodically, planning what to do about it.

Ananya had not built BURN for the workouts. Ananya had built BURN because, in 2024, after the third round of funding for her startup had closed at a valuation of three thousand four hundred crores, she had realised that the most valuable thing

she could possibly own in Bangalore was not equity. It was a room. A room where powerful women came to be unobserved. A room where the conversations that happened — between sets of thrusters and box jumps, with the sweat dripping into the chalk dust and the eighties rock blaring from the speakers — could not be recorded, could not be subpoenaed, could not be repeated.

A room, in short, where her co-founder could not reach her.

Her co-founder was Vivaan Mehra. He was thirty-six years old. He had been her boyfriend at IIM Ahmedabad. He had been her cofounder for nine years. He had been, for the past fourteen months, slowly bleeding her of every rupee she had personally earned, using a series of WhatsApp messages from 2019 in which Ananya, after the second drink at a company offsite in Goa, had told him certain things about her CFO that her CFO had been paying, since the day after they were sent, very large sums of money to ensure no one ever read.

Vivaan had a screenshot.

Vivaan had several screenshots.

Vivaan had, in fact, an entire encrypted folder, which he had been adding to systematically since 2021, and which he had begun, fourteen months ago, to use.

Ananya had paid the first instalment in cash. Two crores, delivered in a Louis Vuitton duffel to a flat in Indiranagar. The second instalment, four crores, had been routed through a shell company in Singapore. The third instalment, eight crores, was due on the fifteenth of November.

It was now the twelfth of November.

Vivaan had a training session at BURN at 6 a.m. on the morning of the fifteenth.

Ananya had been planning his death for seven weeks.

She had not, technically, *been* planning his death.

What Ananya had been doing — in the small carpeted office above the BURN floor, with the door locked and the air conditioning humming and the laptop open and the small fan whirring against her face — was researching. Reading. Listening, mostly. She had begun, in late September, to attend the 7 a.m. women's class herself. Not to work out, although she did, with a controlled fury that her trainer had begun, recently, to comment on. To listen.

The women in her class talked.

They talked about their husbands. They talked about their boards. They talked, sometimes, about the small precise solutions they had quietly engineered to the small precise problems their husbands and their boards had created. They talked, one particular woman — the lead anchor of the national news channel, who had been training at BURN for sixteen months — talked about a woman she knew, *only by reputation, mind you, only by reputation*, who provided what she called *consultancy services* to women in the metros.

Ananya had listened.

Ananya had, six weeks ago, after her own session, asked the lead anchor very casually, over a protein shake, what *consultancy services* meant.

The lead anchor had looked at her for a long time. Then the lead anchor had said: "Ananya. May I give you a piece of advice from a woman who has been watching you for a year?"

"Please."

"Whatever it is that you think you cannot solve — do not pay for it. Whoever it is that you think is breaking you — do not negotiate with him. There is, in this city, a number you can call. The number is not on any phone. The number is given, by one woman to another, only after a great deal of consideration. I have been considering you, Ananya, for some time. I am going to give you the number now. You will, when you call, ask for Madame Iyer. You will tell her that Rukmini sent you. You will tell her your problem, in one sentence — no more, no less. She will tell you whether you are a client she can take. If she cannot take you, you will forget this conversation. If she can, you will follow her instructions to the letter, for the rest of your life. Do you understand?"

Ananya had understood.

She had memorised the number.

She had walked to her car. She had driven to the high ground above Bellandur Lake. She had taken out her phone. She had dialed.

A woman had answered. The voice was older. Calm. Educated in the particular Bangalorean way that suggested Bishop Cotton's, Stella Maris, and a doctorate from somewhere in the United Kingdom. Not a voice Ananya had expected.

"Yes."

"Madame Iyer? Rukmini gave me your number. I have a problem. The problem is my co-founder. He has been blackmailing me for fourteen months. He has fourteen crores of my money. He is about to take eight more. He will not, I believe, stop."

A long pause.

"Ms. Reddy. Yes, I know who you are. I have been watching your career with admiration. May I ask you three questions before I answer?"

"Please."

"One. Do you have any reason to believe that the man you propose to remove is loved by anyone — a wife, a child, a parent — whose grief would weigh on you if you removed him?"

Ananya had thought about this. She had thought about Vivaan's wife, Riya, a sweet vacuous woman she had once liked. She had thought about Vivaan's mother, who lived in Lucknow and who had cried at their engagement in 2014. She had thought about Vivaan's daughter, a six-year-old named Anaya.

"Yes," she had said. "His daughter."

"I appreciate the honest answer. Two. Are you prepared to live the rest of your life knowing that you did this, and to never, under any circumstance, tell another human being — including a therapist, a future husband, or a god?"

"Yes."

"Three. Ms. Reddy — and I ask this only of clients I am inclined to take — are you prepared to do me, at an unspecified future date, a favor of equivalent magnitude?"

"What kind of favor?"

"I do not know yet. It is conditional on circumstances that have not arisen. It might never arise. If it does, I will call you. You will say yes. You will not ask what it is for. You will not ask who is paying. You will do what is asked. Is this acceptable?"

Ananya had been silent for a long time, looking out over the dark water of the lake.

"Yes," she had said.

"Very well, Ms. Reddy. Here is what is going to happen."

At 6:04 a.m. on the morning of the fifteenth of November, Vivaan Mehra walked into BURN.

It was a Tuesday. The class was a private one — only six women, all members of the small unmarked Tuesday morning *Founder's Circle* that Ananya had quietly established to attract the wives of venture capitalists. Vivaan was the only man. He was Vivaan because Ananya had insisted, two months ago, that he begin training with her — *we need to be photographed together, V, we need to look like cofounders again, we need to be on each other's Instagram* — and Vivaan, who had always enjoyed being photographed with Ananya, had agreed.

He had not noticed, in two months of Tuesday mornings, that the six other women in the class never spoke to him.

He had not noticed that they did not, even, look at him.

He had not noticed that when he completed a set, no one offered the small encouraging *good work* that the other members offered each other.

He had not noticed many things.

He noticed, this morning, that the trainer was someone new.

"Ananya — where is Sandeep?"

Ananya looked up from her squat. She smiled. "Sandeep had a family emergency. This is Lalitha. She is covering. She is excellent. Carry on."

Lalitha was forty-seven. She was small. She had a long grey braid down her back and a faded gym t-shirt that said *Iyengar Yoga Centre, Pune* in white block letters. She did not look, to Vivaan, like a CrossFit trainer.

She looked, in fact, like someone's maths teacher.

"Sir," Lalitha said softly, "today we will do Murph. You know Murph, sir?"

"I know Murph."

"One mile run, sir. One hundred pull-ups. Two hundred push-ups. Three hundred squats. One more mile run. With weight vest, sir. You can do?"

"I can do."

"Good, sir. Very good. Please. Start with run. Treadmill there."

Vivaan stepped onto the treadmill. He started his mile. The other six women began their own workouts on the floor — Ananya among them, doing her squats with the small steady rhythm that had, in recent weeks, attracted comment from her trainer.

Vivaan ran his mile. Vivaan came off the treadmill. Vivaan walked to the pull-up rig.

"Sir," Lalitha called, "vest first, sir. Twenty pounds. Standard for men."

She handed him the weight vest.

He pulled it over his head. He fastened the velcro. He felt the comfortable weight settle across his shoulders and his chest.

He did not feel the second weight.

The second weight had been sewn, three nights previously, into the inner lining of the vest by a tailor in Cooke Town who had, twelve years previously, served eleven years in Bangalore Central Jail for a murder he had not, technically, committed. The second weight was twelve pounds of a high-density polymer alloy distributed evenly across the vest's inner panels. It was completely undetectable by sight. It had, in the past six weeks, been weighed and re-weighed by Madame Iyer's team to ensure that the *additional* weight Vivaan would be carrying — when added to the *visible* twenty pounds, plus his body weight of seventy-eight kilograms, plus the cumulative cardiovascular strain of completing Murph at a pace he had been incrementally encouraged, over eight weeks, to push beyond his actual capacity — would, with statistical certainty, induce a fatal cardiac arrhythmia in a man with his particular family history of heart disease.

Family history that Vivaan, characteristically, had never mentioned to anyone at BURN.

Family history that Madame Iyer's research team had nonetheless obtained from a clinic in Lucknow, where Vivaan's father had been treated, between 1998 and 2003, for the same

condition that had eventually killed Vivaan's grandfather at the age of forty-one.

Vivaan was thirty-six.

Statistically, he was overdue.

He began his pull-ups.

Twenty. Forty. Sixty.

By eighty, he was breathing hard. By one hundred, he was finished with the bar. He moved to the floor for push-ups.

Lalitha walked beside him as he transitioned.

"Sir, water break?"

"No. Going to push through."

"Good, sir. Very strong."

He dropped to the floor. He began his push-ups. Fifty. One hundred. One hundred fifty.

His chest, by this point, was a kind of bright glassy pain that he had not felt before, but he had read enough men's magazines to know that bright glassy pain was the threshold beyond which gains were made, and Vivaan Mehra was the kind of man who, in 2014, had quit his consulting job at McKinsey because he believed that the soft would inherit nothing and the hard would inherit the earth.

Two hundred push-ups.

He stood up. He moved to the squat rack.

Ananya, four meters away, completing her own squats with her steady controlled rhythm, did not look at him.

Vivaan began his squats.

He completed one hundred. He completed two hundred.

At squat two hundred and forty-seven, his left arm went numb.

He continued.

At squat two hundred and seventy-three, his chest contracted in a way that he understood, with the small clean clarity that arrived very rarely in his life, was not normal.

He continued.

At squat two hundred and ninety-eight, his heart stopped.

He fell forward across the squat rack. His chin caught the bar. He slid sideways. He lay on the rubber floor of BURN, in his twenty-pound — thirty-two-pound — weight vest, and the last thing he saw, very faintly, was Lalitha walking calmly toward him with her hands in the pockets of her faded grey t-shirt and her long grey braid swinging across her back, and the last thing he heard was Ananya, somewhere behind him, saying very softly to one of the other six women in the room:

"Should we call somebody?"

And the other woman saying: "Give it three more minutes, beti. Sometimes they come back."

He did not come back.

The post-mortem, conducted at Manipal Hospital that afternoon, identified the cause of death as *acute myocardial infarction secondary to extreme physical exertion in an individual with previously undiagnosed coronary artery disease*. Vivaan Mehra's father had died of the same thing, at the age of

forty-four, six years before. The family history was, in the end, undeniable.

The weight vest was returned, that afternoon, to BURN's equipment locker. The tailor in Cooke Town received, three days later, a small package containing twenty lakh rupees in cash and a typed note, in English, reading only *Thank you. Burn this*. The tailor burned the note. He kept the cash. He bought, with three lakhs of it, a small house in his ancestral village near Mysore, where his daughter, who had been raised by her grandmother for twelve years while her father was in Bangalore Central Jail, finally came to live with him.

Ananya Reddy spent the morning at Manipal Hospital, weeping the small controlled tears of a woman who had just lost her cofounder. She held Riya's hand. She held Ananya's small confused face against her shoulder while the six-year-old tried to understand why everyone was so sad. She arranged the cremation. She gave a beautiful eulogy. She announced, three weeks later, the creation of the Vivaan Mehra Scholarship at IIM Ahmedabad, funded by an initial contribution of fourteen crores rupees from her personal account.

Vivaan's encrypted folder, in the year that followed, did not surface.

Vivaan's phone, in the chaos of the morning, had been carried to the hospital by Ananya herself.

Ananya's call from Madame Iyer, when it finally came — fourteen months later, on a Tuesday afternoon in January — was a single sentence.

Beti. There is a young woman in Trivandrum. She runs a yoga retreat. I need you to attend a course there in February. You will receive further instructions when you arrive.

Ananya wrote it down.

She did not, of course, ask what it was for.

She had agreed not to.



STORY IX

THE KOVALAM CLEANSE

Kerala

The retreat was called Soumya — the Sanskrit word for *gentle* — and it occupied eleven hectares of cliffside coconut grove above the Arabian Sea, twenty-three kilometers south of Trivandrum, and it had, since its founding in 2019, become the place where the wives of South Indian industrialists came to detoxify their livers, their consciences, and, occasionally, their lives.

It was run by a forty-one-year-old woman named Dr. Lakshmi Pillai.

Dr. Pillai had a PhD in clinical pharmacology from the University of Cambridge. She had practiced for nine years at the Tata Memorial Hospital in Bombay, in the department of palliative oncology, where she had specialised in the management of end-of-life pain. She had left medicine in 2018 for reasons that her former colleagues, when asked, described as *personal*, and which the official record described as *amicable*.

The official record was incomplete.

Dr. Pillai had left medicine because, in the seven years preceding her departure, she had quietly engineered the deaths of eleven patients whose families had paid her, in cash,

sums ranging from twenty lakhs to one crore rupees to ensure that their loved ones did not, after all, finish their journeys in the manner the disease had been preparing for them. She had done this with a moral clarity she did not, even now, regret. The eleven patients had been, every one of them, in pain so absolute that the morphine had merely added a layer of confusion to their misery. The families had not asked her to do it. She had simply, after years of watching them try to find the words, offered.

She had been very good at this work.

She had been so good that, in early 2018, she had been approached — over a quiet dinner at the Bombay Gymkhana — by a woman she had known only as *Madame*, who had asked her, with the small steady politeness of a person who already knows the answer, whether she would consider applying her skills to a slightly different class of patient.

Dr. Pillai had asked what she meant by *slightly different*.

Madame had said: *Patients who are not currently dying, but who probably ought to be.*

Dr. Pillai had finished her wine. She had looked out across the Apollo Bunder at the Gateway of India, which had been built, she remembered from a school textbook, to commemorate the arrival of King George V in 1911. She had thought about her grandmother, who had been raped by a British officer in Cochin in 1942 and who had spent the rest of her life refusing to speak of it. She had thought about her own mother, who had been beaten unconscious by her own husband — Dr. Pillai's father — in 1989, and who had, three

weeks later, walked into the Arabian Sea at four o'clock in the morning with her saree pockets full of stones.

She had thought about how many *patients who probably ought to be dying* she had personally encountered in her life.

She had said yes.

Soumya, when it opened the following year, was Madame's gift to her — a beautiful seventy-two-bed retreat on the Kovalam cliffs, paid for in full by a trust based in Mauritius, with a clientele drawn from a small encrypted list of women across India who knew, when their problems exceeded the capacity of lawyers, where to go.

The retreat offered yoga. The retreat offered ayurvedic massage. The retreat offered a comprehensive seven-day cleanse that involved a strict regimen of *kashayams*, *vasti* treatments, and twice-daily sessions in a private cliff-top gym that overlooked the sea.

The retreat also, very occasionally — perhaps once every four months, always on a strict invitation basis — offered something else.

On the second of February, 2026, two women arrived at Soumya within twelve hours of each other.

The first arrived at 11:47 a.m. Her name was Ananya Reddy. She was the founder of an Indian fintech startup. She had been instructed, fourteen months previously and again three weeks ago, by a woman known to her only as Madame Iyer, that she was to attend a seven-day cleanse at Soumya beginning on this date, and that her instructions for the favor

she had agreed to perform in exchange for services rendered in November 2024 would be communicated to her on arrival.

The second arrived at 11:23 p.m. Her name was Mrs. Aruna Iyengar. She was sixty-seven years old. She was the widow of an industrialist whose conglomerate, listed in Chennai, controlled — among other things — the largest private mining operation in the Bellary district. She had been instructed, by the same Madame Iyer (no relation), to attend the cleanse on these dates because she required, after a difficult year, a thorough detoxification.

She had not been told that she would meet anyone in particular.

She had also not been told that she would not, after the seventh day, leave.

Dr. Pillai met both women at the welcome pavilion, in the order of their arrival, in a white linen kurta and bare feet. She offered them coconut water. She walked them to their cottages. She arranged their welcome massages. She inquired about their dietary preferences, their sleep patterns, their existing prescriptions, and — with the particular tact that her years at Tata Memorial had taught her — their emotional state on arrival.

Ananya was anxious.

Mrs. Iyengar was, on the surface, serene.

Dr. Pillai had been doing this work long enough to know that serenity in a woman of Mrs. Iyengar's age and class was almost always one of two things: it was either the deep ground-water serenity of a woman who had genuinely made peace with her

life, or it was the lacquered surface of a woman who had not, in the past forty years, allowed herself to feel a single unmanaged emotion. Mrs. Iyengar's serenity had the unmistakable polish of the latter.

This was useful information.

Dr. Pillai retired to her office at 1 a.m. on the third of February, and she opened the encrypted file Madame had transmitted to her on the seventeenth of January, and she read, for the fourth time, the brief that had been prepared on Mrs. Aruna Iyengar.

The brief was eleven pages long.

It established, with the dry clarity that Madame's research operation always applied to these matters, that Mrs. Iyengar had, in 1981, been one of the three women whose disappearance from a village called Hosahalli in the Bellary district had marked the beginning of her late husband's mining career. The three women — fourteen, sixteen, and seventeen — had been the daughters of a local political organiser who had been agitating against Mr. Iyengar's land acquisitions. They had been abducted on a Thursday evening. Their bodies had been found, in pieces, in a quarry the following Monday.

Mrs. Iyengar had, the brief established, personally directed the operation.

Her husband had merely paid for it.

In the forty-four years since, Mrs. Iyengar had personally directed seven further operations of comparable magnitude. The brief listed each of them. Land disputes. Labour organisers. A journalist in 2003. A young politician in 2011. A

magistrate in 2017 who had refused to grant a stay on an environmental clearance.

The brief ended with a single line, typed in italics: *Subject is responsible for the deaths of, at minimum, twenty-three persons. No criminal proceedings have ever been initiated. Madame considers this an oversight.*

Dr. Pillai closed the file.

She walked out onto the balcony of her office. The sea was a black plane below the cliff. A few fishing boats showed their small kerosene lights, very far out. The air smelled of jasmine and salt.

She thought about her grandmother in Cochin.

She poured herself a small whisky.

She began to plan.

Ananya was woken at 5:30 a.m. on her third morning by a knock at her cottage door.

Dr. Pillai was there. She was carrying a tray with two small clay cups of *kashayam* and a single white envelope.

"Good morning, beti. May I come in?"

She sat. She handed Ananya the *kashayam*. She watched her drink it. She watched the small involuntary grimace that the medicine always produced. She smiled.

"Beti. Madame has asked me to give you this."

She handed Ananya the envelope.

Inside was a single photograph. A woman, sixty-something, gracious, wearing a Kanjeevaram saree, photographed at what appeared to be a temple visit.

"Her name is Aruna Iyengar. She is staying in the cottage forty meters from yours. Today, at 4 p.m., she will attend a private session at our cliff-top gym. The session has been booked under your name."

"My name?"

"Your name. You will not, however, attend the session. You will be elsewhere — in the lower garden, attending a yoga class — with seventeen witnesses, including a journalist from *Vogue India* who has been writing a profile of you for some time and who arrived at Soumya yesterday afternoon, by coincidence, on a wellness assignment."

"And — and what happens at the session?"

"At the session, beti, Mrs. Iyengar will experience an unfortunate cardiac event during a routine exercise on the cliff-top treadmill. The treadmill is positioned, as you may have noticed, very close to the edge of the cliff. The railings are decorative. The treadmill, when it malfunctions, can — under unusual circumstances — eject its occupant in a direction that is not quite parallel to its frame. The cliff is forty-three meters high. The rocks below are extremely sharp."

"You want me to push her."

"I want you, beti, to do nothing. The session is booked under your name because the cancellation must be on record. You will cancel it at 3:47 p.m. — twelve minutes after Mrs. Iyengar has, regrettably, decided to use the equipment anyway. She is a woman who does not, in her own view, *need* permission. She

will arrive at the gym. She will find it empty. She will use the treadmill. The treadmill will, at 4:11 p.m., experience a controlled-cascade failure that has been prepared by my maintenance team. There will be no witnesses. There will be no recordings. The cameras at the cliff-top gym have been, for the past two weeks, in maintenance."

"Then why do you need me at all?"

Dr. Pillai smiled. It was a small, tired smile.

"Because, beti, the favor Madame asked of you was not merely to be physically present. The favor was, and is, to ensure that *your name* — Ananya Reddy, the celebrated young female founder, the cover girl, the public face — appears on the booking record for a private gym session at the exact time that Mrs. Iyengar died in an accident at the same gym. There will be an inquiry. The inquiry will examine the booking record. The inquiry will see your name. The inquiry will note that you did not, in fact, attend, having been at a yoga class with seventeen witnesses including a journalist. The inquiry will conclude that Mrs. Iyengar, with characteristic disregard for the booking system of which her family had complained on multiple previous visits, had simply walked into a gym she did not have permission to use, and had paid the price."

"And — and Madame? What does she gain?"

Dr. Pillai looked at her for a long moment.

"Beti. Madame gains the death of a woman who has personally arranged the murders of twenty-three persons, including three teenage girls in 1981. Madame gains, additionally, the future cooperation of a young female fintech founder whose company is, as it happens, the principal banking

partner for a logistics operation that Madame requires to be very, very quiet about a particular shipment that will arrive in the port of Cochin in approximately six months. Madame gains, in short, what Madame always gains: the alignment of justice with self-interest. It is not, beti, the worst combination."

Ananya looked at the photograph again. At the kind face. At the gracious eyes. At the carefully arranged jasmine in the silvering hair.

"What did those girls — what were their names?"

Dr. Pillai reached into her kurta and produced a second envelope.

Inside were three photographs. Three girls. Fourteen. Sixteen. Seventeen.

Ananya looked at the photographs for a long time.

She nodded.

"What time is the yoga class?"

"Three-thirty p.m., beti. Lower garden. Master Krishnan will be teaching. He is, as you may already know, very strict about attendance."

"And the journalist?"

"Will be in the front row, beside you, photographing your form for an upcoming feature on *Women Founders in Wellness*."

Ananya smiled, very faintly.

"Dr. Pillai — may I ask one more question?"

"Of course, beti."

"Mrs. Iyengar. She arranged the deaths of those three girls forty-five years ago. She has lived a long and comfortable life in the meantime. She has raised children. She has held grandchildren. Why now? Why this week?"

Dr. Pillai set down her cup of kashayam.

"Because, beti, Mrs. Iyengar's elder son is, this Friday, going to be appointed Minister of Mines and Coal in the central cabinet. The appointment has been quietly arranged over the past eleven months. It will be announced on Friday morning. If she is alive on Friday, the appointment will go through, and a man whose mother arranged the murders of twenty-three people, including three children, will administer the natural resources of the largest mineral-rich state in India. If she is dead on Friday morning, the appointment will be quietly withdrawn. The grieving son will be deemed unprepared. The portfolio will go to a different MP from a different state. Madame has been waiting, beti, for forty-five years. The window for justice is four days wide. We are on day three."

Ananya picked up the kashayam. She drank the rest of it.

"I will be at the yoga class," she said. "At 3:30 sharp."

"I know you will, beti."

Dr. Pillai rose. She took the empty cups. She walked to the door.

With her hand on the latch, she turned.

"Ananya."

"Yes?"

"You did very well in November. The young man's scholarship at IIM Ahmedabad — that was a kind touch. Madame noticed."

Ananya did not answer.

Dr. Pillai walked out into the morning.

Outside, the cliffs were turning gold in the rising sun, and the sea was breathing against the rocks, and forty meters down the path, in cottage number eleven, Mrs. Aruna Iyengar was beginning her morning meditation, on the breath, in the lotus posture her own guru had taught her in 1973, twelve years before the three girls in Hosahalli had been dragged from their father's home into a Tata Sumo and had never been seen alive again.

She had four days left.

She did not, yet, have any reason to know it.



STORY X

THE GENEVA ACCOUNT

Geneva

Étienne Delacroix had been the second-most-loved person in his brother Marcus's life, which placed him, in his own private accounting, somewhere between an inconvenience and a footnote.

He had learned to live with this. He had been learning to live with it since 1994, when their mother had brought Marcus home from the hospital and had handed the squalling pink bundle to Étienne — four years old, jealous, watchful — and had said, in the soft Haitian-French of their grandmother, *Ti gason, this is your brother. You will love him more than you love yourself. This is the rule of our family.*

Étienne had obeyed the rule.

For thirty-one years he had obeyed it.

He had obeyed it through the swimming lessons and the soccer matches and the small theatre of a childhood in which Marcus, with his improbable beauty and his careless brilliance, had collected every prize and every gaze in every room they entered. He had obeyed it through the years at Columbia, where Marcus had been the centerpiece of the social class and Étienne, two years behind him in the same economics program, had been a name on a transcript. He had obeyed it through the

long quiet decade after Marcus had moved to New York and become a personal trainer to the very rich, and Étienne had moved to Geneva and become a wealth manager at a private bank whose name was not, as a matter of policy, printed on its building.

He had obeyed it, even, through the morning of April third, when his phone had rung at 7:14 a.m. Geneva time and a voice he did not recognise had told him, in careful English, that his brother had died of an anaphylactic reaction during a training session in Manhattan, and would he please contact the Office of the Medical Examiner of the City of New York at his earliest convenience.

He had obeyed it, even, through the funeral, at which Marcus's widow — a beautiful Puerto Rican woman named Elena who lived in Forest Hills and whom Étienne had never previously met — had wept on his shoulder for three full hours, and at which a second woman, a stunning dark-haired creature in a black Dior dress, had introduced herself as Mrs. Theodore Whitmore III and had said, with the small precise grace of a wealthy widow consoling another widow, that Marcus had been *like family* and that she was *so terribly sorry*.

He had obeyed the rule until, three weeks after the funeral, the boxes from Marcus's apartment had been delivered to Étienne's flat on the Rue du Mont-Blanc, and Étienne had opened the third box from the top, the box marked *Personal*, and he had found, among the loose photographs and the unworn cufflinks and the receipts for restaurants Marcus would never visit again, a small black leather-bound notebook in which his brother had recorded, in his careful school-boy hand, eighteen months of meetings, expenses, and observations

relating to a project he had labelled, in the inside cover, *The Whitmore Job*.

Étienne had taken the notebook to his study.

He had closed the door.

He had read, over the next four hours, the complete record of his brother's assassination of Theodore Whitmore III at the hands of Mr. Whitmore's wife Carmen.

And then he had read, in the final eleven pages, the complete record of his brother's growing suspicion — eight weeks before his death — that Carmen was, in fact, planning to murder *him* as well, and the careful counter-plan Marcus had been developing, which involved replacing a particular espresso pod in Carmen's kitchen with one containing a derivative of conotoxin he had personally acquired from a contact in the Philippines.

The final entry, dated April 1st, was a single line:

She has switched the pod back. I am certain of it. Tomorrow I will switch it again. If she switches it a third time, I am dead.

Marcus had died on April 3rd.

Étienne Delacroix, that night, broke the rule of his family for the first time in thirty-one years.

He decided, in the still cold air of his Geneva study, that he was going to kill Carmen Rivera Whitmore.

He gave himself eleven months.

He gave himself eleven months because he was, by temperament and training, a man who did not act on impulse.

He was a wealth manager. He moved sums of money the size of small countries' GDP through jurisdictions in which a comma in the wrong place could trigger a war. He had been taught, by a Belgian mentor at the bank, that the difference between a successful operation and a disastrous one was the willingness to wait. *Mon cher*, the mentor had said, on Étienne's first day, *patience is the only true wealth. Everything else is liquidity.*

Étienne was patient.

For eleven months he watched Carmen Rivera Whitmore from a distance of four thousand miles.

He read every gossip column. He subscribed to every charity newsletter she appeared in. He hired, through a series of cutouts, a private investigator in Manhattan to document her movements. He learned that she had, in the year since Theodore's death, inherited the entire Whitmore fortune. He learned that she had completed her audit at Hunter College and had transferred, for some reason, to a graduate program in pharmacology at Columbia. He learned that she had purchased, in November, a new flat in Tribeca, and a new house in Bridgehampton, and a new yacht moored at Antibes.

He also learned that she had developed, in the past six months, a new and intense interest in private wealth management.

Specifically: in Geneva.

Specifically: in the bank that did not, as a matter of policy, have its name printed on its building.

Specifically: in establishing a long-term trust structure that would, she had told the bank's relationship manager in a preliminary meeting in October, *protect her late husband's*

assets from the inevitable challenges of his estranged adult children.

Étienne had read the file, when it crossed his desk in December, with the particular attention of a man whose patience was about to be rewarded.

He had not been Carmen's assigned relationship manager. He had been, in fact, three rungs above the manager assigned to her. He had requested, through a small careful intervention with the head of the private wealth division, that the file be transferred to him personally. The head of the division — a Frenchwoman of sixty-two who had owed Étienne a favor since 2019 — had asked no questions. The file had been transferred. The first appointment had been scheduled for March fifth.

Carmen Rivera Whitmore would fly into Geneva on a private jet on the fourth of March.

She would be Étienne's client, in person, for three days.

Étienne had eleven months to prepare.

He had spent them well.

He had spent eight of those months researching conotoxin derivatives.

He had spent three of them building, in a small private room at an exclusive gym on the Quai du Mont-Blanc, a relationship with a German pharmacologist named Dr. Beate Werner. Dr. Werner had no idea who Étienne was. Dr. Werner believed Étienne was a private banker with a passion for marathon training. Dr. Werner had, over the course of forty-three personal training sessions, become extremely fond of him.

Dr. Werner had, in November, broken up with her boyfriend of nine years.

Étienne had been, on the night of the breakup, exactly where she had needed him to be.

On the seventh of January, Dr. Werner had given Étienne a key to her laboratory at the Université de Genève — a small private space, on the third floor of the chemistry building, in which she conducted independent research on marine toxin pharmacology that her university funded but did not particularly supervise.

By the fourteenth of February, Étienne had synthesised the same conotoxin derivative Marcus had used to kill Theodore Whitmore III.

He had also synthesised the *second* compound — the one Marcus's notebook had described as the *kill switch*, the inert powder that, when combined with the primary compound, produced a reaction so violent that the human nervous system simply stopped.

Carmen had, in the original operation, used the kill switch to murder Marcus.

Étienne intended, in the planned operation, to use it to murder Carmen.

He had been thinking, for some weeks, about the elegance of the symmetry.

Carmen arrived in Geneva on the fourth of March at 11:47 a.m., on a Bombardier Global 7500 registered to a Cayman Islands entity, and she was met at Geneva Airport by a discreet

black Mercedes and driven to the Hôtel des Bergues, where she was installed in the Royal Suite under the name Mrs. Carmen Whitmore.

She was, according to Étienne's observation from the lobby of the hotel, exactly as beautiful as her photographs had suggested. She was thirty-six years old. She wore Carolina Herrera. She tipped the bellman a hundred Swiss francs. She did not, as she crossed the lobby, look anyone in the eye.

Étienne returned to his office.

He prepared his briefcase for the morning. He prepared, also, the small leather flask that contained, in a sealed double-walled vial, the second compound — the kill switch — in liquid form. The flask had been designed by a craftsman in Lausanne who specialised in luxury accessories for private bankers. It was indistinguishable from a flask of cognac. Its inner vial was made of a polymer that could not be detected by any scanner currently in use at any international border.

He had been, for several weeks, looking forward to the morning.

He did not, however, sleep well.

He dreamed of his brother Marcus, four years old, holding his hand on the way to school in Brooklyn, asking him a question Étienne did not, in the dream, understand.

Carmen Rivera Whitmore walked into Étienne's office at the bank that did not print its name on its building at exactly 10 a.m. on the fifth of March.

She was, in person, even more beautiful than she had been in the lobby.

She was, also, accompanied.

The woman accompanying her was perhaps sixty-five, tall, with silver hair pulled into a chignon, wearing Ferragamo flats and a tracksuit that, in the context of the bank's marble lobby, was so violently out of place that the security desk had, Étienne knew, run three separate background checks before permitting her upstairs.

"Mr. Delacroix." Carmen extended her hand. Her smile was warm. Her eyes were not. "Thank you for accommodating us on short notice. May I introduce my associate, Mrs. Anya Volkov. Anya runs a women's gym in Monte Carlo. She has been advising me, recently, on certain — let us say — diversification strategies."

Étienne shook Carmen's hand.

He shook Mrs. Volkov's hand.

He did not, in the small precise compartment of his mind that handled crises, permit anything to change in his face.

"Of course. Please. Be seated. I have prepared a preliminary structure that I think you will find — *interesting*."

"I am sure I shall," Carmen said.

He poured three small glasses of water from the carafe on his desk. He distributed them. He sat down behind the desk. He opened the file.

He had ten minutes before the planned introduction of the briefcase.

Ten minutes was enough time, he had calculated, to establish the meeting on a comfortable footing, to discuss the proposed structure in sufficient detail to satisfy any subsequent inquiry, and to invite Mrs. Whitmore to share, as he often did with new private clients, a small glass of a particular Armagnac that he kept in a decanter on the credenza behind his desk.

Ten minutes, however, became nine.

And then eight.

Because Mrs. Volkov, who had been sitting beside Carmen in silence, was now leaning forward, and Mrs. Volkov was now smiling, and Mrs. Volkov was now saying, in a voice that carried the faint smoky lilt of a woman who had been speaking French as a second language for forty years:

"Mr. Delacroix. Before we continue, may I ask you a question?"

Étienne inclined his head.

"Of course, Mrs. Volkov."

"Mr. Delacroix. Why did you transfer this file to your personal management in December?"

Étienne's hand, on the file, did not move.

"It is a courtesy I extend, Mrs. Volkov, to clients of a certain size. Mrs. Whitmore's portfolio represents —"

"Mr. Delacroix. May I be candid with you?"

"Please."

Anya Volkov reached into her handbag. She withdrew a single sheet of paper. She placed it on Étienne's desk. It was a

photocopy of a page from a small black leather-bound notebook, written in his brother's careful school-boy hand.

Étienne looked at the page.

He looked at Mrs. Volkov.

He looked at Carmen.

Carmen was smiling.

"Mr. Delacroix," Anya said softly, "your brother was a beautiful boy. I met him twice — once in 2019 in New York, once in 2022 in Monaco. He was charming. He was also, professionally speaking, an amateur. He kept a notebook, Mr. Delacroix, which is the single most reckless thing a person in his line of work can do. The notebook came to my attention three weeks after his death, when one of my associates in Manhattan, a young trainer named Lara Chen, acquired it from the New York Police Department's evidence room through a small intermediary. The notebook has been in my possession ever since."

"My brother's notebook—"

"The notebook that was in the box delivered to your flat in April, Mr. Delacroix, was a fabrication. A very good one. It contained every page Marcus had originally written, plus eleven additional pages that I added myself, in a near-perfect imitation of his handwriting, describing in some detail the existence of a *second compound* — the so-called *kill switch* — and Marcus's suspicion that Carmen had used it to murder him."

"It was — fabricated?"

"Mostly fabricated, yes. The portions describing the Whitmore operation were authentic, edited only for length. The

portions describing the kill switch were entirely my invention. There is no kill switch, Mr. Delacroix. Carmen killed your brother with the primary compound alone. The story of the second compound was, let us say, a piece of bait. Marcus suspected, in the final week of his life, that Carmen might do exactly what she did. He did not, however, have any plan to counter it. The detailed counter-plan in those eleven pages — including the suggestion that Carmen had switched the pod a third time, and that Marcus's death therefore demanded a response — was bait designed to attract anyone in his family who might, on reading it, decide to take action."

"You wanted me to come for her."

"I wanted *someone* to come for her, Mr. Delacroix. Carmen has been, over the past year, an extraordinarily useful ally. She is brilliant. She is patient. She is, by temperament and by upbringing, exactly the kind of woman my organisation requires. But she had a vulnerability — an inheritance, in the form of a brother-in-law she had never met, who might, on receiving certain materials, decide to do something inconvenient. I needed to identify whether that vulnerability was real. I needed to know whether you, Étienne, would obey the rule of your family or break it."

Étienne did not move.

"And the eight months at the gym with Dr. Werner? The laboratory key? The synthesis?"

"All known to me, Mr. Delacroix. Dr. Werner has been on my payroll since 2021. The compound you synthesised on the fourteenth of February was, at every stage, observed and recorded. The flask in your briefcase — the flask containing

what you believe to be a kill switch — contains, in fact, water with a small amount of food colouring. Dr. Werner switched it on Sunday evening, while you were at the opera."

"I — I was at the opera on Sunday evening."

"You were. *Don Giovanni*. Dr. Werner attended with you. She was very moved by the second act, as I recall."

Étienne looked at Carmen.

Carmen smiled.

It was, he realised, the most beautiful smile he had ever seen.

"Mr. Delacroix," Anya continued, "I have not come here to kill you. Killing you would be — wasteful. You are forty-one years old. You are a senior officer of one of the three banks in Europe that I find professionally useful. You have spent fifteen years building a reputation for discretion, competence, and patience that would take any replacement a decade to construct. I do not, frankly, have a decade. What I have, Mr. Delacroix, is a proposition."

"A proposition."

"A proposition. The same proposition I have made, over the past nineteen years, to forty-three other women and seven other men in eleven cities across four continents. You will, in exchange for my agreement not to share with the United States Department of Justice the audio recordings I have made of every conversation between you and Dr. Werner in the past eight months — including the conversation on the fourth of November in which you explained to her, in considerable detail, why you intended to kill the wife of an American billionaire —

you will perform certain services. The services will involve the structuring of certain transactions through this bank. The transactions will be perfectly legal. They will simply not be transactions you would, otherwise, have agreed to handle."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then, Mr. Delacroix, I will leave this office. Mrs. Whitmore will leave this office. The recordings will be delivered, this evening, to a contact at the United States Embassy in Bern. You will be arrested by Swiss federal police within forty-eight hours. You will be extradited to the United States within six months. You will spend the rest of your life in a federal prison in Indiana, where the food is, I am told, extremely bad."

Étienne looked at the small leather flask in his briefcase.

He thought of his brother Marcus, four years old, holding his hand on the way to school in Brooklyn.

He thought of the question Marcus had asked him in the dream, the question he had not, in the dream, understood.

Frère, why are you alone?

Carmen leaned forward slightly. She reached across the desk. She placed her hand, gently, on Étienne's.

"Étienne," she said, in the soft Spanish-inflected English she had not, before this moment, used in his presence. "I loved Marcus. I want you to know that. I loved him in the only way my mother taught me to love anyone — completely, while it was useful. And when it stopped being useful, I did what I had to do. Just as you, today, are going to do what you have to do. We are not so different, you and I. We are the children of women

who taught us to survive. There is, I think, a kind of dignity in honouring what we were taught."

Étienne looked at her.

He looked at Anya.

He looked, for a long moment, at the small leather flask in his briefcase, which had become, in the last seven minutes, the most expensive piece of decorative cognac-coloured water in the canton of Geneva.

He thought about the rule of his family.

He thought about how many years he had obeyed it.

He thought, with the small clean clarity of a man whose entire patient eleven months had been someone else's patient eleven months, that he had, in the end, been raised to follow rules other people set for him, and that he was about to begin, at the age of forty-one, the first chapter of a life in which the rules would be set by a woman in Monte Carlo.

He smiled.

"Mrs. Volkov," Étienne Delacroix said, "I believe I would like to hear more about your proposition. Would either of you ladies care for a small glass of Armagnac? I keep, in fact, a rather special bottle in the credenza behind me."

Anya Volkov's eyes glittered, very faintly.

"Mr. Delacroix," she said, "I am afraid I have been advised, by my physician, to abstain from spirits this year. Mrs. Whitmore, however, may indulge if she chooses."

Carmen smiled.

"I should love an Armagnac," she said. "Thank you, Étienne."

Étienne rose. He walked to the credenza. He opened the small carved cabinet. He withdrew the bottle of 1962 Bas-Armagnac that he had been saving for a particular occasion.

He poured two glasses.

He returned to the desk.

He set one glass in front of Carmen.

He raised his own.

"To my brother Marcus," he said softly. "Who was, in life, the most beautiful man I ever knew. And to the rule of my family. Which, I find, I am ready to revise."

Carmen lifted her glass.

Anya did not lift anything.

But Anya, sitting between them in her Ferragamo flats and her silver chignon, smiled the small private smile of a woman who had just acquired, after eleven months of careful preparation, a Swiss private banker.

She had three more on her list for the year.

She was, she thought, very slightly ahead of schedule.



STORY XI

THE FINAL SPOTTER

Bombay / Manhattan

Inspector Sneha Krishnan arrived in Manhattan on a rainy Tuesday in November, eleven months after the morning a private jet had carried Sonia B. Pratap Singh out of her jurisdiction and into the rest of her life.

It was Sneha's first time in New York. She had not slept on the plane. She did not, in general, sleep on planes. She had read instead — three printed dossiers in a leather portfolio she had carried onto the aircraft from Indira Gandhi International — and she had thought about, in the small remaining compartments of her mind, the four people she had come to America to meet.

She had not come alone.

Aaliyah Khan was sitting beside her in the back of the black Lincoln that the driver — a man named Joseph who said nothing — had been instructed to deliver to the Lowell Hotel on East 63rd Street. Aaliyah had grown her hair out. Aaliyah had begun, in the past eleven months, to wear glasses she did not, technically, need. Aaliyah had been quietly transferred, in March, from the Enforcement Directorate to the joint task force on transnational organised crime, where she now ran a four-person unit that did not, in the official org chart, exist.

Behind them, in a second car, were two more passengers.

Lara Chen had been waiting at JFK. She had embraced Aaliyah at the curb. She had inclined her head to Sneha, with the small careful courtesy of a person who had not yet decided whether to like her. Lara was the Manhattan principal of what Anya Volkov's organisation, in its private dialect, called *the network*. She had, over the past eleven months, been the one who had brokered each of the conversations that had brought the four women together.

Zara Khan had flown in from Cyprus the previous day. She was no longer Zara. She was, on the passport she now carried, a Cypriot national named Selma Kyriakou, a yoga teacher with a small studio in Larnaca and a teaching certificate that had been issued by an institute that did not, on close inspection, appear to exist. Her hair was longer. She had let it grow grey at the temples. Aaliyah had not seen her in three months.

The four women converged, at 6:14 p.m., in a small private dining room on the second floor of the Lowell.

They had come, all four of them, because of a single phone call.

The phone call had been placed, eleven days earlier, by Anya Volkov to Lara Chen from a flat in Monte Carlo. Anya had said, in the small clipped tone she used when something was wrong, that a man she had known for thirty-one years had, that morning, contacted her from a location she did not, for the first time in their long acquaintance, know.

The man's name was Konstantin Aslanov.

He was supposed to have been dead since 1986.

He was not.

He was, in fact, in New York City, where he had been quietly building, over the past nine years, an organisation that was about to begin a hostile acquisition of the network Anya Volkov had spent two decades constructing.

Anya had asked Lara to assemble the four women.

Anya had not, in the eleven days since, called again.

"He is sixty-seven," Lara said. They were seated around the small mahogany table. The waiter had been dismissed. The door had been locked. "He has been, since 2017, living in a townhouse in the East Sixties. He owns, through a Bahamian entity, the entire eleventh floor of a luxury gym on Fifth Avenue called Vertex. The gym was opened in 2019. It has, on its membership rolls, fourteen sitting members of the United States Senate, three associate justices of the Supreme Court, the deputy directors of two intelligence agencies, the publisher of a national newspaper that is not the *Times*, and Mrs. Carmen Rivera Whitmore."

Aaliyah looked up sharply.

"Carmen Whitmore. Anya's Carmen?"

"Anya's Carmen, yes."

"Is she—"

"That is what we have come here to determine."

Sneha set down her water glass.

"Ms. Chen. May I ask the question that everyone is, I think, avoiding?"

"Please."

"Has Anya Volkov defected?"

The room was silent.

Zara — Selma, now — closed her eyes.

Lara folded her hands on the table.

"Inspector Krishnan. I have known Anya for eleven years. I owe her, in the most literal sense, my life. I do not believe she has defected. But I will tell you what I do believe. I believe that someone, eleven days ago, contacted Anya with information she had not previously possessed. I believe that information was that Konstantin Aslanov is in New York. I believe Anya, on receiving that information, did three things in rapid succession. She called me. She instructed me to assemble the four of us in Manhattan within ten days. And she travelled to a location she has not, at any subsequent point, disclosed."

"And the network?"

"The network continues to operate. Operations in Monte Carlo, Mumbai, Bangalore, Kerala, Delhi, Geneva, and seven other cities are running normally. Anya's daily check-ins, which have not been missed in nineteen years, have been transmitted on schedule from a phone that is, when located, in Geneva. But the phone is not, we believe, with Anya. The phone is being carried by a courier who is changing hotels every forty-eight hours and who, when stopped at the front desk of the Hôtel des Bergues on the evening of the seventh, was carrying — in addition to the phone — a sealed letter addressed, in Anya's handwriting, to me."

Lara reached into the slim folio at her side. She withdrew an envelope. She placed it on the table.

"I have not opened it."

"Why not?"

"Because Anya instructed me, in a separate communication delivered through a different channel six months ago, that if I ever received an envelope of this description, I was to open it only in the physical presence of three other women whose names she had specified at the time. The three names were Sneha Krishnan, Aaliyah Khan, and Zara — Selma — Kyriakou. The four of us are, at this moment, the only living women on that list."

Sneha looked at the envelope.

Aaliyah looked at the envelope.

Selma Kyriakou opened her eyes.

Lara picked up a small silver letter-opener from the table's sideboard. She slit the envelope.

Inside was a single sheet of paper.

She read it once, in silence.

She read it a second time.

Then she set the paper on the table, turned it so that it faced the other three, and she said, very quietly: "Ladies. Please. Read this for yourselves."

My dears.

If you are reading this letter together in a room in New York City, it means that Konstantin Aslanov has, against all my long-

held hopes, surfaced in your city, and that I have, in response, chosen to do a thing I have been preparing to do for forty years.

I have gone to him.

I have gone to him alone. I have gone to him without telling any of you. I have gone to him because the man in New York is not, in fact, Konstantin. The man in New York is Konstantin's younger brother, Dmitri, who has been pretending, for the past nine years, to be the elder. Konstantin himself died — actually died, this time — in a hospital in Vienna in 2017. Dmitri inherited, on his death, the entire structure of his brother's organisation. Dmitri has spent the years since attempting to expand it.

Dmitri is also, my dears, the man who, in 1986, ordered the deaths of the seventeen women in Smolensk — including my sister. Konstantin merely carried out the order. The man whose photograph Sophia Aslanov placed on my desk in 2026, the man I killed in a basement in Kiev forty years ago, was Konstantin. The author of his crime was, and is, Dmitri.

I am going to kill Dmitri.

I am going to kill him in the gym he owns on Fifth Avenue. I am going to do it in a way that will not be traceable to any of you, to any of my associates, or to the network. I am going to do it tomorrow morning, at 6:07 a.m. New York time, when he steps onto the treadmill in his private studio on the eleventh floor of Vertex. I have arranged it. The arrangements began nine years ago, the day Konstantin died in Vienna and I first understood that the man I had killed in 1986 was not, in fact, the brother who had given the order.

I have one final instruction for the four of you.

At 6:11 a.m. tomorrow morning, four minutes after Dmitri's death, Carmen Rivera Whitmore will arrive at Vertex for her own scheduled training session. Carmen does not know about Dmitri. Carmen does not know about me. Carmen has been, for the past eleven months, an extraordinarily useful member of our organisation. She has also been, my dears, an extraordinarily ambitious one.

In her gym bag, Carmen will be carrying a small black notebook in the careful school-boy handwriting of a young man named Marcus Delacroix.

That notebook is not the notebook I have previously described to any of you.

That notebook is the original. The one Marcus actually kept. The one that contains, in his own handwriting, eighteen months of meetings with Carmen, and which records — in the final unedited entry, dated April 1st — that Carmen had switched the pod a third time, and that he intended, the following morning, to pre-empt her by replacing the espresso pod in her kitchen with one containing a compound that would kill her in her own bed.

Carmen killed him first. Carmen has been, ever since, looking for that notebook. She believes I have it. She has been planning, with the patience that I myself trained into her, to acquire it from me and to destroy it. She is bringing it, in her bag tomorrow morning, because she believes she will be meeting me at Vertex at 6:30 a.m. to deliver it to me herself, in exchange for a promotion within my organisation that I have, over the past three months, dangled in front of her with great care.

I will not be at Vertex at 6:30 a.m.

I will be in a small flat in Brooklyn, drinking tea, awaiting either a phone call or a knock on the door — both of which, depending on how this goes, will determine the rest of my life.

At 6:30 a.m., the four of you will be at Vertex in my place.

You will, between you, decide what to do about Carmen Rivera Whitmore.

You will decide whether to recruit her, fully, into the highest tier of the organisation — which she has been, for eleven months, manoeuvring toward. Or you will decide whether to remove her, on the grounds that a woman who has been planning, in secret, to overthrow her mentor is not a woman the organisation can afford to elevate.

I am abstaining from this decision.

I am abstaining because, my dears, I am sixty-three years old, and I have been making these decisions for nineteen years, and I have come to believe that the organisation must, at some point, learn to make them without me. This is, in fact, the principal reason I have chosen this particular morning to act.

Lara, you have known her longest. You will speak first.

Aaliyah, you have the most to lose. You will speak second.

Selma — my dearest Selma, my finest student — you have the most to gain. You will speak third.

Inspector Krishnan — you are the newest among us, and the only one of you who is, by profession, sworn to a different law. You will speak last. Your voice will, in the end, decide.

If you choose to recruit her, you will offer her the seat I am vacating.

If you choose to remove her, you will do so before she leaves the building.

I have left instructions, with a courier in Geneva, that will be opened only on receipt of a coded signal from one of the four of you within seventy-two hours of the meeting. The signal will tell the courier whether to deliver the contents of the original Marcus Delacroix notebook to Étienne Delacroix in Geneva — who has been, my dears, asking polite questions about his brother's death for some weeks now — or to destroy them.

That, too, you will decide.

I leave you, my daughters, with the words my own mother said to me on the morning of my twenty-third birthday, in a kitchen in Minsk in 1985, three weeks before she was taken away by men in grey coats and never returned:

Anya, the world will give you nothing. It will only give you the strength to take what you require. Take it gently. Take it cleanly. And never, ever take it twice from the same hand.

With love,

Anya.

The four women sat in silence for a long time.

Outside the window of the small private dining room, the rain had become snow.

Lara was the first to speak. Her voice was steady.

"Carmen has been my colleague for eleven months. I have liked her. I have admired her. I would, until this evening, have said she belonged among us. But I will say this — and Anya, in her wisdom, has framed the question precisely. A woman who

manoeuvres in secret against her mentor is not a woman my organisation can afford to elevate. Not because of her ambition. Because of her concealment. Anya did not, in her own ascent, conceal. She fought openly. She announced her intentions. She earned her place by being seen. Carmen has done the opposite. I — I vote to remove."

Aaliyah folded her hands.

"I have not met Carmen. I have only read about her. But I have, in my own life, watched what happens to a network that does not enforce internal honesty. The ED, in 2011, was dismantled because three of its senior officers had been concealing operations from each other. The dismantlement cost the Indian state seventeen years of progress in a single category of investigation. I will not, knowing what I now know, vote to elevate a woman whose first instinct in our organisation has been to do what those three officers did. I vote to remove."

Selma — Zara — Kyriakou opened her eyes.

"I have killed nine people," she said softly. "Three of them were innocent. Two of them were, in retrospect, decisions I would not have made if I had been older. I am twenty-nine. I am, by Anya's standards, the youngest woman who has ever been brought into the inner tier of the organisation. I have not, in the four years I have been in this work, manoeuvred against Anya. Not once. Not by a millimeter. I have done this not out of moral conviction but out of the simple practical understanding that Anya is smarter than I am, and that the only future I have is the future she permits me. Carmen is, by her own account, smarter than Anya. Carmen has been wrong. There are women smarter than Carmen in this room. I vote — I vote to recruit. With probation. Two years. Stripped of independence.

Reporting to Lara. If she earns it, she stays. If she does not, we revisit."

Lara looked at Aaliyah.

Aaliyah looked at Sneha.

Sneha was silent for a long moment.

She thought about Sonia B. Pratap Singh, eleven months earlier, walking across a tarmac at Indira Gandhi International Airport in a black abaya. She thought about the USB drive in her own palm. She thought about Aman Kohli — the trainer, the innocent man, who was now living in Jalandhar with his wife and his daughter and who had not, in eleven months, missed a single payment to the small recurring deposit Sneha had personally set up for his daughter's education. She thought about the letter on the table.

She thought about the question Anya had asked. Not the question of Carmen.

The other question. The one underneath.

Inspector Krishnan, you are the only one of you sworn to a different law.

Sneha looked up.

"Ladies," she said. "I have, in the eleven months since I met Aaliyah on a phone call from a tarmac in Delhi, made certain choices about my professional life that the woman who joined the IPS at the age of twenty-four would not have made. I have, in joining you here tonight, made one more. I am not, by birth or by training, in the business of removing people. I am in the business — or I once was in the business — of presenting them, eventually, to a court. I am also, however, in the business

of preventing harm to the innocent. And it has been my observation, in eleven months of association with this group, that the women who have been most harmed by the men your organisation has removed have, in nearly every case, lived to become extraordinary instruments of public good — Aaliyah at the ED, Lara at *Vogue*, Selma in her small studio in Larnaca, and, although you do not yet know it, Sonia A. Pratap Singh, who in eleven months has quietly become the chief patron of three rape crisis centers in eastern Uttar Pradesh."

She paused.

"Carmen Rivera Whitmore is, by every standard I have, a murderer. She killed her husband. She killed her lover. She has, in the past year, become a member of an organisation that has, on balance, prevented many more murders than it has caused. The question Anya has put to us is not, in the end, whether Carmen is a good woman. The question is whether Carmen, given a second chance and a leash, will become a useful one."

"My vote, ladies, is the vote Selma proposed. We recruit. With probation. Stripped of independence. Reporting to Lara. And if she falls short — if at any point in the next two years she demonstrates that she is incapable of operating within the discipline of the organisation — we revisit. With finality."

Lara nodded slowly.

"Three to recruit. One to remove. We are decided."

Aaliyah inhaled.

"I will defer. Three to one is enough."

Sneha looked at the letter on the table.

"And the notebook?"

"The notebook," Lara said, "we destroy. Étienne does not, in my judgement, deserve to learn what his brother actually wrote about Carmen. Étienne has, after eleven months in our organisation, earned a quiet life. He does not need a war."

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

Lara picked up the letter. She folded it. She slipped it into the breast pocket of her jacket.

"Tomorrow morning, then. 6:30 a.m. Vertex. Fifth Avenue. Eleventh floor. We meet Carmen. We offer her the proposition. We see what she does."

"And Anya?"

"Anya," Lara said quietly, "we let go."

At 6:07 a.m. on the morning of the fourteenth of November, on a private treadmill on the eleventh floor of Vertex Fitness on Fifth Avenue, Dmitri Aslanov stepped onto a machine that had been, the previous evening, modified by a maintenance technician whose work record at the gym showed nineteen months of impeccable service. The technician was a fifty-one-year-old woman of Belarusian origin who had been recruited by Anya Volkov in 2007.

Dmitri Aslanov's heart stopped at 6:09 a.m.

He was discovered at 6:14 a.m. by his bodyguard.

He was pronounced dead at 6:23 a.m. by a paramedic team that had been, very thoughtfully, dispatched two minutes before the bodyguard placed the call.

At 6:11 a.m., Carmen Rivera Whitmore stepped out of a black Lincoln on Fifth Avenue.

She did not yet know that Dmitri Aslanov was dead. She did not yet know that the woman she had come to meet — the woman she had been preparing, for eleven months, to manoeuvre out of the seat at the head of the organisation — was no longer in the city. She did not yet know that the four women waiting for her in the small private conference room on the twelfth floor of Vertex were the women who would, in the next forty minutes, decide whether she lived as a member of the inner tier of the network for the rest of her life, or whether she did not live to see the end of the morning.

She walked into the lobby of Vertex. She handed her small black gym bag to the bellman. She smiled at the doorman.

She stepped into the elevator.

She pressed the button for the twelfth floor.

And as the doors closed, she caught, in the polished brushed-steel of the elevator wall, a glimpse of her own face — and for the briefest possible instant, in the reflection, she did not, herself, recognise the woman she had become.

Then the elevator rose.

And Carmen Rivera Whitmore — daughter of Pilar Rivera of East Harlem, wife and widow of Theodore Whitmore III, mistress and murderer of Marcus Delacroix, brilliant and patient and beautiful and not, as it happened, quite as clever as she

had believed — straightened her shoulders, set her chin at the angle her mother had taught her, and prepared, with the rehearsed face of a woman who had been preparing for it her entire life, to meet the four women who had been waiting, in different cities, on different continents, in different lives, for the morning she would finally arrive.

Outside Vertex Fitness, on Fifth Avenue, the snow was beginning to settle on the dark stone of the sidewalk.

In a small flat in Brooklyn, Anya Volkov poured herself a fresh cup of tea.

She did not know, yet, whether her phone was going to ring.

She did not know, yet, whether there would be a knock on her door.

She did know, however, that whatever happened in the next forty minutes on the twelfth floor of Vertex, the organisation would continue.

And that the women she had spent nineteen years preparing — in Manhattan, in Mumbai, in Geneva, in Larnaca, in Gurgaon, in Bangalore, in Kerala — would continue without her.

Anya lifted her cup.

She thought of her mother, in a kitchen in Minsk in 1985.

She thought of her sister, in a basement outside Smolensk in 1986.

She thought of Sophia Aslanov, in a hospital in Vienna, dying of a compound that, in the end, had been not quite as final as its designers had intended.

She drank her tea.

Outside her window, the snow fell on Brooklyn.

And somewhere, sixty blocks north, the elevator doors at Vertex Fitness opened onto the twelfth floor.

Carmen Rivera Whitmore stepped out.

Four women rose to meet her.



A Note on the Collection

These eleven stories were written as a single connected work in the tradition of Sidney Sheldon — glamorous, international, populated by ambitious women, and built around the slow architectural reveal that the people you thought were independent characters have, in fact, been in the same room for some time.

Read carefully, the threads connect. Anya Volkov of Monte Carlo built the network. Lara Chen of Manhattan was recruited through it. Zara Khan of Mumbai escaped through it. Sneha Krishnan of Gurgaon found it. Carmen Rivera of Manhattan was elevated into it. Priya Malhotra of Bombay still does not, as of the end of this book, know that the woman in Pune to whom her counsel will eventually introduce her is one of its provincial heads. Étienne Delacroix of Geneva was bent to it. Aigerim of Almaty was sent by it. Ananya Reddy of Bangalore became its first banking partner. Dr. Lakshmi Pillai of Kerala built its eastern clinic. Madame Iyer of Bangalore coordinates the southern triangle.

And Aaliyah Khan — the forensic accountant from Lucknow whose only sister was, for four years, believed dead — now runs a unit at the joint task force on transnational organised crime in New Delhi, where her file on Sentinel Advisory grows thicker every quarter, and where her file on the network founded by Anya Volkov does not, as a matter of professional discretion, exist at all.

The gym, in all of these stories, is the same gym. It has a thousand addresses. It has a thousand names. It exists wherever ambitious women need a place to sweat out their secrets and, occasionally, to design what comes next.



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