2036 - No Money

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A Meera Kulkarni Mystery

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For everyone who has ever waited in a line and wondered who was moving it.

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CHAPTER 1

The Bag Nobody Took

The phone went at 6.22, which Meera knew because she had been awake since five and watching the clock on the cooker go round. Nobody rang her before nine any more. Nobody rang her much at all. The number was unknown, a Navi Mumbai prefix, and she let it buzz three times on the kitchen counter before she picked it up, in case it was the pension office again about the form she had already filled in twice.

'Madam Kulkarni? Meera Kulkarni, formerly EOW?'

'Formerly,' she said.

'Sub-Inspector Farhan Shaikh, Panvel Provision Zone. Deshpande sir gave me your number. I hope that's all right.'

Avinash Deshpande had been her joint commissioner for nine years and had signed the order that dissolved her wing in 2033. He had shaken her hand afterwards and said the city had moved on, and she had said the city always said that just before somebody stole it. She had not heard from him since.

'Depends what you want it for,' she said.

The young man explained, in the careful order of someone who had already explained it to two superiors. At 5.40 that morning a harvesting machine working the outer bays of Tower 9 had stopped on its track and refused to move. It had sensors for obstacles. The obstacle was a man. Dead, cold, lying on the service apron at the foot of the tower. That part was simple enough, Farhan said, unfortunate but simple.

'And the part that isn't?'

'There's a bag beside him. Full of money. Cash.'

'How much?'

'I haven't counted. A lot. Old five-hundreds.' He paused. 'I didn't know who else would know what to make of it. Deshpande sir said you were the last person in Maharashtra who still thought about cash.'

'Did he say it like a compliment?'

Farhan did not answer that, which was an answer.

She asked if anyone had touched the bag. He said only to open it and look. She told him not to let anyone count it, not to let anyone move it, and not to let any machine near it either, and he said the machines did not go near anything they were not told to, and she said, 'Then don't tell them anything.'

The 7.15 from Vashi depot to Panvel was half empty. Meera sat at the back with her reading glasses hanging on their cord and her calculator in the pocket of her cardigan, the old Casio with the solar strip that had outlived two phones and one husband. Out of the window the city thinned into flyovers and then into the long flat stretch where the zone began, marked by nothing more dramatic than a change in the road surface and a line of pale blue signs. WELCOME TO THE PANVEL PROVISION ZONE. EVERYTHING YOU NEED. NOTHING TO PAY.

A poster at the zone's first bus stop showed a smiling girl holding a mango, and below it a line in three languages about a businessman who had said, back in 2025, that one day soon nobody would have to work and money would not matter. The poster said the zone was proof he had been early. It did not say early for what. Meera had read the same line on the same poster four times in five years, on her visits to Ishaan, and each time it had made her want to ask who printed it and who paid them.

The bus let her off at Gate 2 at 7.58. Farhan was waiting beside a white police jeep with the bonnet still warm. He was taller than she had pictured from his voice, well over six feet, with a beard trimmed so precisely it looked drawn on. He held out his hand, then seemed unsure whether that was correct, then left it there.

'Madam.'

'Meera is fine. I'm not anybody's madam any more.'

'Meera madam,' he said, and opened the passenger door for her.

They drove along a service road between the vertical farms. In daylight the towers were grey and blank, fourteen of them in two rows, their windows sealed. At night, she knew, they glowed pink from the growing lights and you could see the colour from the Sion-Panvel highway. The air smelt of diesel from the backup generators and, underneath, of wet soil, which was the strangest thing about the place in February. Everywhere else in Navi Mumbai the ground was dust. Here the farms leaked moisture through their vents like something breathing.

'You grew up here?' she said.

'Since I was twenty-four. First intake. Before that, Govandi.' He said the word without inflection, the way people did when they had decided not to be ashamed of it. 'My mother had a room eight feet by ten with a tin roof. Now she has a two-bedroom in Block F and her sugar is under control because the clinic checks it every month. She has never paid one rupee.'

'Who pays the clinic?'

'The consortium. The state. Nobody, really. It's machines.'

'Somebody pays for the machines.'

He glanced at her and then back at the road. 'You sound like my uncle.'

'Is your uncle usually right?'

'No,' Farhan said.

Tower 9 stood at the end of the row. Yellow tape had been strung between two bollards and a lamp post, and a constable in a sweater stood guard with his hands in his armpits against the morning chill. Beyond the tape the service apron was a strip of concrete about six metres wide between the tower wall and a drainage channel. A harvesting machine sat stopped on its rail, a squat thing like a covered handcart with three folded arms, humming faintly, a small amber light blinking on its side. It had been blinking, Farhan said, since 5.40.

'Can't you switch it off?'

'Not without the allocation department's credentials. It's waiting for someone to tell it the obstacle's gone.'

The obstacle lay on his back with his feet towards the drain. Somebody, presumably the constable, had laid a sheet over him and then folded it down to the chest. Meera crouched, which her knees disliked, and looked.

Thin man. Late thirties. Grey shirt, cotton, cheap, buttoned to the second button and ironed along the sleeves, which in her experience meant either a mother nearby or a man who did not like to be seen untidy. Brown trousers, rubber sandals, one of them half off the heel. His hair was short and there was dried blood in it at the back, a dark patch that had run into the concrete and stopped. His eyes were half open. His mouth was closed. Someone, at some point, had been calm enough or kind enough to close it, or else he had died that way.

'Name?'

'Dev Rao. Thirty-eight. We got him off the face register in about four seconds.' Farhan seemed to take some pride in the four seconds. 'Allocation engineer. Works for the zone administration. Lives in Block C, flat 412. No record of anything.'

'What does an allocation engineer do?'

'Maintains Ledgerless. The software that decides who gets what. Delivery slots, housing, clinic appointments, all of it. He'd be one of maybe thirty people who work on it.'

'So he decided who gets what.'

'The software decides. He kept it running.'

Meera lifted the dead man's left hand by the wrist. Cold and stiff through the fingers. No watch. A pale band of skin where a watch might once have been, but faded, years old. Nails short. A ridge of callus on the side of the middle finger of the right hand, where a pen or pencil would sit if someone wrote a great deal by hand. She turned the hand to the light. Graphite, ground into the whorls of the fingertip.

'Doctor seen him?'

'The clinic sent their duty officer at 6.50. Skull fracture, back of the head. Time of death between ten last night and two this morning. She thinks he fell.' Farhan pointed upward. 'There's a harvest gantry on the outside, fourth level, eleven metres up. Maintenance staff use it. If he went over the rail...'

Meera looked up. A narrow steel walkway ran along the face of the tower, painted the same grey as the wall, with a single rail at waist height. From where she crouched, she could not see whether there was a gate or a gap.

'What was he doing on a harvest gantry at midnight? He works on software.'

'Engineers check sensors. Or he went up to smoke.'

'Did he smoke?'

'I don't know yet.'

She went through the pockets. Front left: empty. Front right: empty. Back pockets: empty. Shirt pocket: one pencil, cheap yellow, sharpened down to a stub not much longer than her thumb, and sharpened with a blade rather than a sharpener, the wood cut in long flat facets.

'No phone,' she said.

'People don't really carry phones here. Doors know your face. Depots know your face.'

'An engineer who looks after the software doesn't carry a phone.'

'Some of them are like that. Old-fashioned.'

'He's thirty-eight.'

Farhan did not answer. Meera held the pencil stub up between finger and thumb. A man who carried a pencil carried something to write on. There was nothing to write on. She asked for an evidence bag and he produced one from the jeep, and she dropped the stub in and sealed it and wrote the time on the label: 8.17.

'Now the money,' she said.

The bag sat about a metre from the body, against the tower wall, upright. Green canvas, a drawstring top, a leather patch at the base worn shiny. She thought of the boys in her son's cricket academy in 2019 with exactly this bag over their shoulders, too big for them, banging against their knees. It was the only thing on the apron that did not have a fine grey film of dust on it. The concrete had it, the sandals had it, the folded arms of the harvester had it. The bag looked as if it had been put down five minutes ago.

She pointed this out. Farhan looked at the bag and the concrete for some time.

'Maybe it was inside,' he said. 'Under cover. And he brought it out.'

'Maybe.'

She took the bag by its base and carried it to the jeep and set it on the bonnet, which had cooled now, and loosened the drawstring. Bundles of five-hundred notes, the old series, the ones with the red fort on the back. Not new. Soft at the corners. Some with the faint blue stamp of a bank teller's count, some with ball-

point scribbles in the margins where a shopkeeper had once written a phone number or a sum. She took the bundles out one at a time and laid them in rows.

There were two kinds of rubber band. Most were red, thin, the kind sold in packets of a hundred at any stationery shop. Five bundles were held with thicker bands, a dull khaki colour, that had a faint stamped mark along their length which she could not read without her glasses. She put her glasses on. A brand name, half worn off, ending in -LAX.

'Somebody bundled these at different times,' she said. 'Or different people did.'

She counted. Farhan watched. The constable watched from the tape. A delivery drone passed overhead at roof height with a parcel slung underneath, and its shadow went across the notes and was gone. She counted each bundle twice, licking her thumb, the way her first sergeant had taught her in 2007 in a strongroom in Fort with a ceiling fan that did not work. The bundles were not uniform. Some had a hundred notes, some fifty, one had thirty-seven. That interested her more than the total.

When she finished she took out the calculator and pressed the keys, though she did not need to. Seven hundred and sixty notes. Times five hundred.

'Three lakh eighty thousand,' she said, and turned the little screen so he could see it. 3,80,000.

Farhan whistled softly. 'In the zone that's nothing.'

'In Vashi it's a year's rent on my flat and some left over.'

'That's what I mean. There's nothing to spend it on here. Everything's provided. You can walk into any depot and leave with a fridge.' He gestured at the towers, the road, the blue signs, the whole flat reclaimed expanse. 'Nobody steals because there's nothing to steal. That's why he still has it. A man is lying here with almost four lakh rupees and nobody took it.'

'Nobody took it,' Meera said. 'Somebody left it.'

'Or he was carrying it.'

'To where? You just told me there's nothing to spend it on.'

He opened his mouth and shut it again.

She put the bundles back in the bag in the order she had taken them out. The red bands on the left, the khaki on the right. She did not like the bag. She did not like how upright it stood, how clean it was. In twenty-six years she had

found money in many places: in false ceilings, in diesel drums, in a child's school bag in Malad, in the lining of a coffin in Bhiwandi that had turned out to contain no body at all. Money that people wanted was always hidden. Money that was left in plain sight was a message, and the trouble with messages was working out who they were addressed to.

'So what do you think happened?' she said.

Farhan straightened. He had clearly been waiting to be asked. 'Two possibilities. One, an accident. He went up for whatever reason, he slipped, he fell. The money is his. Savings, maybe, from before the zone. People keep old cash for sentimental reasons. My mother has six thousand rupees in a steel box she won't let anyone touch.'

'And two?'

'Personal. A quarrel. A woman, or a man, I don't judge. Someone he was close to. They argued up there, it got physical, he went over. Nothing to do with the zone.' He hesitated. 'Nothing to do with how the zone works.'

'You'd like that.'

'I'd like the truth.'

'You'd like the truth to be a quarrel.'

He did not deny it. That, at least, she gave him credit for. He looked at the harvester with its blinking amber light, still waiting for someone with the right credentials to tell it the way was clear, and then at the sheet over Dev Rao's chest, and the muscle in his jaw moved under the neat line of beard.

'You don't know this place,' he said. 'I mean it respectfully. Five years ago there were four lakh people within ten kilometres of here who didn't know where the next meal was coming from. Now nobody here is hungry. Nobody. It works.'

'I didn't say it doesn't work.'

'You're looking at that bag as if it's a crime.'

'I'm looking at that bag as if it's a bag.' She tightened the drawstring and knotted it. 'Tell me something. You said there's nothing to buy here.'

'Nothing you need to buy.'

'Then why does an allocation engineer have seven hundred and sixty used notes, bundled by at least two different people, in amounts that don't match?' She tapped the khaki band through the canvas. 'Thirty-seven notes in one bun-

dle. Nobody saves thirty-seven notes. That's a payment. That's somebody's price for something.'

'For what?'

'I don't know yet. That's why I asked.'

'Asked what?'

She took her glasses off and let them drop on their cord. Down the row, Tower 10's ventilation fans came on with a long rising whine, and the smell of wet soil thickened in the dry morning air. The constable stamped his feet. The drone came back the other way, empty now.

'Who still pays in cash,' she said, 'in a place where nothing costs anything?'

Farhan looked at the bag on the bonnet. Then at her. For a moment he had the expression of a man who has been handed a coin from a country he did not know existed.

'Nobody,' he said.

'Then nobody is going to be very easy to find.' She picked up the evidence bag with the pencil stub and held it to the light, the flat knife-cut facets of the wood catching the sun. 'Somebody sharpened this with a blade. Find me what he was writing on.'

CHAPTER 2

Index Zero

A woman in a maroon nightie and a grey cardigan walked up to the counter of Depot 6 at 9.48, looked into a camera the size of a five-rupee coin, and said, 'Five litre. The tall one, not the flat one.'

Behind the counter something hummed. A belt moved. Twenty seconds later a steel pressure cooker came through a rubber flap in its cardboard sleeve, still smelling faintly of machine oil, and the woman tucked it under her arm like a loaf of bread and went out past them into the sun. She did not look at the camera again. She did not look at anyone. Meera checked her watch. Forty-one seconds, door to door.

'That's it?' she said.

'That's it.' Farhan was leaning on the jeep's open door, pleased, the way men are pleased when they show you their village. 'Face, item, done. She'll have it on the stove by ten.'

'Who signs for it?'

'Nobody signs.'

'Who's charged?'

'Nobody's charged.' He said it kindly, as if to a child who has asked where the sun goes.

Meera looked at the depot. Single storey, white panels, a ramp, a queue of six people that moved so quickly it hardly counted as a queue. Above the door a drone lifted off a pad with a parcel slung under it and tilted away over the resettlement blocks, low enough that she heard the motors change pitch as it turned.

'Somebody made that cooker,' she said. 'Steel. A gasket. A whistle. Three, four kilos of metal. Somewhere a book shows one cooker going out of this building and not coming back.'

'The system knows a cooker went out. It makes another one.'

'Out of what?'

'Scrap from the recycling line at Taloja. Power from the solar fields past Gate 4.' He counted on long fingers. 'Machines from the consortium. All paid for in 2031.'

'Paid for by whom?'

'The state and the consortium. It's on the website.' He shrugged. 'After that it costs nothing to run. Or close enough that nobody counts it.'

There was no pause before any of it. That was what bothered her. Twenty-six years in Economic Offences had taught her to listen for the pause: the half-second when a man decides how much of the truth will hold his weight. Evasion meant there was something to evade. Farhan was not evading. He answered as quickly as he would have told her his own name, because to him there was nothing there.

'And if she comes back this afternoon and asks for another one?'

'Then she gets another one.'

'And a third?'

Farhan frowned. 'Why would anyone want three pressure cookers?'

She had no answer for that, and it annoyed her.

Her right hand had gone into the pocket of her kurta of its own accord and found the calculator: grey, solar strip, the 7 key worn smooth. She had carried it through bank raids at Nariman Point and a fortnight in a godown in Bhiwandi with four crore of fake stamp paper. Every case she had ever closed began in the same place. Find where the money came in. Find where it went out. The crime lived in the gap between the two, and the gap was always written down somewhere, by somebody who had to answer to somebody else.

She watched the next person step up to the camera. A boy of about twelve. School shoes, size five. Thirty-three seconds.

There was no in. There was no out. There was no book.

Meera took the calculator out, looked at the blank grey screen, and put it back.

They drove east along a road that had no potholes, which was the first thing in the zone that made Meera uneasy in a way she could name. Farhan kept the jeep at forty. On both sides the resettlement blocks went past in rows, eight storeys each, cream paint already gone the colour of milky tea along the bottom where the dust settled. Washing hung from every balcony. Somebody on the fifth floor of Block R-11 was beating a carpet with a cricket bat.

Above the rooftops the drones held their positions. Meera counted fourteen over one stretch of four blocks, spaced like birds on a wire, each hanging still for a few seconds before it dropped, delivered, rose and took its place again. They made a sound like a ceiling fan in the next room. Below them a man was shaving on his balcony with the mirror propped against the grille. Two girls in school pinafores were sharing an earphone at a bus stop. A grandmother was sorting fenugreek into a steel thali on a doorstep. None of them looked up. They looked up at drones about as often as they looked up at the sky to check it was still blue.

'How many?' Meera said.

'In the air at any time, about eleven hundred. Total fleet, twenty-six hundred and something.' Farhan slowed for a speed bump that was painted, not built. 'They charge on the roofs. You'll see the pads.'

'Who watches them?'

'The system.'

'Which person?'

He thought about it. 'There's a fleet office. Near Gate 1.'

'How many people in it?'

'A few.'

At the junction with the main road a screen stood on two steel legs above the bus shelter, the size of a cinema hoarding. It showed the date, the time, 10.06, and the temperature, 31 degrees. Below that, in figures half a metre tall, white on blue: SCARCITY INDEX 0.00. Under the number, smaller, the same thing in Marathi and Hindi.

Farhan stopped the jeep, although nothing required him to.

'That's ours,' he said. 'Every depot has one. Every school. It measures the gap between what residents ask for and what they receive, across every category, every hour. Zero means nobody in the zone asked for something and didn't get it. Food, clothes, housing, goods, care.' He said the list the way people say a prayer

they learnt young. 'Zero since month eleven. Four years and some months. Delegations come from Delhi to stand where we're standing and take photographs of that screen.'

'Who calculates it?'

'Ledgerless.'

'Who decides what counts as asking?'

'The software.'

'And who wrote the software?'

'The allocation department.'

'Who checks the allocation department?'

Farhan looked at the screen rather than at her. 'There's an audit. Annually. The consortium does it.'

'The consortium that runs the zone.'

'Ma'am.' He put the jeep in gear. 'It's zero because people get what they need. I grew up in a chawl in Govandi where my mother queued at the ration shop with my sister on her hip. I know what a gap looks like.'

It was a good answer, and she believed he meant every word. She also noticed it was the first answer that morning he had needed to take a run at.

The bus behind them sounded its horn. Farhan pulled away. Meera twisted in her seat and watched the screen recede through the rear window, the clock rolling over to 10.07 while the number beneath it did not move at all.

In twenty-six years she had seen a great many perfect figures. Quarterly returns from a cooperative bank in Thane that never varied by more than a lakh. A gold dealer in Zaveri Bazaar whose stock balanced to the gram every month for nine years. Honest numbers were untidy. They twitched. They had bad weeks. A figure that sat exactly where it was supposed to sit, month after month, was a figure somebody leaned on, every day, with both hands.

'Four years at zero,' she said.

'Four years and three months.'

She took the calculator out again, typed 0.00, and looked at it.

The administration building stood at the centre of the zone on a low rise of reclaimed earth, four storeys of glass that caught the sun and gave nothing back. Farhan parked in a bay marked for him by name. A machine at the door read

both their faces, and Meera's took longer, 2.8 seconds by the clock above the lift. Visitor, the screen decided.

Director Kavita Menon's office was on the top floor and had three walls of glass. From the chair she was offered Meera could see Towers 6 to 11 in a line to the south, glowing faintly pink even in daylight, and beyond them the creek, flat and brown, with the coastal block standing at its edge like something that had been delivered to the wrong address.

Kavita did not sit behind her desk. She sat on the low sofa across from Meera with her ankles crossed, in a cotton sari the grey of wet slate, and she let a silence go on long enough to show she was not in a hurry. She was forty-seven and looked as if she had been told so and had decided not to believe it.

'Dev was one of our best,' she said. 'I want that on the record before anything else.'

'Noted.'

'You'll have heard the line people use about this place.' Kavita turned her head toward the glass. 'A businessman in America said it at the end of 2025. That within ten or twenty years nobody would have to work unless they wanted to, and money would stop meaning anything. Everyone laughed. Economists laughed hardest. I was one of them.' She smiled at the towers. 'He wasn't wrong. He was early. Two hundred and forty thousand people out there are the proof.'

She said it the way a priest says the bit of the service that never changes. Meera had heard bank chairmen do the same thing with their founder's motto, usually about a year before the auditors came.

'What's your mandate?' Meera said.

'To show it works.'

'On paper. Who signed it, and what does it let you do?'

'The state and the consortium jointly. It lets us provide.' Kavita spread her hands. 'Food, shelter, goods, care. Without the friction of exchange.'

'Who do you answer to?'

'A board. Delhi watches. The world watches, frankly.'

'Who on the board reads the allocation logs?'

'Nobody reads logs, Mrs Kulkarni. That's rather the point. The system reads them so that people don't have to.'

'And if I wanted to read them?'

Kavita looked at her properly for the first time. Meera knew the look. She had seen it on the faces of managing directors in Fort who were deciding whether she was a nuisance or a danger, and how much each would cost.

Farhan shifted on his chair. 'Ma'am, Mrs Kulkarni is here at my request. Informally.'

'I know.' Kavita stood, went to her desk and touched the surface, which lit under her fingers. 'Informally won't get her through a single door here. The doors don't recognise informal.' She typed something with two fingers. 'Temporary consultant. Thirty days. Read access to Ledgerless at department level, physical access to every building except the server floor.' She looked up. 'I'd rather you looked from inside than guessed from outside. Guessing is how rumours start.'

It was generous. It was also, Meera thought, the way you handled a stray dog that had got into the compound: you fed it in the kitchen, where you could see it.

'Why?' Meera said.

'Because I've nothing to hide, and I'd like that established quickly.' Kavita came round the desk. 'Your face is registered now. The doors will know you.'

On the wall beside the lift, as they left, a smaller screen repeated the number in white: 0.00. Meera's face went into the machine's memory at 10.31, and somewhere a file with her name on it began to fill.

The lift opened before Farhan could press the button, and a man stepped out holding two paper cups of tea, one in each hand, as if he had known to the second when they would be standing there.

'You'll be Mrs Kulkarni.' He held a cup out to her. 'Ginger, no sugar. Farhan said you take it plain. Arjun Malhotra. Allocation.'

She took the tea because refusing it would have been a statement. Farhan did not get a cup. He did not seem to expect one.

Arjun was forty or so, broad through the shoulders, in a pale blue shirt with the sleeves turned back twice. A cricketer's tan stopped at his wrists. His eyes were red at the rims, and he did not try to hide it. When he spoke about Dev he stopped once in the middle of a sentence and looked at the floor until he could go on.

'He sat two desks from me for four years,' he said. 'He brought his own lunch in a steel tiffin. Every day. Dal and two chapatis. I used to tell him the depot would give him a better lunch for nothing and he said he liked knowing who'd made it.' He breathed out through his nose. 'Sorry. I keep doing that. I'm told it's normal.'

'It is,' Meera said.

'Whatever you need, you come to me. Not the helpdesk, not a form. Me.' He took a card from his shirt pocket, an actual card, cream stock, with a number written on the back in blue ink. 'Your access will take a few hours to filter down to the building locks. If a door won't open, ring that. I'll have someone there in ten minutes. And if you need a vehicle so you're not tying up Farhan all day, I can sort that by two o'clock.'

'That's kind.'

'It's the least.' He looked at Farhan. 'He's a good lad. He'll have told you we're all very proud of him.'

Farhan had told her nothing of the kind. He looked pleased anyway.

The lift was still holding its doors for them. Arjun put out an arm to keep them open, and as Meera stepped past him he lowered his voice so that it was meant for her alone.

'I was sorry to hear about Sudhir,' he said. 'I know it's been a while. But it doesn't really go anywhere, does it.'

The tea was hot through the paper. Meera kept her hand where it was.

She had not said her husband's name in this building. She had not said it to Farhan, who had known her for four hours and had asked nothing about her except whether she wanted the window down. Sudhir had been dead since October 2029. He had taught physics at a junior college in Vashi and had never once been in the newspaper, and there was no reason on God's earth for a deputy director of allocation in Panvel to know what he had been called.

'No,' she said. 'It doesn't.'

'Anything at all.' Arjun let the doors go.

They closed on his face, kind, sad, attentive. Meera watched the floor numbers count down from 4. She thought about how long it took to learn a stranger's husband's name. A phone call to the right person. A minute with a

pension file. Less, if the stranger's face had gone into a machine at 10.31 and the machine had somewhere to look.

Or he was simply a decent man who had asked about her before she arrived, the way decent men did.

She had met a great many decent men. Several of them were now in Taloja jail.

'He's like that with everyone,' Farhan said. 'He knows my mother's birthday.'

'Does he.' Meera turned the cream card over and read the number again. Ten digits, written slowly, every one of them closed and neat.

The lift opened onto the ground floor at 10.58. Farhan turned left, towards the glass doors and the jeep, and Meera turned right, because she could hear a ceiling fan and nothing else, and in her experience a room with a fan in it was a room with people in it.

The corridor ran thirty metres to a pair of frosted doors. Painted on the wall in green, in the same rounded letters as the depot signs, were the words HUMAN CARE. Below them, someone had stuck a laminated sheet with the hours: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., Monday to Saturday. The laminate had bubbled at one corner.

The waiting area was full. Meera counted the chairs out of habit. Six rows of eight, forty-eight moulded plastic seats bolted to steel rails, and every one taken. Another dozen people stood along the back wall. An old man in a white kurta held a plastic folder of papers against his chest with both arms, the way people held babies on trains. A woman in a nurse's cardigan that was not a uniform sat with a steel tiffin on her knees. Two boys of about eight sat on the floor under the window, playing something with bottle caps, without a sound.

Nobody was talking. On a Thursday morning in Navi Mumbai, sixty-odd people in a single room, and nobody was talking. The fan turned. The room smelt of phenyl and of the jasmine in somebody's hair.

Meera stood at the end of the second row. A woman of about thirty looked up at her, then down at her own feet, and stayed looking down. Meera had been a police officer for twenty-six years. She knew the difference between people who had not noticed her and people who had decided not to.

'Excuse me,' she said to the man in the kurta. 'How long have you been waiting?'

He held the folder tighter. 'Since morning.'

'This morning?'

He looked past her at the frosted doors and did not answer. A woman beside him moved her handbag from the empty space on the rail to her lap, which was an answer of sorts, though Meera could not tell to what.

Farhan came up behind her. He had the jeep keys in his hand and the face of a man whose guest had wandered into the wrong part of the house.

'It's the specialist side,' he said. 'Clinic care is in the blocks, you don't come here for a fever. This is for the real doctors.'

'How many real doctors are there?'

'I'd have to check.'

'Check,' Meera said.

He did not write it down. She noticed that, and she noticed that he kept his voice lower than he had in the director's office, as though the room had rules nobody had posted.

On the left-hand door, at eye level, was a small black panel. Red digits glowed in it, square and steady, like the clock on a microwave. It did not say what the number counted. It did not change while she watched it, and she watched it for a full minute by her own wristwatch, the fan going round, a child's bottle cap clicking once against the tiles.

14.

In the zone where nothing was scarce, where the screens upstairs and in every depot said so to two decimal places, somebody was two hundred and fourteenth in line for something.

Meera took the biro from her pocket. Below the 3,80,000 that had been on the back of her hand since half past eight, she wrote 214, and underlined it twice.

CHAPTER 3

Grey Shirts

Three shirts. That was the first thing, and for a while it seemed to be the only thing.

They hung on wire hangers from a steel rail in the alcove by the window, grey, all three of them, buttoned to the collar and spaced so evenly that someone must have measured. Meera put her finger between the first and second. Then between the second and third. Two fingers' width each time. Below them, on the floor of the alcove, stood one pair of black sandals with the heels worn down on the outside edge.

Flat 7-14, Block C, ninth floor of twelve. Thirty-one square metres, according to the plate by the door, which Farhan had opened at 10.10 by holding his warrant card to a reader the colour of a betel stain. The lock had clicked, a small dry sound, and the door had swung in on its own as though it had been expecting them.

'He lived here five years,' Farhan said.

'Who told you that?'

'The block record. First intake of staff housing. July 2031.'

Meera looked at the kitchen counter. One steel plate stood upright in the drying rack. One tumbler beside it. One spoon lay flat on the drainboard, and that was the full inventory of a man's meals for five years. The two-ring hob had a film of grey dust on it you could have written your name in. She did not. She bent and looked at it sideways, against the light from the window, and saw no marks at all.

Farhan was opening cupboards. Each one was empty, or nearly. A packet of Provision salt, unopened. A box of matches. A roll of the brown tape the depots used for parcels.

'No phone,' he said. 'No laptop. No tablet. There's not even a charger.' He went to the socket beside the bed, a single mattress on a wooden frame, and crouched. 'Look at this. He was an allocation engineer. He kept the whole system running, and there's nothing to plug in.'

'He didn't carry a phone on him either.'

'Because somebody took it. And somebody came here and took the rest.' He stood, brushing his trousers. 'A man who writes code doesn't live like a sadhu, madam. Somebody cleaned this place out before we got here.'

'Cleaned it,' Meera said.

'Stripped it. You know what I mean.'

She did know. She had walked into perhaps forty flats in twenty-six years where someone had got there first: a chartered accountant's office in Fort with the drawers pulled out and left hanging, a builder's bungalow in Chembur where the safe stood open and the carpet still had the four square dents from where a cabinet had been dragged off it. People who strip a place are in a hurry. They leave edges.

'Come here,' she said.

He came. She pointed at the shelf above the bed, a plank of laminated board with nothing on it. The dust lay across it in one even coat, wall to wall.

'If something had been sitting there for five years and was taken on Tuesday night,' she said, 'there'd be a clean patch where it stood. There isn't one. Same on the desk. Same round that socket.' She tapped the plastic plate with her biro, and a little grey cloud came away. 'Nobody's pulled a plug out of that this year.'

Farhan looked at the socket for longer than he needed to.

'So he was poor,' he said finally. 'In his habits, I mean.'

'Nobody's poor here. You told me that yesterday.'

He didn't answer. Down in the courtyard a delivery drone came in low with the whine of a dentist's drill, set something down outside Block D, and lifted off again.

Meera went to the bathroom because it was the only room left. It was the size of a railway compartment toilet: tap, bucket, squat pan, a shower head on a

bracket, white tiles to shoulder height. She stopped in the doorway.

The rest of the flat smelled of dust and closed windows. This room smelled sharp. Wet cement, faintly chalky, the smell that had hung over her mother's kitchen in Dadar for a week in 1994 when the plumber redid the wall behind the sink.

She ran a finger along the lowest row of tiles. It came away clean.

The grout was another matter. Along the third row up, at the height of her knee, it was paler than the rest, the grey of new pencil lead against the yellowed seams above and below. She pressed it with her thumbnail and it gave, very slightly, like cheese left out of the fridge.

She started at the corner by the door and knocked on each tile with the second knuckle of her right hand. Tock. Tock. Tock. The sound of tile laid on solid wall, flat and dull. Farhan stood in the doorway because there was no room for him anywhere else.

'What are you doing?'

'Listening.'

Tock. Tock. The fifth tile along the third row answered differently. A thinner sound, with a little hollow behind it, the way a melon sounds when the vendor at Vashi market thumps it to show you he isn't cheating. She knocked the tiles on either side to be sure. Tock. Then the odd one again. Tunk.

'Bring me the plate,' she said.

'Madam.'

'The steel plate. In the rack.'

He did not move. 'This is a death scene, possibly. If there's something behind there, forensic should take it out. We photograph it in place. We log it. If we break the wall ourselves, a lawyer will say we put whatever it is in there.'

'Which lawyer?'

'Any lawyer.'

'You've got a camera on your phone. Photograph the tile now. Photograph me taking it out. Photograph whatever's behind it.' She held out her hand without looking round. 'And when forensic come, ask them how long it took them to get here from Panvel this morning.'

He went. She heard the plate lift out of the rack with a small ring. He photographed the wall from the doorway, then from a crouch, then handed it to her

rim first, as if it were a weapon.

The plate was cheap Provision steel, thin enough to flex. She worked the edge into the soft grout along the top of the tile and drew it across, and the grout came out in a damp grey ribbon. She did the left side, then the right. The bottom she left alone. When she pushed down on the top edge, the tile tipped forward on its lower seam like a letterbox flap and she caught it in her palm.

Behind it was a gap cut in the plaster, roughly the size of a brick laid on its side. Someone had lined it with a square of polythene, the kind the depots used to wrap bedding. Inside the polythene was a book.

Farhan's phone clicked three times behind her.

She lifted it out with two fingers on the spine. A notebook, octavo, bound in dark blue cloth worn grey at the corners, the sort they still sold at stationery shops in Matunga for students who liked to feel serious. Ninety-six pages, it said on a sticker inside the back cover. Rs 145. A pencil had been used for everything. She could see the shine of graphite on the paper when she tilted it toward the small window above the shower.

The entries ran in columns, neat, cramped, ruled by hand. A date. Two initials, sometimes three. Then a pair of numbers separated by a slash.

18.04.35 · SP · 61/2

02.05.35 · NKB · 140/11

29.06.35 · RD · 214/9

She stopped on that one. On the back of her left hand, under 3,80,000, the biro still read 214. She did not say anything about it. Farhan was reading over her shoulder, close enough that she could smell his aftershave, something with lime in it.

There were pages of them. She turned through quickly, not reading, only counting. Eleven entries on a page, sometimes twelve. Some pages had a second column added later in a softer pencil, single words she would need her glasses for. Toward the back the handwriting got smaller, as if he had begun to worry about running out of room.

The last written page had four entries. Three were complete. The fourth sat on its own line at the bottom, under a ruled gap.

10.02.36 · · 2/1

The date. The pair of numbers. And between them two dots of pencil with nothing between the dots, where the initials should have been.

'The tenth,' Farhan said. 'He died on the eleventh.'

Meera held the page to the light. The paper between the dots was smooth. No eraser marks. Nothing rubbed out. He had simply left the space empty.

They sat on the floor of the main room because there was nowhere else to sit. Farhan folded his long legs under him like a boy at a wedding lunch. Meera lowered herself onto the concrete more slowly and felt it in her left knee. The notebook lay open between them on its polythene, and the window threw a slab of white light across it.

She put her glasses on.

'It's a bug log,' Farhan said. 'I'm almost sure. Engineers keep these. The first number is a line in the code, the second is how bad it is. Severity. Two is minor, eleven is serious.'

'Line two hundred and fourteen.'

'Or a module. Something like that.' He tapped the margin, not the page. 'And the initials are who reported it, or who he assigned it to. Ledgerless has fourteen categories. Every category has a team. He was keeping track of who was sitting on what.'

'In pencil. Behind a bathroom wall.'

'He didn't trust devices. You saw the shirts. He was particular.'

She turned back a page. *14.08.35 · BT · 188/3.* Then forward. *03.10.35 · NKB · 97/40.* She held her finger under that one until he looked at it.

'Severity forty,' she said.

He frowned. 'Maybe the scale changed.'

'Or it's a number that went up. Ninety-seven to forty is down, if you're standing in a line. Two hundred and fourteen to nine is a long way down.' She took the calculator out of her kurta pocket and keyed it in without looking at the buttons. 'Two hundred and five places. Somebody went in at two hundred and fourteen and came out at nine. That's not a bug. That's a man moving.'

'Nobody can move in Ledgerless. That's the whole point of it. The machine decides.'

'Then this is a list of times the machine decided strangely.'

Farhan was quiet. Outside, a woman was calling a child in Marathi, the same name four times, rising each time. He picked a flake of dried grout off his trouser knee.

'Fine. Say you're right. Say these are positions. Then it's a software matter, and the person who can read it properly is the tech lead at the consortium office, fourth floor. I can take it there this afternoon. They'll pull the logs against the dates in an hour.'

'And the tech lead reports to whom?'

'To allocation.'

'To Mr Malhotra, who knew my husband's name.'

'He's a friendly man, madam. He knows everybody's name. He sent flowers when my father had his hip done.' Farhan's voice had gone tight. 'You've been in the zone one day. You can't decide the whole building is crooked because a man was polite to you.'

'I haven't decided anything about the building. Dev Rao decided. He worked on the fourth floor, and he cut a hole in his own wall rather than keep this on it.' She said it more sharply than she meant to and saw it land. 'He didn't trust them. I'm inclined to give his opinion some weight. He was the one who knew them.'

'So who do we give it to? Not forensic, not the consortium. You?'

She did not answer that. She was turning pages again, faster now, and this time she was reading the left-hand column instead of the numbers. The pencil initials went past in their small upright capitals. SP. RD. NKB. GHM. BT. A dozen sets of letters, most of them appearing once, twice. She went back to the biggest falls, the ones where the first number was in the hundreds and the second was in single figures, and laid her calculator flat on the page beside each one as she went, working out the drop and pencilling nothing.

05185290176211.

Five largest. She looked at the initials beside each of them.

BT. BT. BT. NKB. BT.

She checked the dates. June, August, November, January. Spread out. Patient. Not one person moving one place up a queue, but someone being moved, over and over, into the front of it.

'What?' Farhan said.

'Nothing yet.'

She closed the notebook on its own polythene, folded the plastic over twice and slid the whole thing into the inside pocket of her cotton jacket, where she used to keep seizure receipts. It sat flat against her ribs, 96 pages, Rs 145.

Farhan watched her do it. He opened his mouth and closed it.

'That's evidence,' he said.

'Yes,' Meera said. 'You photographed it.'

'I photographed it.'

The knock came before he could say anything else. Three raps, flat-handed, on a door that had no bell.

Farhan got up first. Meera stayed where she was, one hand resting on her jacket, and watched the door open on a woman of about forty in a crushed blue salwar, a wheeled suitcase behind her with an airline tag still looped through the handle. HYD. She had Dev's narrow face and none of his tidiness. Her dupatta had slipped to one shoulder and she had not bothered to fix it.

'Who are you?' she said. She was looking past Farhan, at Meera on the floor. 'Why are you in his flat?'

Farhan showed his card. The woman read it properly, both sides, and gave it back.

'Pallavi Rao,' she said. 'His sister. They phoned me at nine last night. Nine. He was lying there from the morning and they phoned me at nine.' She came in and stopped, because there was nothing to stop at. 'Where is everything?'

'This is everything,' Meera said.

Pallavi looked at the three grey shirts on their hooks for a long moment. Then she looked at Meera. 'And you? You're not police.'

'Not any more.'

'Then what are you?'

Meera got up, which took two movements and the wall. She could have said consultant. She could have given Kavita Menon's thirty days and the read access. 'I'm someone who doesn't know where your brother was going at ten o'clock on a Wednesday night,' she said. 'I don't know who he was meeting or why he'd climb a gantry eleven metres up. I was hoping you might.'

Pallavi's mouth moved. Some of the stiffness went out of her shoulders, not all of it.

'Nobody knew where Dev was going,' she said. 'That was Dev.'

There was one steel plate and no cups. Pallavi unzipped the front of her suitcase and took out a Milton flask, a stack of paper cups from the train and a packet of Parle-G gone soft in the humidity of a sleeper coach. They stood in the kitchen because the kitchen had a counter to lean on. The tea was sweet and lukewarm and tasted of the flask.

'He hated this place,' Pallavi said. 'No. That's wrong. He liked the work. He said the food was better than our mother's, which was a lie he told to annoy me.' She broke a biscuit in half and did not eat either half. 'He called on Sundays. From a phone box at the depot, can you imagine. Ten minutes exactly. He timed it.'

'When did you last see him?'

'Diwali. He came for four days.' She turned the paper cup in her fingers. 'He bought Rohan a scooter. My son, he's seventeen, he's been after us since he was fourteen. An Activa, the new model. A hundred and four thousand.'

'On a loan?'

'Cash.' Pallavi gave a short laugh, embarrassed by it. 'He took Rohan to the showroom in Kukatpally and paid from a cloth bag like a farmer selling onions. The salesman counted it twice. My husband asked him where an engineer who gets everything free finds one lakh in notes, and Dev laughed. He said, "I'm being paid to learn." That's all. Being paid to learn. Then he took Rohan for ice cream.'

Farhan had stopped chewing. Meera did not look at him.

Being paid to learn. Not paid to do. Someone had handed Dev Rao money, more than once, in bundles that did not match, and he had taken it, spent some on a scooter for a boy, and gone home to write down what he had been shown. Initials. Dates. Two hundred and fourteen to nine. He had been inside, and he had been taking notes, and the last entry had no name because he had not yet learned it.

The notebook sat flat against her ribs. She was conscious of its corners.

'Madam.' Pallavi was looking at her. 'One more thing. Someone phoned me this morning on the train, near Solapur. A man. Very polite. He said he was

from Dev's office and he was sorry for my loss.' She put the paper cup down on the counter. 'He asked whether Dev had sent me any papers. A book, he said. Anything handwritten.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I said my brother didn't write letters.' Pallavi looked at the empty room, at the shirts, at the pale square of fresh grout behind the bathroom door. 'Did he?'

CHAPTER 4

The Hand Economy

Teak dust lay on the eastern road for forty metres before Meera saw where it came from. It had settled in the cracks of the paving and along the kerb in a fine brown line, like spilled turmeric, and a delivery drone passing low over the resettlement blocks had blown a little of it into a whorl on the white wall of Block K.

She had walked from Gate 2. Two point three kilometres by the map on the bus shelter, thirty-four minutes by her watch, past Towers 11 and 12 with their pink glass gone pale in the morning light, past a generator shed that coughed diesel at her as she went by. The farms breathed out wet soil through their vents. Everything else smelled of dust. February in Panvel did not pretend to be anything else.

The workshop was a lean-to against the back of a disused pump house. Corrugated sheet on two steel poles, a tarpaulin for a side wall, a workbench made from a door. Someone had painted ISHAAN on a plank in green and then, apparently, lost interest before adding anything else. Inside the air was thick enough to taste. She took her glasses off the cord and put them in her pocket so they would not fog with it.

He was sanding the arm of a chair. He did not look up.

He had the chair clamped upside down on the bench and he was working the curve of the arm with a strip of paper wrapped round two fingers, slow strokes, feeling more than looking. His hair was tied back with a rubber band. Khaki, she noticed, and then told herself to stop noticing rubber bands. There were four more chairs along the tarpaulin wall in different stages. One was only a

seat and three legs. One was finished and oiled, the colour of strong tea, standing on a square of clean cotton as if it were in a shop.

'You came on the bus,' Ishaan said.

'I walked from the gate.'

'You came on the bus to the gate.' He blew dust off the arm and ran his thumb along it. 'Farhan Shaikh phoned me yesterday. To ask if you were reliable.'

'What did you say?'

'I said you were extremely reliable.' He turned the chair a few degrees in the clamp. 'He didn't seem to know if that was good.'

Meera looked at the finished chair. The joints had no screws she could see. The back was made of seven thin slats, each one curved, each one slightly different, and the seat was dished where a person would sit, as though someone had already sat in it for twenty years.

'Who's that one for?'

'A woman in Bandra. Pali Hill. She has a dining table from Jodhpur and she wants eight of these round it. That's the third.'

'What does she pay?'

'Sixty thousand.'

'For the eight.'

'Each.'

She did not say anything. She took the calculator out of her bag, the grey Casio with the cracked corner, and pressed the keys without quite deciding to. Sixty thousand. Her pension was forty-one thousand five hundred a month after deductions, twenty-six years of service, early retirement, reduced rate. One chair was a month and a half of her life. Eight chairs was four lakh eighty thousand rupees. More than the green canvas bag. A hundred thousand more than a dead man had been lying next to on Tuesday morning.

'Ma.'

She pressed the clear key, then pressed it again. In this place a pressure cooker cost a face and forty-one seconds. A shirt cost nothing. Rice, soap, a bed, a roof, electricity up to a line on a meter. The machines in Taloja made all of it out of scrap and sunlight, and the posters said that meant nobody needed money any

more, and here was her son, who had never earned a salary in his life, making half a lakh out of four pieces of old wood and a strip of sandpaper.

'Where does the teak come from?'

'Doors. Old Bombay houses getting knocked down in Girgaon. A man brings it on a tempo.' He went back to sanding. 'Machines can make wood now. Fake teak, printed. It's fine. She doesn't want fine.'

Meera looked at the number on the little grey screen. 480000. It sat there, and she found she could not make it mean what she wanted it to.

'You could have told me,' she said.

'Told you what?'

'What you charge.'

'You never asked what I charge. You asked when I was going to stop.' He did not look up. 'Two years ago, at Diwali. In front of Mausi.'

'I asked when you were going to apply for something.'

'Same question.'

It had taken less than half a minute. She had timed worse arguments with him, and she had timed better ones, and this one had found its old groove the way a bus finds a pothole it hits every morning. She put the calculator back in her bag and did not clear the screen.

'Your father was at the Customs House at twenty-two,' she said.

'And he died at fifty-four with a pension he never drew.'

'I draw mine.'

'Forty-one five. You told me. You tell me every time the electricity board puts up the rate in Vashi.' He blew on the arm of the chair again. 'You wanted me to sit an exam for a clerk's post that a machine took in 2032. I'd have been redundant before you were.'

'There were other posts.'

'Name one.'

She could not, at least not quickly enough, and he saw that, and she saw him see it. The sanding stopped. He set the strip of paper down on the bench, folded once, beside a tin of linseed oil and a mug with a crust of something brown at the bottom. Then he wiped his hands on his kurta, which explained the colour of the kurta.

'Say it,' he said.

'Say what?'

'The thing about sitting at home on free rice.'

'I wasn't going to.'

'You were going to say it about other people. The neighbours. Some boy in Block K. So I'd know you meant me.'

That was true, and it annoyed her that it was true. In 2033, the month the Wing was wound up, she had sat at her own kitchen table with a cardboard box of personal effects (one stapler, a framed citation, a coffee mug from a conference in Pune) and Ishaan had come in from the zone with his hair full of sawdust and asked her what she was going to do now, in a tone she had decided was mockery. She had told him at least she had done something. He had left without eating. He had not come for dinner again until Holi.

The generator shed coughed somewhere behind the pump house. A drone went over, low, and the tarpaulin lifted and dropped.

'I came about a case,' she said.

'I know. Farhan told me.'

'Then I'll ask about the case.'

'Ask.'

She opened her mouth to say Dev Rao's name and found she did not want to say it here, with the dust in her throat and the chair on its square of cotton. She looked instead at the half-built one, the seat and three legs. The fourth leg lay on the bench, rough, a pencil line drawn down its length.

When he was nine he had walked out of the flat in Vashi in the middle of an argument about homework and gone down four flights in his school socks and sat on the wall by the bus stop until it got dark. At sixteen he had slammed doors. At twenty he had stopped slamming them and just gone. She waited now for the version of him that went. Her feet had already half turned towards the road.

He picked up the rough leg instead and weighed it in his hand.

'You want to know who pays cash in here,' he said.

'I didn't say that.'

'You said it to Farhan. He repeated it to me like it was a riddle.' He put the leg down. 'I can show you. Not tell you. You never believe anything you're told, so I'm not going to waste it.'

'Show me what?'

'What I do all day.' He took a key on a string from a nail on the pole, then a cloth bag, then his phone, which he looked at and put face down again. 'I've got a delivery at eleven and a fitting at half past twelve. You can carry the cushions.'

She looked at her watch. It was 9.52.

'I have a calculator,' she said, 'not a van.'

'That's fine.' He lifted the finished chair off its cotton square, turned it over once to check the feet, and held it out to her by the back. 'Neither have I.'

She carried it. It weighed less than she had expected, perhaps six kilos, and the arms were warm where his hands had been.

The eastern road ran straight between the resettlement blocks and the farm fence, four lanes of concrete with a strip of dead grass down the middle. Delivery carts hummed along the kerb at walking pace. Ishaan walked beside them with the cushions under one arm and did not offer to swap.

The first stop was a ground-floor flat in Block M with its door wedged open by a brick. Inside, a woman of about sixty sat on a mat with a kurta across her knees and a needle going in and out of the hem in short, even stabs. Three more kurtas hung on a string across the window, white cotton, the necks embroidered in thread so fine Meera had to lean in to see it was thread.

'Shobha-tai,' Ishaan said. 'My mother.'

The woman nodded without stopping. 'Sit, sit.'

'How long for one?' Meera said.

'Nine days, if my eyes are good.'

'And the price?'

'Eleven thousand. Twelve for the long ones.' She bit the thread. 'Six weeks' waiting now. A lady from Juhu sent her driver to ask if she could pay extra and go first. I said no. Then I said yes.'

Meera looked at the depot shirt Shobha-tai herself was wearing, grey, machine-folded creases still in the sleeves. It had cost nothing.

Outside, Ishaan pointed with his chin at a first-floor window where a whiteboard leaned against the grille. 'Mr Pillai. Maths, physics. Retired from a college in Chembur.'

'The machines teach maths. Farhan showed me. Every child gets a tutor on a screen.'

'Every child does. Pillai has forty-three families on his list and he takes eight. Three thousand an hour. He shouts at them. They pay him to be shouted at by somebody who'll remember next week that they didn't do their homework.'

At the corner of Block N, under a neem tree, a man had set up a folding chair, a mirror tied to the trunk with wire, and a plastic tray of combs in blue liquid. A boy sat in the chair with a sheet round his neck. The barber was talking to him about his sister's exam.

'Ramesh,' Ishaan said, and the barber lifted his scissors in greeting.

'Ishaan-bhai. Chair finished?'

'This one is.'

'Your mother?' Ramesh looked at Meera in the mirror. 'You have his ears.'

'The depot has a cutting booth,' Meera said. 'I passed it. Four minutes, free.'

'Six hundred,' Ramesh said. 'With me, six hundred. And I know he likes it short at the back because his neck sweats. And I know his sister failed chemistry in December.' He went back to the boy. 'The booth knows his head. I know him.'

They walked on. The chair had begun to dig into her palm.

'It's nostalgia,' Meera said. 'That's all this is. People with money paying to feel the way things were in 1995. A hobby for the comfortable. You can't run a country on embroidered necklines and a man under a tree.'

'Nobody's running a country on it.'

'Then it isn't an economy.'

'Shobha-tai bought her grandson a laptop last month. Pillai's paying for his wife's knee. Not the clinic knee, a surgeon in Hiranandani.' He shifted the cushions. 'That's money going in and coming out. You used to arrest people for less.'

'Small amounts.'

'You found a bag of three lakh eighty this morning and you're telling me the amounts are small.'

She stopped walking. A delivery cart halted behind her, waited exactly two seconds, then steered round.

'Everything you can get from the depot,' Ishaan said, 'nobody pays for. Fine. Nobody pays for rice. Nobody pays for a shirt. So whatever you can't get from the depot, that's where it all went. Whatever's left over.' He looked at the chair in her hands. 'Machines made things cheap. They made people expensive.'

She waited for the answer to come to her. In twenty-six years she had always had one, usually by the second sentence, often before. A drone passed over the road and its shadow slid across the chair and off it.

She shifted her grip on the chair and said nothing at all.

The delivery was to a flat in Sector 19, outside the zone fence, where a man in a silk kurta took the chair without looking at Meera and transferred the money to Ishaan's phone while they stood in his doorway. The fitting was a woman in Kharghar who wanted the arms of her chair two centimetres higher. Ishaan measured her elbows twice with a cloth tape and wrote the figures on his wrist in biro. Meera looked at her own hand, at 3,80,000 and 214 fading into her skin, and put it in her pocket.

They were back at the workshop by twenty past one. The tarpaulin had shifted in the heat and the light under it had gone yellow. Ishaan set the cushions on the bench and drank a whole bottle of depot water without stopping.

Meera picked up her bag. The bus to Vashi left Gate 2 at 1.50, and the walk was eighteen minutes if she did not stop to argue with anyone.

'Sixty thousand,' she said.

'Sixty-two. He liked the finish.'

'You could have told me that a year ago.'

'You'd have asked how much tax.' He was sweeping shavings into a pile with the side of his foot. 'Somebody tried to pay me without money once, if you want something strange. Last year. A set of six for a dining table in Belapur. The man said cash was difficult that month, but he could get my child a place at Saraswati.'

'You haven't got a child.'

'That's what I said. He said it didn't matter. He said I could pass it on to someone who had one, and they'd be grateful, and gratitude was worth more than his cash anyway.' Ishaan shrugged. 'I said no. I wanted the money. He paid in the end, a week late.'

'Saraswati is the school.'

'The school. Real teachers, real blackboards. Two hundred and forty seats for the whole zone. Everybody's in the queue from the day the baby's born.' He stopped sweeping. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'How was he going to get the place?'

'I didn't ask. Rich people say things.'

'What was his name?'

'Amma.'

'His name.'

'I don't remember. Something with an S. I've got it on an invoice somewhere.' He gestured at a cardboard box under the bench, full of paper, sawdust in the corners. 'You want me to look now?'

She did. She also wanted to catch the 1.50, and she wanted, in a way she did not examine, for this to be the first time in two years that she had left his workshop without either of them raising their voice.

'Look tonight,' she said. 'Send it to me.'

'You'll owe me.'

'I carried your chair.'

He almost smiled. He went back to sweeping, and she went out under the edge of the tarpaulin into the white glare.

The eastern road was empty of people at that hour. The carts still ran along the kerb, patient, half full. She walked on the dead grass of the median because the concrete threw the heat back at her shins. A seat in a school, offered across a table for six teak chairs, the way you might offer a gold chain or a cheque postdated to the fifteenth. Something you could give away. Something you could sell on. A place in a line that a man in Belapur had spoken of as if it were in his pocket.

In 2014 she had spent four months on a man in Masjid Bunder who paid his suppliers in railway reservations. It had seemed funny, until it had not.

At the bus shelter she sat on the steel bench and took out her calculator. It was an old one, grey, the keys worn shiny, with a memo line that held twelve characters and that she had used for nothing but phone numbers since Sudhir died. She cleared the last entry. She held down the shift key and pressed the letters one by one, slowly, because the keypad had three letters to a button and she always overshot.

SARASWATI SC

Twelve characters. No room for the rest.

The screen across the road said 0.00. The bus came round the corner at 1.49, a minute early, and she saved the entry before she stood up.

CHAPTER 5

Seven Months

Rekha Gaikwad arrived eleven minutes early and took the table nearest the fire door, which Meera only knew because Rekha said so before she said hello.

'I was here at ten to four. I wanted the wall behind me.'

'I'd have done the same,' Meera said.

The canteen sat on the ground floor of Tower 4, under eleven storeys of spinach and coriander, and it smelled of wet soil and boiled dal and the faint sweetness of the pink lamps leaking down the stairwell. Farm workers ate at long steel tables in green overalls. There were perhaps forty of them, though only a handful were people. The rest of the farm's work went on overhead without stopping, a low hum through the ceiling slabs like a fridge in another room. A machine at the counter dispensed thalis on steel trays. Nobody paid. Nobody signed for anything. A boy of about nineteen took two trays, ate one, and left the other half-finished on the table, and nobody looked at him.

Rekha had brought a plastic folder, blue, the kind sold in stationery shops for ₹40, and a steel tiffin she did not open. She was forty-four. She wore a cotton sari in a dull mustard colour and a cardigan over it although the afternoon was thirty-one degrees, and her hair was pulled back so hard it lifted her eyebrows. She looked at Farhan's uniform for longer than she looked at Meera's face.

Farhan had found her. That was the arrangement. Meera had asked him on the bus the previous evening, while she was still turning the Saraswati invoice over in her mind, for every complaint the zone police post had received about Human Care in the past two years. He had said there would be none. There

were two. One was a man who had punched a reception screen. The other was a typed sheet, a page and a half long, dated 14 October 2035 and signed R. S. Gaikwad, with a stamp in the corner: civil matter, referred to Human Care grievance cell, no cognisable offence. Farhan had read it twice at his desk and then phoned the number on it himself.

'You teach,' Meera said.

'Marathi. Class six and seven. Government school in New Panvel.' Rekha put her hands flat on the folder. 'Outside the zone. They pay me in rupees, if you're wondering. Thirty-eight thousand a month. I keep it in a bank. I'm one of the last fools.'

'I had a pension paid into the State Bank in Vashi this morning. Two of us, then.'

Rekha almost smiled. It did not get far.

Farhan took out his notebook and a ballpoint and wrote the date at the top of a fresh page, 16.02.36, and underlined it. He sat very straight. In the canteen light his beard looked freshly trimmed, and Meera thought, not for the first time, that he dressed for every interview as if someone senior would later read the transcript.

'Your husband,' he said.

'Sanjay.' Rekha said it to Meera. 'He was forty-six. He drove a tempo for a pharma distributor in Taloja for nineteen years, and then the distributor got the robots, and then we came here. 2032. Second intake. We had a one-room in Kalwa before that, with a shared toilet for eleven families. Here we had a flat with a balcony.' She stopped. 'I'm not going to pretend it was bad here. I want that on your paper.'

Farhan wrote something. Meera watched his pen move and guessed it was the word balcony.

'In January last year he started getting breathless on the stairs,' Rekha said. 'Fourth floor. He said it was the dust. Then he said it was his age. On the twenty-ninth of January he sat down on the landing between the second and third floors and couldn't get up for twenty minutes. I took him to the clinic in Sector 8. The machine took his blood and did the ECG and the echo, all in one morning, very quick, very polite. It said he needed a cardiologist. A human one. It said the

word human.' She tapped the folder. 'It put him in the line for Human Care, cardiology, on the third of February. He was number eighty-eight.'

'Eighty-eight,' Meera said.

'They told us it would be four to five months. The welcome hall girl said that. She was very kind. She had a badge with her name on it, Priyanka, and a sticker of a sunflower, and she said, Ledgerless only looks at need, aunty, it doesn't look at who you are. She said that if he got worse the machine would see it in his readings and move him up. Automatic. Nobody could interfere.' Rekha unclipped the folder. 'So I watched it. Every night at nine, on my phone, I opened the app and took a picture of his number. Two hundred and nine pictures. I missed three days in August when he was admitted in the clinic and I slept on the floor there.'

She took out a stack of printouts, A4, held with a black binder clip. Each sheet had four screenshots on it, small, in colour, the Ledgerless screen with its pale blue band across the top and a single number in the middle in large grey type. Under each screenshot, in neat blue biro, a teacher's hand had written the date.

Meera put her reading glasses on and turned the sheets one by one. The numbers went down. Eighty-eight, eighty-six, eighty-five, eighty-five, eighty-one. Down through February, down through March, a few places a week and sometimes none. Seventy, sixty-two, fifty-five. It was the slowest thing she had ever watched move on paper, and she had once spent eight months tracking a single consignment of copper wire through three godowns in Bhiwandi.

'Here,' Rekha said, and put her finger on a square in late May.

Nineteen. And on the next square, the following night, twenty-one.

'He went backwards,' Rekha said. 'Two places. I phoned the grievance cell. They said the queue adjusts for clinical priority, sometimes other patients become more urgent. I said fine. I'm a reasonable woman. People get sicker. I believed them.'

She turned two more sheets. Mid-July: eight, then nine.

'Again.'

Then August, and Meera turned the page and saw it before Rekha's finger arrived. Four, on the night of 21 August. Seven, on the night of 22 August.

'He was number four,' Rekha said. 'Do you know what four looks like when you've watched eighty-eight? Four is nothing. Four is next week. I bought him new chappals for the appointment because his old ones were split at the back. I told my sister in Nashik. And then it was seven, and nobody could tell me why, and on the third of September he was number three and he was dead.'

She said it flatly, the way she might have read a register of attendance. The canteen hummed. At the next table a farm worker in green overalls scraped his tray clean with a piece of chapati and went back to his phone.

Farhan had stopped writing. His pen rested on the page at the end of a word. Meera did not look at him directly. She looked at the clip on the printouts, the binder's black steel arms, and listened to him breathe through his nose.

'There are other places he went backwards,' Meera said.

'Fourteen in all. I counted them in November. Some only one place. I have a list.' Rekha drew a single sheet from the back of the folder, handwritten, two columns: dates on the left, positions on the right, with arrows. 'I gave this to the police in October. With the pictures. Your post.' She was looking at Farhan now. 'They kept it four days and gave it back to me and said it was a medical matter.'

Farhan said nothing.

Meera opened her bag. She had brought the photocopies, forty-six pages from a xerox shop near Vashi station at ₹2 a page, which she had made the night they found the notebook and which Farhan had never asked about. The original was in an evidence locker at the zone post, sealed in a brown envelope with his signature across the flap. The copies were greyer than the original, and Dev Rao's light pencil had gone faint in places, but the numbers held.

She did not show them to Rekha. She laid them face down on her own side of the table, beside her calculator, and ran her finger down the dates on Rekha's handwritten list until she reached 28.05.35. Then she turned the copies over and went looking.

Dev's notebook did not run in clean order. Some pages were dense and some had three lines. Some entries carried a small letter after the initials, written smaller than the rest, almost an afterthought: h, s, k, c. She had wondered about the h since Tuesday. On the eleventh page, halfway down, she found it.

28.05.35 — P.J. h — 31/17

28.05.35 — N.D. h — 44/12

Two lines. Two people who had been behind Sanjay Gaikwad the night before, at thirty-one and forty-four, and who were in front of him the next night, at seventeen and twelve. She took the calculator and did it anyway, because she always did it anyway. Nineteen plus two. Twenty-one.

She went on. 14.07.35 was on the twenty-second page, a single line with a different set of initials, the h after them, and a pair that read 26/5. Eight plus one was nine. 22.08.35 was on the thirty-third page, and Dev had written three entries for it one under the other with the same pencil, the last two slightly cramped as if he had run out of time, each with its h, each with a first number higher than four and a second lower. She did not need the calculator for four plus three. She pressed the keys regardless and watched the 7 come up grey on the little screen.

Meera took her glasses off. She found she wanted to rub her eyes and didn't.

'Mrs Gaikwad,' she said. 'On three of these dates, people jumped over your husband in the line. I can tell you how many on each date. I can't yet tell you who, or what they paid.'

'Paid,' Rekha said.

'I don't know that they paid. I know a man wrote it down.'

'Which man?'

Meera hesitated, and in the hesitation Farhan said quietly, 'An engineer from allocation. He died on Wednesday.'

'Dev Rao.' Rekha nodded once. 'It was in the zone bulletin. The fall at Tower 9.' She looked at the photocopies, at the grey pencil she could not read upside down. 'He wrote it down and then he fell.'

Nobody answered that.

'What about the other eleven?' she said.

'They aren't in here.' Meera put her hand on the copies. 'Either he didn't see them, or they weren't bought, or he hadn't got that far. I can't tell you which.'

Rekha seemed to accept that. She was a woman, Meera thought, who preferred an honest gap to a full answer. She picked up the tiffin, looked at it, put it down again.

'I'll tell you what I'm not,' she said. 'I'm not one of these people who wants to break the machines. My sister does. She sends me videos. Every week, some uncle in Pune shouting that the robots killed the jobs. I don't care about the ro-

bots. The robot did his ECG in eleven minutes. In Kalwa we waited six hours at the civil hospital to be shouted at by a ward boy. The robot was the kindest thing that happened to us all year.' Her voice did not rise. 'I'm angry with Priyanka with her sunflower sticker. I'm angry with the poster in the welcome hall, the one with the madam director in it, that says Need Is the Only Number. I'm angry with the doctor at the clinic who held my hand and told me the line was fairer than any of us could ever be. They all told me. Nobody told me it could be bought. If they'd told me, I'd have found the money.'

'How much?' Meera said.

'Whatever it was.' Rekha looked at her. 'I've got a salary. I've got my mother's bangles. I've got a brother-in-law in Dubai who owes us. Whatever it was. I didn't know there was a counter. I would have stood at that counter like I stood in every other line in my life and I'd have paid it, and then he would have seen the cardiologist on the twenty-third of August instead of a box in the clinic cold room on the third of September. That's what I'm angry about. Not the machine. They told me there was no counter.'

Meera had spent twenty-six years being lied to by men who owned counters, and she had a sentence ready about it, something dry about how there was always a counter and the only question was who stood behind it. She did not say it. Across the table Farhan was looking at the page in front of him, at the word he had stopped on. His pen lay where it had been. The second hand on the canteen clock above the thali machine went round once, all the way, and then most of the way again. A drone went past the window at head height with a crate of tomatoes slung under it, and its shadow crossed the table and the binder clip and Rekha's hands.

Meera counted, because she could not help counting. Fifty-eight seconds. Sixty. Seventy.

Farhan put the cap on his pen. He set it down parallel to the notebook, square to the edge of the table, and Meera saw the knuckle of his first finger had gone white where he had been pressing.

'I grew up in Govandi,' he said to Rekha. 'Shivaji Nagar, near the dumping ground. My father had TB twice. When we came here in 2031 he got his medicines on the first day. The first day, aunty. I watched a machine hand them to him.' He breathed out. 'I was posted here in 2034. Your complaint came to

my post in October. I didn't sign it off. But if it had come to my desk I would have done the same. I would have written medical matter. I would have believed it.'

'I know,' Rekha said. 'You have that face.'

He took it. Meera saw him take it, and saw it land somewhere below the uniform, and she thought she might have liked him better for it if she were the sort of person who liked people for things.

'Can I have copies?' he said. 'Of everything. Every page. The list. Anything else you have. Call logs to the grievance cell, if you have them. The clinic discharge. Any letter.'

'I have the call logs. I wrote them in a register. Time, name of the person, what they said.' Rekha's mouth moved, not quite a smile. 'Teacher.'

'Everything,' Farhan said. 'Please.'

Rekha reached into the folder again, behind the list, and drew out a second set of printouts, thinner, the same black clip, the same neat dates in blue biro under each picture. A buff-coloured cover sheet was stapled to the front. On it, in the top right corner, sat a rubber stamp in violet ink, slightly smudged at one side where the stamp had rocked: PANVEL PROVISION ZONE POLICE POST, RECEIVED 14/10/35. Below that, in a different hand, in ordinary blue ballpoint, someone had written Returned to complainant 18/10/35 and an illegible initial.

She slid it across the steel table to him and kept her fingers on it a moment before she let go.

'This one was already for the police,' she said.

CHAPTER 6

Kilowatts

Every door in Block F had a grey box screwed to the frame at shoulder height, about the size of a paperback, with two numbers glowing green on its face. On the door of F-3-11 the top number read 4.20 and the bottom read 1.06. On F-3-12 it was 4.20 and 0.31. Someone had stuck a sticker of Ganpati over the corner of the second box, as if that might help.

'Daily quota on top,' Gopal Mhatre said. 'What you have left underneath. Resets at midnight.'

He ran a repair stall in the lee of Ishaan's lean-to, fans and mixers and the occasional drone with a bent rotor, and Ishaan had sent Meera to him that morning with a text that said only: *Ask Gopal about the boxes.* Gopal was sixty or so, with a pen behind each ear and a soldering burn on his thumb the shape of a comma. He had agreed to walk her round the blocks if she carried his toolbag, which weighed about as much as the chair had.

'Four point two units,' Meera said. 'For everything.'

'Lights, fans, fridge, the induction plate. Machines in the depots run off the solar field past Gate 4, that's not yours. This is yours.' He tapped the box. 'Nobody needs more than four. Fridge is maybe one and a half. Fan, one. You'd have to try.'

A door opened two flats along. A woman in a housecoat leaned out, saw Gopal, and came straight over without looking at Meera at all.

'Gopal-kaka. Sunday you said.'

'I said Sunday if I had time.'

'Point five. That's all. For three days.' She lowered her voice, which made it carry further. 'I'll do your shirts. Starch also.'

'I'll see.'

She looked at the meter on F-3-12, then at the closed door beside it, and her mouth went thin. 'Ask him what he's doing in there till three in the morning,' she said, and went back inside.

Meera waited until the latch clicked. 'Point five of what?'

'Units. You can transfer between meters. Neighbour to neighbour, inside the block.' Gopal shrugged the pen from his left ear and put it behind his right, where there was already a pen. 'Officially it's for sharing. Old people, sick people, a wedding.'

'And unofficially.'

'Unofficially, the boy in 12 has three graphics cards and a cooling fan he built from a pedestal fan and a bucket of ice, and he drinks everybody's spare by six in the evening.'

They went down the stairwell. It smelled of dust and somebody's frying mustard seeds. On the second floor a man stopped Gopal to ask if he still had the old meter cable, the one that could be persuaded, and Gopal said no in a tone that meant not on the stairs. On the ground floor two teenagers stood at a meter with their phones held up to it, arguing about a transfer of 0.8 that had gone to the wrong flat. One of them said the other owed him for February. Meera heard the word *owed* and stopped.

She had spent four days being told that nobody here wanted anything. She had stood in Depot 6 and watched a pressure cooker leave for nothing. She had been prepared, more or less, to concede the point about soap and rice. What she had not expected was this: people on stairwells keeping tallies, offering starch and shirts, glancing at each other's doors with the particular sourness of someone who suspects a neighbour of being better off. She had seen that look across a thousand chit-fund meetings. She had not expected to see it over a fan.

'What do they want it for?' she said. 'The boys.'

'Computing.' Gopal said it like an illness. 'Running models. Mining whatever they mine now. Training something. My grandson explained it twice and I fixed a toaster while he talked.' He pushed open the door to the street. The light was white and dry, and somewhere a generator was coughing. 'Food is free,

madam. Phones are free. The box on the wall is the only thing in this zone that says no.'

Meera looked back at the stairwell, at the two boys still holding their phones up to the meter like a pair of pilgrims.

'Who decides,' she said, 'when the box says yes?'

Gopal took the toolbag back from her and weighed it in his hand for a moment.

'You'd have to ask Tanmay,' he said. 'Flat 12.'

Flat 12 did not answer. Meera knocked three times, then a fourth, and the woman in the housecoat opened her door again just wide enough to say, 'Terminal room. Where else,' and close it.

The terminal room was the ground floor of Block H, two streets over, a long hall that had been built for evening classes and still had a blackboard bolted to one wall with *SANITATION* chalked on it in a teacher's hand. Nobody had taught sanitation there for some time. Forty-odd machines ran along trestle tables in two rows, most of them with their side panels off, their insides lit blue and red and throbbing with fans. The hall was four or five degrees hotter than the street. It smelled of warm plastic and dust and, faintly, of something burning that nobody seemed worried about. A notice by the door said MAX 0.6 UNITS PER STATION and someone had written underneath it, in biro, *ha*.

She found Tanmay at the far end, where the extension cables met. He was sixteen or seventeen, thin, in a Mumbai Indians shirt washed nearly white, with headphones round his neck and a stainless-steel bucket of ice at his feet. A pedestal fan with its cage removed was bent over the bucket, blowing cold air sideways into an open case. Three graphics cards. Gopal had counted correctly.

'You're Tanmay.'

He didn't look up. 'You're the police lady who was in Depot 6 with Farhan-bhai. Everybody saw you.' He typed something. 'I don't do anything illegal. Transfers are allowed.'

'I'm not police.'

'Then why are you asking?'

'Because I don't understand it.'

That made him glance at her, briefly, the way people glanced at a dog that had walked into a shop. 'Nobody over forty understands it.'

'I'm fifty-two,' Meera said. 'So I'm well past help.'

Nothing. He went back to the screen, where lines of text scrolled too fast to read. Meera put Gopal's case aside in her head and looked at the setup properly: the ice, the cables taped at the joins, a cardboard box on the floor with a courier label half torn off, the address scored out in marker. *Pune. Return to sender.*

'Something didn't arrive,' she said.

His hands stopped.

'Drones only bring Provision,' he said after a moment. 'Anything you buy outside, the courier needs an outside address. Mine got sent back twice. Eleven thousand rupees, my uncle paid, and it's sitting in a warehouse in Pune because they won't deliver to a gate.'

'What is it?'

'Power supply. A better one. This one's going to cook.'

Meera took out her notebook, wrote her address in Vashi in block capitals, flat number and all, and tore the page off. She held it where he could see it but not take it.

'Send it there. I'll bring it on the 7.15.'

He looked at the paper for a long time. Then at her. Then he pulled his headphones off his neck and put them on the table.

'What do you want to know.'

'How you get more than four point two.'

'You apply.' He opened a window on the second screen and turned it towards her: the Ledgerless page, white and green, the same layout she had seen at Rekha's on the photographs. *Utility Quota Revision. Your position: 1,388.* 'Same as the doctor, same as the school. Everything's one queue, different category. I applied on 9 January. Normal time is six, seven weeks. Some people wait three months.'

'Who's ahead of you?'

'Nobody can see that. You see your number. It goes down.' He shrugged. 'Mostly it goes down.'

'Mostly.'

He reached for the ice, took a cube, and rubbed it across the back of his neck. A boy two stations along was watching them now and pretending not to.

'Last month a man in Block K got two units extra,' Tanmay said. 'Permanent. He applied after lunch. By dinner his box said six point two. My friend saw it, he was fixing the man's router.' He dropped the cube back. 'And it's not only him. It happens. Hours. Not weeks. Everyone here knows somebody whose went through in hours.'

'And what do they say about it?'

'Nothing.' He put the headphones back round his neck. 'You say something, maybe your number goes up instead of down.'

On the screen, his position flickered and settled. 1,388.

* * *

The room cost ₹850 a night and came with a ceiling fan, a single bed, a framed print of the Gateway of India hung slightly crooked, and a landlady who had asked for three nights in advance and counted the notes in front of her. It was on the second floor of a lodge on the old Panvel road, ten minutes' walk from Gate 2. Meera had taken it on Monday so she would stop spending four hours a day on buses. From the window she could see Tower 9, or the pink smudge of it, above the roofs.

She sat on the bed with the photocopies spread across the blanket in date order. Forty-one pages. Farhan had made them on the police-post machine, which streaked a grey line down the left margin of every sheet, so Dev's handwriting looked as though it had been written beside a railway track.

She had been reading the entries as positions. Before and after. 214/9. 61/2. Someone who had been far back and was now near the front. That was what Rekha's photographs had confirmed, and she had stopped looking for anything else.

Tanmay's screen had said 1,388. A queue number. But the box on the wall said 4.2, and that was not a position. It was an amount.

She went through again from the first page, slower, with the calculator open on her knee.

On page 23 she found it. *28.12.35 A.K. k 4.2 → 5.7.* Small letters, the pencil pressed lightly, as if Dev had written it standing up. No queue numbers on either side. Just the two figures and the arrow.

She punched the subtraction in out of habit. 1.5.

Page 31. *22.01.36 A.K. k 4.2 → 6.2.* Two units. Last month. She thought of Tanmay rubbing ice on his neck. *By dinner his box said six point two.*

Her first thought was the business card. She took it out of the back of her own notebook, where she had tucked it on the day Arjun Malhotra poured her tea and said Sudhir's name without being given it. Cream card, raised print. ARJUN K. MALHOTRA. DEPUTY DIRECTOR, ALLOCATION. A mobile number and an email with the consortium's domain.

A.K. Arjun Kumar, Arjun Krishna, whatever the K was for.

She sat with the card in one hand and page 31 in the other and made herself do the other half of the sum. Dev had used initials for everyone. Initials meant a first name and a surname. Arjun Malhotra was A.M. on any page Dev had written so far; she had seen two A.M.s already, both in Human Care entries, and she had not thought of him either time. A.K. could be Anil Kadam, Ashwini Kale, any of the Khans. The zone had 240,000 people. If even a tenth of a per cent of them had those initials, that was 240 people, and she was counting a middle letter on a business card as a match. In 1998 a junior inspector had brought her a case built on initials and she had sent him back to Crawford Market for a week to find the man's handwriting. He had found a different man.

And Tanmay's Block K man might not be either entry. Two units was two units. People rounded.

She laid the pages face down so she would stop looking at them.

She had read access to Ledgerless for another twenty-four days. Kavita had said so in front of Farhan, with a smile. Read access meant she could open the utility-quota category and look for revisions on 28 December and 22 January, 4.2 to 5.7 and 4.2 to 6.2, and see whose meters they belonged to, and whether those revisions had waited six weeks or six hours. If the names were A.K., she would have names. If one of them sat in Block K, she would have Tanmay's friend and a router.

If there were no such revisions at all, she would have something more interesting.

Nobody needed to hear Arjun's name from her before then. Not Farhan, who would defend him from reflex. Not Kavita.

The consultant laptop was on the chair under her cardigan. It had a consortium sticker on the lid and a login screen that took her face, then a six-digit code

from a text message, then her face again. She plugged it into the one socket in the room, unplugging the fan to do it.

The fan wound down. The room got warmer. The screen came up white and green.

The screen asked for her face. She gave it. It sent a code to her phone, 418207, and she typed it with one finger. It asked for her face again.

ACCESS SUSPENDED. PLEASE CONTACT ZONE ADMINISTRATION. REF 18:06.

She tried twice more. The reference changed to 18:09, then 18:11. The rest stayed the same.

She plugged the fan back in and put her shoes on.

* * *

The administration building was lit on four floors. At 7.25 p.m. the glass doors still opened for her face, which she took as an oversight. The young man at reception had a terminal turned towards visitors, and she asked him to log her in there, in case the laptop was the problem. He tried. He read the screen and then read her, and picked up his phone.

'Madam is still upstairs,' he said. 'She says you can go up.'

Kavita Menon was standing at the window with a cup of something green, looking at the towers. She had taken her shoes off. They sat side by side under the desk, heels together.

'Mrs Kulkarni. I was going to call you in the morning.'

'The system called me first.'

'I'm sorry about that. It's automatic once the order goes in.' Kavita put the cup down on a coaster. 'Consultant read access covers aggregate data. Some of what you've been opening is individual-level. Health referrals. Household utility records. Under the zone's privacy framework that needs a separate consent process. Our compliance people flagged it. It's routine.'

'I've had the access for five days.'

'And it took them five days to notice. That's also routine.' She smiled. 'We'll set up a supervised session. You tell us what you need, someone from allocation pulls it, you see it with a minder in the room. Probably next week.'

'Someone from allocation.'

'They know the data.'

'Next week the dates I'm interested in will still be the dates I'm interested in,' Meera said. 'Whoever pulls them will know what they are.'

Kavita sat down, which made her shorter than Meera for the first time. 'You're looking for a pattern in a man's death. I understand that. But I have 240,000 people whose kidney results and electricity meters are in that system, and they were promised nobody would be reading them on a laptop in a lodge on the Panvel road.'

Meera had not told her where she was staying.

'Who placed the order?'

'I did. At six.'

'What happened at five?'

Kavita did not answer that. She moved the cup half an inch on its coaster. Behind her the window held Tower 9, pink, and on the corner of the desk a stack of paper squared off with the edges matching.

The top sheet was not consortium paper. It had the state emblem in the corner and the blue stamp of the Panvel Zone police post, and under the stamp a signature Meera had watched being made that afternoon on a photocopy log. F. SHAIKH, SI. The typed lines above it were short. *Request under Section 91 for production of all Ledgerless queue revision logs, categories Human Care and Utilities, period 01.02.35 to 11.02.36, inclusive of operator credentials.*

Utilities. She had not told him about the kilowatts. She had not told anyone.

The received stamp, red, said 16.52.

Kavita followed her eyes to the sheet and did not cover it. That, Meera thought later, was the most honest thing she did all evening.

'The sub-inspector's request will go to legal,' Kavita said. 'Legal takes time.'

'How much time?'

'As much as the framework requires.'

Meera picked up her bag. At the door she stopped, because the coaster under Kavita's cup was a square of cork with a printed number on it, the same one that sat on every depot screen in the zone, and somebody in the gift shop had thought it would make a nice souvenir.

0.00.

On the stairs she took out her phone and found Farhan's number. It rang six times. When he picked up, there was traffic behind him and his voice was careful.

'My access went at six,' he said, before she could speak. 'Did yours?'

CHAPTER 7

The Tea Stall at Gate 3

The clerk weighed the rubber band before he would look at it. He set it on the brass pan of a letter scale, squinted at the needle, and wrote something on the corner of a delivery chit. Meera had put it on his desk in the same polythene sleeve Farhan had given her on the twelfth, one khaki band out of the evidence bag, signed for in two places. It lay curled on the pan like a dead worm. The needle did not move.

'Too light,' the clerk said. 'Can't tell anything from one.'

His name was Nitin Kamat, according to the plastic badge clipped crookedly to his pocket, and he had already told her twice that Bharat Paper and Stationery Mart sold rubber bands to half of Mumbai. The back office was three metres by four, with a ceiling fan that ticked on every turn and cartons stacked to the beam: carbon paper, file tags, gum bottles, register books with marbled covers that nobody outside a government office had bought since 2030. It smelled of glue and the sulphur of new rubber. Through the door she could hear Abdul Rehman Street, handcarts and a man shouting the price of padlocks.

'I don't need you to tell anything from one,' Meera said. 'I need you to tell me who buys this width.'

'Madam, hundreds of shops.'

'Khaki. Flat cut. Three millimetres. Not the round ones.'

'Hundreds.'

'Name me ten.'

He picked up the sleeve and turned it over, as though the band might have a label on the other side. He was perhaps thirty-five, with a good shirt and a bad

haircut, and he kept looking at the doorway where his employer's chair stood empty. She had shown him nothing official because she had nothing official. A retired officer's card from 2033 and a pocket calculator. He had worked that out in the first minute and had been polite ever since, the way people were polite to someone they did not have to obey.

'Ganesh Rubber Works, Kolhapur,' Meera said. 'The khaki is their number 64. The red is their number 32. I bought a packet of each at a shop on Lohar Chawl this morning for eighteen rupees and the man there said he gets them from you. He said you're the only wholesaler on this side of Carnac Bunder who still keeps the 64 in stock, because everybody else stopped in 2031 when the banks went to cards and nobody needed to bundle notes.'

Nitin put the sleeve down.

'Shopkeepers say anything,' he said.

'They do. That's why I came to the ledger instead.' She nodded at the shelf behind him, where a row of register books stood with years inked on their spines in white paint. 2034. 2035. 2036, half full. 'I can wait for Mr Bharat. I can come back with a sub-inspector, which will take him one afternoon and you one week of explaining. Or you can look up the 64 and I'll be on the 4.10 train.'

The fan ticked. Outside, the padlock man had dropped his price to two hundred.

Nitin took down the 2035 register and opened it on his knee, not on the desk, so she could not read it upside down. He ran a finger down the stock column, licked the finger, turned three pages, then a fourth. She watched his lips move over the numbers. He stopped, went back a page, and stopped again.

'Number 64 khaki,' he said. 'We sell it loose. Packets, mostly. Shops take two, three gross a year.' He tapped the page without looking up. 'Bulk, only one account. Twenty boxes every quarter. One kilo each box. Cash, always. Last order fifth January.'

'Twenty kilos of rubber bands a quarter.'

'Yes.'

'Who uses twenty kilos of rubber bands a quarter in 2036?'

Nitin closed the register on his thumb. For the first time he looked at her directly, and he seemed less frightened than embarrassed, as if she had asked him to repeat a word everybody in the market already knew.

'Old man,' he said. 'Comes himself, or sends a boy with a handcart. He runs a tea stall now. Outside your zone, Gate 3.' He shrugged. 'Before, he had a counter near Crawford Market. Twenty, thirty years. Everyone here still calls him the changer.'

* * *

The milk at Gate 3 boiled over at 7.05 the next morning, and nobody moved to stop it.

It ran down the side of a dented aluminium pan, hissed on the kerosene ring and burnt to a brown crust that the man behind the counter scraped off with the edge of a steel spoon, unhurried, as if this were the first step of the recipe. Meera stood at the back of a queue of porters. There were six of them, in vests and towels, their handcarts parked in a row along the outer fence where the zone's grey wall met the Panvel road. The carts were empty. They had carried something in before dawn and would carry something else out later, and between the two jobs there was tea.

The stall was a tin box on bricks, painted the green of hospital corridors a long time ago. A board said QURESHI TEA in English and something smaller in Urdu. Cutting chai, fifteen rupees. Bun maska, twenty. Inside the gate, thirty metres away, a Provision kiosk handed out tea for nothing, in paper cups, all day. The porters had walked past it to get here.

When her turn came the man looked at her for perhaps a second longer than he had looked at the porters. He was small and very upright, with a white beard trimmed close and reading glasses pushed up into hair that was still mostly black. Sixty-seven, if Nitin Kamat's arithmetic was right. His forearms were thin and freckled with old burns.

'One cutting,' Meera said.

He poured from height, a long brown rope from the pan into a glass the size of an egg cup, and set it on the counter. 'Fifteen.'

She paid with a twenty. He gave her a five back from a biscuit tin.

'You're Salim Qureshi.'

'Today, yes.' He wiped the counter around her glass. 'Tomorrow, inshallah, also.'

'You had a counter near Crawford Market.'

'I had a counter, a stool and a very good umbrella. The umbrella I miss.' He turned to a porter who was holding up two fingers and poured him two glasses without looking at the pan. 'People come to me now and say, Salim-bhai, you were a money-changer, tell us about the old days. I tell them. Dirhams, riyals, dollars, a little bit of pounds. Every note in the world passed through my hands, and not one of them stayed.' He laughed, a short dry sound. 'Now I change milk into tea. Better margin.'

'A man was found dead at Tower 9 on the twelfth,' Meera said. 'There was money beside him. Old five-hundreds.'

'I read.'

'Three lakh eighty thousand.'

'I read that also.' He began rinsing glasses in a bucket. 'Madam, I am too old for three lakh eighty thousand. At my age a man counts his tablets, not his notes.'

'You don't know anything about it.'

'I know it was not mine. If it was mine, somebody would have taken it.' He shook water off a glass and set it upside down on a cloth. 'Next.'

There was no next. The porters had drifted to their carts. The road was quiet except for a water tanker grinding towards Gate 4 and a crow working at a bun wrapper. Meera finished her tea. It was very good, too sweet, with cardamom crushed in by hand.

She took the polythene sleeve out of her bag and laid it on the counter, flat, between the biscuit tin and her empty glass. One khaki band, flat cut, three millimetres. She did not say anything about it.

Salim stopped rinsing.

He dried his hands on the towel at his shoulder, pulled the glasses down from his hair and bent over the sleeve without touching it. He looked at it the way Nitin had not known how to look at it: the cut edge, the colour, the slight curl. Ten seconds. Fifteen. The kerosene ring hissed.

Then he picked up the pan, poured a second cup into a fresh glass and set it in front of her. He did not ask for fifteen rupees.

'Sit,' he said, and pushed a plastic stool round the side of the stall with his foot.

She sat. The stool had a crack across the seat and wobbled on the broken pavement.

'I will tell you how it works,' Salim said. He folded the towel into a square and laid it over the sleeve, covering the band. 'The market. How a line is bought, how it is paid. Like a lecture at a college. Only that.'

'And who.'

'Only that,' he said again, and lit the ring under a fresh pan of milk.

'Doctors first,' he said. 'Always doctors first. Nobody pays to get ahead for a pair of shoes.'

He set the pan on the ring and took a fresh glass down from the shelf, though she had not finished the second.

'Human Care has a line for each kind of doctor. Heart, kidney, bones, women's things, children. The machine gives you a number. You see the number on your phone, you see it on the door. Two hundred and fourteen, like that.' He held up one finger. 'One place up in the heart line, two thousand rupees. Ten places is not twenty thousand. Ten places is fifty, because the man you jump over has a wife who is also counting.' He held up a second finger. 'Top five, you don't ask price. You ask who you know.'

Two porters came back for more and he served them, talking about the cricket while he poured. Meera took out the calculator. She keyed in two thousand, then fifty thousand, then nothing, because she did not know what to divide by. A man with a cloth bundle on his head stopped to ask the way to Gate 4. Salim pointed with the spoon. When they had gone he picked up exactly where he had stopped, in the same tone, as if the stall had a pause button.

'Saraswati school. One seat, first standard. Four lakh last year, five lakh this year. Or gold. Gold is better for both sides. Forty grams, nobody asks where it went.' A third finger. 'The flats by the creek. That is not a line, that is an auction. Twelve, fifteen lakh, and still people wait.'

'And power.'

'Power is for small boys.' He smiled. 'Three thousand, five thousand. Their mothers pay. The boy wants his machine to run all night, the mother wants the boy at home.'

'You said rupees or gold.'

'Or later.' He poured her third cup. The milk had a skin on it now and he flicked it off with a fingernail. 'Somebody has no cash. Fine. He goes up the line today and he owes. One day a man comes to his door and says, you remember. Then he signs something, or he forgets something, or his cousin who is clerk in the collector's office forgets something.' He set the glass down. 'Later is the most expensive. Nobody knows the price until it comes.'

Meera kept her eyes on the calculator. 'So you sell a position. Somebody pays you. Then what happens to the number.'

'The number goes up.'

'How.'

'Madam.' He spread his burnt hands on the counter. 'I have never touched a computer in my life. My grandson sets the alarm on my phone. I sell a promise. I take the money, I take my piece, I send the rest where it goes, with a name on a paper. After that, somebody inside keeps the promise.' He shrugged. 'If he doesn't keep it, I give back the money. In thirty years I gave back money four times. That is why people still come.'

'Somebody inside.'

'Somebody inside,' he said, and that was the end of that.

A bus pulled in across the road and let off a dozen people with plastic bags. Five came to the stall. Salim made ten glasses, took sixty-five rupees and a torn ten he looked at twice and accepted. Meera drank the third cup slowly. It was sweeter than the first two.

'You know what this is,' he said, when the bus had gone. 'Your zone people think they have invented something new. No money, everything free, only you wait your turn. Very modern.' He laughed. 'In 1974 my father stood for my mother at the ration shop on Mohammed Ali Road, kerosene line, six in the morning, and a man came down the line selling places. Railway counter at VT, same thing. Passport office, same thing. Gas cylinder, telephone connection, eleven years waiting for a telephone.' He tapped the counter. 'This is the oldest bank in the world, madam. The line. Before coins, there was a line.'

Meera thought of the railway touts she had booked as a constable in 1999, three of them in one week at the reservation hall, each with a fistful of forms and a wife at home who would have the rent by Friday. She had thought of them as petty. She had thought of them, if she was honest, as finished.

She looked through the gate at the Provision kiosk, the paper cups stacked beside it, and the red digits of the Scarcity Index on the screen above. Nought point nought nought.

'How many people do this,' she said. 'Like you.'

Salim took the towel off the rubber band and folded it back over his shoulder.

'In this zone,' he said, 'or in this country?'

Meera did not answer that. She finished the third cup and set the glass on the counter, and he filled a fourth without asking.

The light had gone flat and orange over the Gate 3 car park. The porters had left for the night shift at the depots. A drone went over low, carrying something the size of a shoebox, and the noise of it, a thin electric whine like a mosquito in a steel tumbler, made Salim look up and then look away. He began stacking the clean glasses upside down on a tray. Twenty-two of them. She counted while he did it.

'The man inside,' she said. 'I want his name.'

'No.'

'You know it.'

'I know my grandson's name. I know the price of milk.' He wiped the ring with a rag. 'In 1988 there was a man at Crawford Market, Hamid, he changed dollars two shops down from me. A very clever man. He wanted to know where everybody's money went after it left his hands. He asked and he asked. They found him in the dock at Sewri with his tongue in his shirt pocket.' He said it in the same voice he had used for the price of a school seat. 'I am sixty-seven years old, madam. I got there by not asking.'

'Dev Rao asked.'

Salim's hands kept moving.

'I can have this stall shut by tomorrow,' she said. 'Trading without a licence on zone land. Section 144, obstruction at a gate. Farhan Shaikh will do it if I ask him.'

'You are retired.'

'He isn't.'

'He grew up in this zone,' Salim said. 'His mother bought tea from me in 2032 with Provision cups because she did not trust the kiosk milk. He will not

shut me for you.' He looked at her properly for the first time in an hour. 'And you are not a woman who shuts a tea stall to make an old man talk. You would have done it already.'

She took her glasses off and let them drop on their cord. 'A woman waited seven months for a heart doctor,' she said. 'Her husband died at number three. Somebody moved him back fourteen times. You sold some of those places. Maybe you sold all of them.'

'Maybe.'

'Then give me the one who moved the numbers. Not the buyers. Just him.'

'No,' he said, and that was all. He did not apologise and he did not explain again.

The last customer, a security guard in a grey Provision uniform, drank standing up, paid fifteen rupees in coins and went back through the gate. The stall was empty. Salim turned off the ring. He reached across and took her glass, though there was still a finger of tea in it, and tipped it into the gutter and held it under the tap of a blue plastic drum. He rubbed the rim with his thumb, slowly, longer than it needed.

'Your engineer,' he said, to the glass. 'The thin one with the grey shirt.'

Meera kept still.

'He came three times. October, November, January. He bought three places. One heart, one school, one power.' He turned the glass over and set it on the tray with the others. Twenty-three. 'Each time I told him the price. Each time he paid more. Not a little more. The heart place was eighteen thousand, he gave me forty. I said, you have made a mistake. He said, no mistake.'

'Cash.'

'Five-hundred notes. Old ones.' Salim shook the water off his hands. 'A man pays double for a place in a line, either his mother is dying or he is not buying the place.'

'What else would he be buying?'

Salim lifted the towel from his shoulder and dried his fingers one at a time.

'Ask yourself who got the other twenty-two thousand,' he said. 'Because it was not me.'

He pulled the shutter halfway down, and the band on his sleeve showed again in the gap, khaki, the same as eleven of the bundles in the green canvas bag.

CHAPTER 8

Clean Numbers

'Leave the door open,' Kavita Menon said. 'The air conditioning on this floor only works if it can see the corridor.'

It was 6.40 in the evening and the glass walls of her office had turned into mirrors. Behind Meera's reflection, faintly, the towers were coming on one by one across the zone, pink squares stacked on pink squares. Farhan stood by the door with his hands behind his back, the way junior officers stood in rooms where they had not been invited to sit.

Meera put her bag on the floor and took out the folder. She had bought it that morning at a stationer's in Vashi for ₹35, buff cardboard with a string tie, because she wanted Kavita to watch her untie something.

She laid the sheets out in two rows. Top row: Rekha Gaikwad's photographs, printed four to a page at a cyber café beside the bus depot, each one a phone screen held up under a tube light with a date in the corner. Bottom row: photocopies of Dev Rao's notebook, the pencil gone grey and fuzzy in the copying.

'Sanjay Gaikwad,' Meera said. 'Cardiology referral, 3 February 2035. Queue number 88.' She touched the first screenshot of May. 'Nineteen on the night of the fourteenth. Twenty-one the next night.' She moved her finger down to the copy beneath it. 'Fifteenth of May. Dev Rao writes h, two sets of initials, two pairs of numbers. Two people move ahead of nineteen.'

Kavita leaned forward. She did not pick anything up.

'July,' Meera said. 'Eight to nine. One entry, one h.' She moved along. 'August twenty-one to twenty-two. Four to seven. Three entries on the twenty-first, all h. He died on the third of September at number three.'

She had rehearsed this part on the bus, the next part too. Kavita would say the screenshots could be anything. Kavita would say a dead engineer's private notebook was not a system record. Kavita would say patients were reprioritised every night on clinical grounds and the software did not explain itself to relatives. Meera had an answer for each of those, written on the back of an electricity bill folded into her blouse.

Kavita sat back. She took off her glasses and laid them on the screenshot from 22 August, lenses up.

'Yes,' she said.

Meera waited for the rest of the sentence.

'Positions have been adjusted. Not by the software. By people with access to the software.' Kavita said it in the voice she had used for the Musk line in this same room, a week ago, as though it were something she had said to many rooms. 'We have known since late 2034 that there was some leakage. We estimate it at under one per cent of allocations. Point seven, point eight. Statistically it does not register.'

Farhan shifted his weight. His shoes squeaked on the floor.

'Sanjay Gaikwad registered,' Meera said.

'I am sure he did, to his wife.' Kavita looked at her steadily, without hostility. 'Ledgerless makes about nine lakh allocation decisions a day. Food, cloth, medicine, power, beds, drone routes. Under one per cent. I can give you the exact figure if you like. I will not pretend it is zero to you. I only pretend it is zero to the screens.'

'Then why are the screens zero?'

Kavita turned her chair a quarter towards the glass, towards the pink towers and the dark blocks between them.

'In 2031 there were two hundred and forty thousand people on this land, or on the land they were moved from, and a third of the children were underweight. We measured them. I have the files. Now nobody here goes to bed hungry. Nobody. Your sub-inspector's mother does not go to bed hungry.' She did not look at Farhan as she said it. 'The consortium funds us on one number. If it moves, the funding moves. If the funding moves, the rice moves.'

She put her glasses back on and squared the August photocopy against the edge of the desk with one finger.

'So tell me, Mrs Kulkarni. Would you trade that for a rounding error?'

Meera opened her mouth. The electricity bill was still folded flat against her ribs, and none of the four answers on it fitted the question.

Farhan spoke before she did.

'Madam is right.' He had taken one step in from the door, no further, as if the carpet had a line on it. 'With respect, ma'am. I am not saying the Gaikwad matter is nothing. I asked for the copies. I have them in my locker. But my mother had two meals a day in Govandi if my father had work that week, and one if he didn't. Now she has three and she complains about the dal.' He tried a smile and it did not hold. 'The numbers are clean where it counts. Rice. Water. Roofs. You are looking for ghosts in a queue while two lakh forty thousand people eat dinner.'

He had clearly been holding this in for some time. It came out in one breath, in the order he must have arranged it.

Meera turned round in her chair to look at him properly. He was very tall in the doorway, and his beard had been trimmed that morning, and he was standing exactly the way she had stood in 1998 in front of a deputy commissioner who had just explained why a cooperative bank fraud was a matter for the cooperative.

'Dev Rao is not a ghost,' she said. 'He is in a drawer in the clinic basement with a fractured skull. I saw him on Tuesday. So did you. He fell eleven metres off a gantry he had no reason to be on, beside three lakh eighty thousand rupees he had no reason to have, and he had written down the date Sanjay Gaikwad went from four to seven.' She picked up the August photocopy and held it out to him. He did not take it. 'Those people ate dinner too. Gaikwad ate dinner until the third of September.'

'That is not the same thing.'

'No. One of them is a rounding error.'

Farhan's jaw moved. He looked past her at Kavita, the way a batsman looks at the umpire.

Kavita had not been listening to them, or she gave a good impression of it. She had pulled a tablet across the desk and was scrolling with one finger, the screen lighting her face from below. A drone went past outside the glass at eye level, low and slow, humming like a refrigerator in another room.

'Sub-Inspector,' she said, still scrolling. 'While you're here. The Rao file. The clinic report says fall, the gantry rail is loose on the north side, maintenance has confirmed it. If you could put it through as accidental by Monday, the inquiry closes and his sister can take him home to Hyderabad. She has been asking. It is unkind to make her wait.' She glanced up. 'You can attach the money as found property. It can go to the district treasury. Nobody here needs it.'

She said it the way people ask someone to pick up milk.

Farhan did not answer.

Meera watched him. He put his hands behind his back again, then brought them round to the front, then put one in his trouser pocket, where she knew he kept his notebook, a cheap spiral thing with a Mumbai Police crest that he had been writing in all week. He did not take it out. The air conditioning ticked. Somewhere along the corridor a lift arrived with two soft notes and nobody got out.

'Sub-Inspector?'

'The file is open, madam,' Farhan said.

'I know it's open. I'm asking you to close it.'

'The file is open,' he said again, more quietly, and looked at the floor between his shoes. 'There are some things I have to check.'

Kavita set the tablet down. For the first time since Meera had come into the room she looked at Farhan for more than a second, and her face did not change at all, which was worse than if it had.

'Of course,' she said. 'Check them.'

The clock on the wall behind her read 6.52. Farhan had moved back to the doorway without seeming to walk there, and he was no longer standing beside her desk, and he was not standing beside Meera's chair either. He was standing in the corridor's cold air, exactly halfway.

* * *

The zone police post was a single-storey block between Gate 2 and the bus turning circle, with a neem tree out front that someone watered from a jerrycan. At 9.10 the next morning Meera was kept waiting on a plastic chair in the corridor for twenty-five minutes, under a notice about lost Provision cards and a framed

photograph of the chief minister cutting a ribbon in 2031. The ribbon had been green. She had not noticed that before.

At 9.35 a constable showed her into the briefing room. It had a whiteboard with last week's duty roster half rubbed off, eleven chairs in two rows and a ceiling fan that turned without moving the air. Inspector Bhosale sat at the front table with a single sheet of paper squared in front of him. Farhan stood by the window. He had his cap under his arm.

Bhosale was a heavy man near retirement who had spent the week finding reasons to be in Kharghar. He did not stand up.

'Mrs Kulkarni. Please.' He gestured at a chair. She stayed on her feet, so he read it to her where she stood. The consultancy arrangement of 13 February was terminated with immediate effect. Her temporary credentials were withdrawn. Any material she held relating to the Rao inquiry was to be returned to the post by 5 p.m. She was thanked for her assistance.

'Thanked,' Meera said.

'It is in the letter.'

'Who signed it?'

Bhosale turned the sheet round so she could see. There was a stamp, a signature that might have been anyone's, and under it the words *Competent Authority*.

'That is not a name.'

'It is the competent authority,' Bhosale said. 'The consultancy was granted under the consortium's administrative arrangements. It has been withdrawn under the same arrangements. The police side was never party to it. I only convey.'

'Somebody asked for it. Somebody wrote it. Somebody drove it here before nine thirty in the morning.' She looked at the date stamp. 18 FEB 2036. 08:47. 'Forty-seven minutes past eight. Fast work, for a rounding error.'

'I don't know what that means.'

'No.' She put both hands on the back of the chair in front of her. 'Is the Rao file closed?'

'The file is under review.'

'By whom?'

'By the appropriate officers.' He said it the way people say the weather is the weather. 'Mrs Kulkarni, you are retired. You are not on any roll. You were here as

a courtesy, and the courtesy has ended. I am not saying this to be unkind.'

'Nobody is saying anything to be unkind,' Meera said. 'I have noticed that.'

Bhosale picked up his pen and put it down again. The fan went round. Outside, a delivery drone settled on the post's roof pad with a sound like a sack of rice being dropped from a short height, and the window glass shivered once.

Meera turned to Farhan.

He was looking at the roster on the whiteboard. 14/2 to 20/2, his own name in blue marker against three night shifts, the last letters smeared where a sleeve had dragged across them. He looked at it as if he had been asked to learn it by heart. His cap was still under his arm. He had shaved again, and there was a small nick under his left jaw with a fleck of tissue stuck to it.

'Sub-Inspector,' she said.

'Ma'am.'

That was all. He did not say the file was open. He did not say there were things he had to check. He moved the cap from one arm to the other and kept his eyes on the board, and she understood that he had been in this room before she arrived, possibly for some time, and that whatever he had said to Bhosale or Bhosale had said to him, it had been said without her.

Last night he had stood halfway. This morning he had picked a side of the door to stand on, and it was the inside.

She took the photocopies of Dev Rao's notebook out of her bag, forty-one sheets in a brown cardboard folder, and set them on the table beside Bhosale's letter. She kept her calculator. Nobody asked for it. Nobody in the building would have known what it was for.

'Five o'clock,' Bhosale said.

'You have them now,' Meera said, and went out past the neem tree to wait for the bus.

* * *

The 8.40 from Gate 2 was the last bus with seats and it had none. Meera got one anyway, because a boy in a Saraswati blazer stood up for her without looking up from his phone, and she was too tired to be insulted by it.

She had spent the afternoon in the lodge on the Panvel road settling a bill of ₹2,850 for six nights and arguing with the manager about a seventh she had not

slept there. He had a printout. She had a calculator. They agreed on six. Then she had sat on the bed with her bag packed until it got dark, which had not been the plan, there being no plan.

The bus rattled. Every window frame had its own note, and the one beside her head buzzed against the rubber seal whenever the driver touched the brake. A man in the aisle held a pressure cooker box against his chest like a baby. Two women behind her were discussing a wedding in Uran and whether the caterer was human.

Let it go, she told herself. You are not on any roll.

She took out her phone. Rekha's screenshots were in a folder she had named GAIKWAD, fourteen of them, one for each night Sanjay had gone backwards. Below them was a second folder, forty-one photographs of the notebook pages, taken on the lodge bed under a sixty-watt bulb on her first night with the book. She had returned the paper. Nobody had asked about the phone.

The calculator sat in her lap. It was a Casio she had bought in 1998 for the departmental exam and it had outlived two husbands' worth of batteries, if she counted Sudhir as two, which on some days she did.

She began with the dates. Fourteen slips. On each of those dates Dev had pencilled entries, initials and paired numbers, and beside most of the pairs he had written a single lower-case letter. She had not paid the letters much attention before. On her second morning with consultant access she had seen the same letters in the Ledgerless menu, a column of fourteen allocation categories from a for apparel down to w for water fittings, and had thought only that Dev was tidy.

She went through the photographs one at a time, enlarging each with two fingers, and entered what she found. Twenty-three entries on Rekha's fourteen dates. She counted them twice. Then she counted the letters.

h, eleven times. Human Care.

s, five. Saraswati.

c, four. Coastal block.

k, three. Kilowatts.

She added them on the Casio because she did not trust herself at that hour. Twenty-three. Nothing for apparel. Nothing for food, furniture, footwear, uten-

sils, transport passes, water fittings. Nothing in the ten categories where the machines made enough for everyone and nobody needed to wait.

Under one per cent, Kavita had said. Statistical noise. Noise went everywhere. Noise did not know the difference between a pressure cooker and a cardiologist.

The bus lurched over the Kalamboli speed breaker and the man with the pressure cooker apologised to nobody. Meera kept her thumb on the keys. Four categories out of fourteen. If the jumps were random, the chance of any one landing in those four was four in fourteen. The chance of all twenty-three doing it was that, multiplied by itself twenty-three times. She keyed it in slowly, pressing equals after each step and saying the count under her breath, and one of the women behind her stopped talking about the caterer to listen.

The display filled and shrank. 3.065 –13.

Three in ten trillion, near enough. Less likely than winning the old state lottery every week for a year. She had sent men to Arthur Road on worse arithmetic.

Outside, the bus came round the long curve where the road ran beside the zone fence, and the farms stood up one after another in the dark, Tower 4, Tower 7, Tower 9, glowing pink from the ground to the roof, fourteen storeys of light that nobody paid for. She could see the gantry on Tower 9 from here, a dark line across the glass eleven metres up.

She did not clear the screen. She turned the calculator face down on her knee so the number would keep, and held it there all the way to Vashi.

CHAPTER 9

Sea-Facing

Salt had got to the gate before anyone else. The hinges were orange with it, and the brass plate that said SAGAR DARSHAN — COASTAL BLOCK — RESIDENTS ONLY had gone the soft green of an old coin, which made it the only thing in the zone Meera had seen that looked its age.

'Let me talk,' Ishaan said.

'You don't know what I want.'

'I know what you look like when you want it.'

He had a chair on his back, strapped on with two luggage belts, and a tape measure clipped to his kurta pocket. Officially he was here to measure a bay window for a Mrs Bhatia on the fourth floor, who had seen one of his chairs in Bandra and wanted a pair. Unofficially he was here because his mother had been sacked by a letter signed 'Competent Authority' and had rung him at 7.10 the next evening to ask, very politely, whether he had any clients by the water.

He had three.

The block was six storeys, pale yellow, built in a shallow curve so that every flat faced the creek. Beyond the railing the mudflats ran out grey to a line of mangrove, and past that the water, flat and brown, with two fishing boats sitting on it like they had been placed there for the photographs. The wind smelt of salt and low tide. Behind them, inland, the farms hummed.

The secretary of the residents' association met them in the lobby. He was about sixty, in a white half-sleeve shirt with a pen in each pocket, and he intro-

duced himself as K. S. Rajan, retired, Customs. He looked at Ishaan's chair, then at Meera.

'Mrs Bhatia said one person.'

'My mother,' Ishaan said. 'She carries the other end.'

'I can see the chair has one end.'

Meera took her glasses off the cord and put them on, which bought her four seconds. 'Mr Rajan. I was Economic Offences for twenty-six years. I'm not any more. I have no warrant and no badge, and if you ask me to wait outside, I'll wait outside.'

He considered this the way a customs man considers a suitcase that is too light.

'What do you want?'

'Your handover register. The one you keep. Not the one on the screen.'

That was a guess. Men like Rajan always kept their own. He went into a small office behind the lift and came back with a long cloth-bound book, ruled by hand, and set it on the security desk without letting go of it.

'Thirty-six flats,' he said. 'Keys, dates, names on arrival. I started it because the system told me nothing. I like to know who lives above me.'

Ishaan went up in the lift with his tape measure. Meera stood at the desk and read.

The block had been filled in four lots. Nine flats on 6 June 2033. Nine on 14 January 2034. Ten on 2 November 2034. Eight on 19 March 2035. Thirty-six. No flat in Sagar Darshan had ever changed hands since, which in a zone of 240,000 people moving between blocks for babies, divorces and deaths was its own small fact.

She took out her phone and opened the photographs of Dev's pages. She had gone through them on the bus so many times that she knew roughly where to look. The entries marked 's' were fewer than the 'h' ones, and she had assumed, without saying so, that s meant school.

06.06.33 s 9.

14.01.34 s 9.

02.11.34 s 10.

19.03.35 s 8.

She read them twice. Then she read Rajan's columns again, from the top, putting her finger on each date.

'Problem?' Rajan said.

'No.'

It was not school. It was sea. And Dev had not logged a few flats jumping a queue. He had logged the whole queue, every batch, on the day it ran, and written the number of flats beside it as if he were counting chickens into a cart. There were no initials beside these entries and no before-and-after positions. Nobody had been bumped ahead of anybody. There had never been anybody to bump. Every key in this book had gone out through the same door.

She had been looking at the coastal block as one more leak. It was the tank.

The lift opened. Ishaan came out with the tape measure in his hand and a figure written on his wrist.

'Two hundred and eight centimetres,' he said. 'She wants them facing the water. Both of them. She says she never sits anywhere else.'

* * *

The records annex of the Panvel Municipal Corporation was a ground-floor room behind the fish market in Old Panvel, and it smelt of both. Steel almirahs stood along three walls. The fourth wall had a window with a cooler wedged into it that had not run in years and now held a bundle of files and a stapler.

The clerk was a young man named Bhalerao with a bandage on one thumb. He took Meera's twenty-rupee inspection fee and wrote a receipt by hand, slowly, pressing hard enough to mark the page beneath.

'Which ward?'

'Kharghar, Kamothe, New Panvel. Marriage registrations, 2018 onwards. And sale deeds for the same.'

'All three wards?'

'If that's all right.'

He looked at the clock over the door, which said 11.52, and then at her.

'Those files are already being reviewed,' he said.

'By whom?'

'I can't say.'

'Are they in the room?'

He thought about that for longer than he needed to. 'They're in the room.'

'Then I'll review them after.'

Ishaan had taken the plastic chair by the door, the one meant for whoever was waiting, and sat in it with his legs out and the empty luggage belts coiled in his lap. He had left the chair with Mrs Bhatia as a deposit. He looked like a man waiting for a bus that he expected to be late.

'If anyone comes,' Meera said quietly.

'I'll ask them what wood their door is.'

Bhalerao brought the marriage registers one at a time, as if each trip cost him something. They were tall green ledgers with cracked spines. Meera opened the first on the counter and laid her phone flat beside it, with Rajan's handover pages on the screen. Thirty-six flats. Thirty-six names on arrival, and next to each name, in Rajan's careful customs hand, the address the resident had given as their previous one.

Most were what she expected. Govandi, Mankhurd, Turbhe, a few from Chembur. Resettlement addresses. Chawl numbers with room numbers after them.

Four were not.

Flat 2-04 and Flat 5-01 had gone to Rohit Malhotra and Simran Malhotra, previous address 1102, Gulmohar Heights, Sector 20, Kharghar. Flat 3-06 and Flat 6-02 had gone to Suresh Kapoor and Nalini Kapoor, previous address B-7, Shanti Kunj, Kamothe.

Nobody from Gulmohar Heights needed resettling. She knew the building. It had a swimming pool on the roof that had been in the newspapers in 2029 for leaking into the penthouse.

She turned pages. The marriage registers were ordered by date, not name, so she went year by year with her finger. It took her forty minutes. Bhalerao watched her from his desk and did not take his lunch.

In the 2019 register, Kharghar ward, entry 1,147, dated 22 November: Arjun Kishore Malhotra, 24, married Priya Suresh Kapoor, 23. Bride's father, Suresh Kapoor. Bride's address, B-7, Shanti Kunj, Kamothe.

Arjun K. Malhotra. She had suspected the K. She had not wanted to trust it.

She wrote the entry number on the back of her hand under the others, which were starting to smudge.

The sale deeds took longer. Bhalerao claimed the 2024 volume was with the reviewer. Meera said nothing and waited, and after six minutes he found it on a shelf behind his own chair. Flat 1102, Gulmohar Heights, had been bought in March 2024 by Rohit Malhotra. The witness who signed for the buyer was Arjun K. Malhotra, of the same family address in Jaipur listed for the purchaser. Cousins, then, or brothers, and the register said cousin, because the clerk at the time had been asked to write a relationship and had written one.

Ishaan stood up by the door. A man in a pressed blue shirt had stopped on the step outside, phone at his ear, looking in at the counter. He did not come in. After a minute he walked on.

'Who was that?' Meera said.

'Nobody. He had good shoes.'

She photographed every page she had touched, eleven in all, and closed the ledgers. Bhalerao came to collect them and stacked them in his arms without checking which ones they were.

'Did the reviewer ask for these same pages?' she said.

He looked down at the top ledger, the 2019, and then at the door.

'He asked for the Kharghar ward,' he said. 'He only wanted to know if anyone else had.'

* * *

The stair door to the roof of the coastal block had a brick in it. Somebody had wedged it there long enough ago that the brick had worn a pale groove in the floor tile. Ishaan kicked it aside, held the door for her, and put the brick back once they were through.

The roof was flat and bare except for six water tanks and a row of solar panels tilted at the sky. At 6.35 the sun was already behind Tower 11, and the creek below had gone the colour of weak tea. Mangroves on the far bank. A dredger working its way north with one light on. The air smelt of salt and the diesel generator two blocks back, and under that, faintly, of the farms.

Meera stood at the parapet and took out her calculator. She did not need it. She held it anyway.

'Four flats,' she said. 'His cousin, his cousin's wife, his father-in-law, his mother-in-law. All from addresses with swimming pools. I go to him tomorrow.'

'With what?'

'With the marriage register.'

'Photos of the marriage register.' Ishaan sat on the low ledge of a water tank. 'On your phone. Which you took as a member of the public who paid twenty rupees. After you were thrown off the case. Mother, a lawyer would stand up and say a man's relatives got lucky in a lottery, and then sit down again.'

'It wasn't a lottery.'

'You know that. Dev knew that. Dev's dead.'

She looked at him. He did not look away.

'And Farhan?' he said. 'He can't use any of it unless it comes in by the front door. You told me that yourself, about some case in 2017. The diamond man.'

She had told him. He had been thirteen, and she had not thought he was listening.

Below them, on the sixth floor, a light came on in Flat 6-02. Nalini Kapoor, previous address B-7, Shanti Kunj, Kamothe. Nobody came to the window. The light stayed on, the way it does in a flat where nobody is home and a timer is doing the work.

'Nobody needs this,' Ishaan said. He nodded at the creek. 'You get the same flat in Block C. Same kitchen, same machine-laid floor, same 4.20 units. Mrs Bhatia has a room with a view of a depot wall and she's never once complained about the flat. Only about the view. That's the whole point. If anybody needed it, the machines would make more of it.'

'They can't make more creek.'

'No. So people pay. You can't price a sea view by what it does. It doesn't do anything. You price it by who else wants it.'

Meera turned the calculator over in her hand. Thirty-six flats. Dev's book, page after page of dates with *s* and a number. No initials. No positions. She had read those entries as a queue and they had never been a queue. He had written them the way she used to write cash seizures in the station diary, date and amount, because a count was all that mattered.

He had been counting money.

A flat in this block could not be traced by any bank. It sat outside the Index because the Index measured only what was in short supply, and Ledgerless had been told there was no shortage here, only a list. It could not be spent, so it

could not be noticed. It could be lent to a cousin. It could be handed to someone who had done you a favour, or would. A doctor's hour, a school seat, a junior officer's silence: you could pay for any of them with a key, and the key never appeared in a pocket or a bag or a rubber band.

'Thirty-six,' she said.

'What?'

'Not thirty-six homes.' She switched the calculator on. The screen still showed 3.065×10^{-13} from the bus. She cleared it. 'Thirty-six banknotes. Very large ones.'

Ishaan looked down at the lit window on the sixth floor, then at the dark ones either side of it.

'How many of them have anybody living in them?' he said.

She began to count from the bottom row.

She got as far as the third floor before the light went. Eleven windows lit out of thirty-six. Two of those had the steady, dead yellow of a timer. One had a man in a vest frying something with the door to the balcony open, and the smell of mustard seeds came up the wall to them.

'Nine,' she said. 'Maybe.'

'Out of thirty-six.'

'Out of thirty-six.'

They went down the stairs because the lift needed a resident's face and neither of them had one. Ishaan took the brick out of the roof door and put it back again on the other side without being asked.

The gate was a steel pole on a counterweight and a cabin the size of a telephone box. The guard inside was in his sixties, in a khaki jacket two sizes too big, the zone's crest sewn on the pocket with the thread coming loose at one corner. He had a register open on a plank, a steel flask, and a radio playing a Marathi bhajan so low it was mostly hiss. He watched them come down the path the way he must have watched everyone come down it: without getting up.

'Visitors sign out,' he said.

'We didn't sign in.'

'Then you sign out twice.'

Meera bent over the register. The last entry was 4.10 p.m., a delivery. Before that, nothing since Thursday. She wrote her name in full, Meera S. Kulkarni,

and the time, 6.58, and then stayed bent over the page.

'Your handwriting is better than the machine's,' she said. The columns were ruled in pencil. Every date had been underlined twice.

'Machine doesn't write. Machine only opens the pole.'

'Then why keep a book?'

He looked at her properly for the first time. 'Because when the pole goes wrong they ask Waman Jadhav who came in. Not the pole.'

'How long have you been here, Jadhav-ji?'

'Since before the flats.' He tapped the cabin wall. 'This cabin was for the builder's cement. 2031.'

She did not sit, though there was a second plastic chair. She asked him what shift he worked and he told her: seven to seven, six days, a relief man on Mondays who slept through most of it. She asked where he lived and he said Block P, inland, a view of the drone yard. She did not tell him she was police, because she wasn't, and he didn't ask, which she took as a courtesy.

Ishaan leaned on the pole and said nothing. He had learned that somewhere.

'You must know everybody,' Meera said.

'I know the ones who come.' Jadhav unscrewed the flask, poured a capful of tea and drank it himself. 'Some come with trucks. Sofa, fridge, everything handmade, everything wrapped. Then I never see them again. Six-zero-two, I have seen her twice. Nine-zero-one, nine-zero-three, nine-zero-four, never. Only a man who comes Sunday to open the windows and run the taps.'

'The same man every Sunday?'

'Driver. Big car, white.' He screwed the cap back on. 'He waits for his saab. Saab plays at the creek ground first. Every Sunday, seven o'clock, whites, proper pads, the full show. Then he comes here at eleven, has his driver open nine-zero-one, sits on the balcony with a cold drink, looks at the water. Then goes.'

'Which saab?'

Jadhav nodded up the road, towards the glass building with the allocation offices on its fourth floor. 'Malhotra-saab. From the top. Very nice man. Every Diwali, a box of sweets for the cabin.' He considered this. 'Kaju katli. Not machine. From a shop in Vashi.'

Meera wrote nothing down. She thanked him, and he lifted the pole for them by hand, though it would have lifted itself.

On the road Ishaan walked a step behind her, the way he had as a boy when he knew she was thinking.

'Today is Thursday,' he said.

'I know what today is.'

'You can't just go and stand on a cricket ground.'

'It's a public ground.' The street lights had come on in their pink-tinged row along the creek road, and Tower 9 stood at the end of it, lit floor by floor. 'People stand on it every Sunday at seven. Apparently.'

She took out the calculator, switched it on, and typed 7.00 into the memo, under SARASWATI SC.

CHAPTER 10

Night Shift

At 2.19 by the lodge's wall clock, a man Meera had met exactly once was telling her how he had nearly died.

'I was asleep on the bench,' Salim Qureshi said. 'Don't laugh. At my age, a bench is a bed if you are tired enough.'

She was not laughing. She was sitting on the edge of a mattress that sagged towards the middle, phone against her ear, feet on the cold terrazzo. The ceiling fan had stopped at midnight when somebody downstairs forgot to pay the lodge's meter man. The room smelt of mosquito coil.

'Go on,' she said.

'I smelt it before I heard anything. Kerosene. Not the good blue kind they used to sell on ration, the cheap yellow stuff. For one second I thought, who is cooking at two in the morning?' A cough, wet and long. 'Then I thought, nobody is cooking.'

He told it in order, the way a man counts out change. The awning went first. It was plastic sheeting over bamboo, and it caught along the front edge and dropped onto the counter in strips, still burning. He had two cylinders under the stove, 5 kilos each, one full and one half. He had refilled the full one on Tuesday at Rs 410.

'You know what I was thinking about?' he said. 'Not God. Not my daughter in Mumbra. I was thinking, the half one is lighter, the half one will go first.'

'Did it?'

'I didn't stay to find out which.'

But he had stayed long enough. Under the counter, behind the sugar tins, there was a tin box with a padlock, the kind of box Meera had seen in a hundred raids, green paint gone to rust at the corners. He had knelt down for it. The heat came over the counter like a hand on the back of his neck. He said he could hear his own hair.

'Stupid,' he said. 'Fifty years in this line, and I go back into a fire for paper.'

'Where are you burned?'

'Left hand. Left side of the face. My eyebrows are now a matter of history.' He breathed in through his teeth. 'I crawled out the back, under the tarpaulin, on my elbows with the box against my chest like a baby. Then the half cylinder went. Or the full one. I am still not sure. Loud.'

He had lain in the drain behind the stall, he said, because it was the lowest place and it was dry. From there he could see the corner where the Gate 3 approach road met the service lane. A scooter stood there with its engine running. No headlight. No number plate he could see. Somebody on it, helmet on, visor down, one foot on the ground.

'Watching,' Salim said. 'Not running away. Not coming to help. Watching the way you watch a pot to see if it boils.'

'How long?'

'Maybe one minute. Maybe two. Then the engine went up, and he turned and went towards the highway, not towards the zone.' He paused. 'Madam, my stall is a tea stall. If someone wants to frighten a tea-wallah, they break his glasses, they steal his milk. They don't use five litres of kerosene and then wait to see if he comes out.'

Meera was already reaching for her sari with her free hand.

'Where are you now?'

'The truck stop past the toll. A Sikh boy gave me ice from his cooler.' Another cough. 'I didn't call the police. You understand why.'

'I'm coming.'

'Bring a bag,' he said. 'Something big. And Madam, nobody is bothering to steal this one either.'

She took an auto. At that hour the only one on the Panvel road was parked outside a closed dhaba with its driver asleep across the back seat, and he wanted

Rs 250 to go four kilometres. Meera gave him 200 and her old voice, the one from raids, and he started the engine without another word.

She had put the sari on badly. The pleats were pinned with one safety pin instead of three, and over the blouse she wore Sudhir's grey cardigan, which she slept in on cold nights and had not meant to wear in public. Her reading glasses swung on their cord against her chest. She had not combed her hair. She was furious, and she let herself be, because fury kept her awake and the cold air through the auto's open side was not doing the job.

A man she had met once. A man who sold places in a line for a living, who had told her in four cups of tea everything except the one name that mattered. And now he rang at two in the morning, burnt, frightened, asking for a bag.

She had seen this before. In 2017 a diamond broker in Opera House had rung her at night to say he was ready to talk. She went with two constables. The broker was there, and so was a photographer from a Marathi daily, and by Thursday the story was that an EOW officer had been seen meeting a suspect alone after midnight. It had taken her eight months to get her name back.

The truck stop was a strip of concrete and parked lorries past the toll plaza, sodium lights, a chai counter shuttered for the night. Salim was not where he had said. She found him fifty metres on, in the doorway of a chemist's shop with its steel shutter pulled down and padlocked at the base. Shree Sai Medical. A green cross, unlit.

He was sitting on the step with the tin box between his feet. His left hand lay palm up on his knee, wrapped in a wet handkerchief that had gone grey. The right held a phone. As she crossed the road she saw him press three digits with his thumb and lift the phone to his ear, and then, before anything could ring, take it down again and end the call. The screen lit his face. The left side was shiny and pink, like meat under plastic. The phone was shaking.

'Who were you calling?'

'Hundred and twelve.' He put the phone face down on the step. 'Third time. I keep thinking, this time I'll let it ring.'

'Why don't you?'

'Because the one on the scooter had a helmet, and the helmet had a sticker.' He looked up at her. 'I don't know which sticker. I couldn't see. That's the problem, Madam. I couldn't see.'

She stood over him and did not sit down. Across the road a lorry driver was urinating against his own back wheel, watching them. No photographer that she could see. That meant nothing.

'You told me you sold promises,' she said. 'You told me somebody inside moved the numbers and you never asked who. Now you want me to bring a bag at two in the morning. To what? So someone can photograph a sacked officer taking a box from a hawala man?'

'Former hawala man.'

'I'm going back to bed.'

She had turned. She had actually taken two steps towards the auto, whose driver had his feet up on the dashboard, when she heard the key in the padlock. It took Salim three tries with his right hand.

The lid came up with a small rusty sound. Inside were ledgers, five of them, cheap school exercise books with brown paper covers, each one swollen from damp and handling. On top lay a rubber band, khaki, Ganesh number 64.

'Every slot,' Salim said. 'Since April 2033. Who bought, what they bought, what they paid, who I paid. You can't read it. Nobody can read it but me.' He closed his good hand on the edge of the box. 'So you need me alive to read it. That's the deal. You keep me alive. I read.'

* * *

By ten past six the tea on the kitchen table had grown a skin. Meera had made it strong, with the last of the milk, and neither of them had touched it after the first sip. Salim sat on the only chair that did not wobble. She sat on the steel trunk that held Sudhir's files, her knees nearly against his. The flat was 410 square feet and had never been meant for two people and five ledgers.

He had burn gel on his face now, from the tube she kept for cooking accidents. It made the shiny side shinier.

'Read me one,' she said.

He opened the first book at random. The script ran right to left in tight pencilled loops, no longer than a fingernail per entry, with numerals in between that she could at least recognise. 'Fourteenth June, 2033,' he said. 'Human Care, orthopaedic. Position ninety-one to position six. Paid one lakh twenty, cash. Forty to me, eighty passed on.'

'Passed on to whom?'

He closed the book on his finger. 'Where do I sleep tonight?'

'Here.'

'Here.' He looked at the window, which faced the back of another building close enough to touch with a broom. 'Madam, the man with the helmet found my stall. Your building has a watchman who sleeps at nine.'

'Then somewhere else. Farhan will know.'

'The boy from the zone. The believer.'

'He stopped believing on Saturday.'

Salim considered that for as long as it took a pressure cooker two floors down to whistle twice. Then he opened the book again.

It went like that. One entry, one condition. A school seat in March 2034 for a promise that he would not be handed to the zone police. A flat in Sagar Darshan, batch two, for a promise that his name would stay out of anything she wrote. A kilowatt increase, 4.2 to 6.2, Block K, for nothing at all, because he was tired and his hand hurt. She wrote the dates on the back of an electricity bill and he translated the rest aloud, and after forty minutes she understood that he was not holding back the buyers. Most buyers were nobody: a fish wholesaler, a dentist's wife, a man from Thane who wanted his mother seen before Diwali. He was holding back something else.

Beside some entries, in the margin, there was a small drawing. Three strokes of the pencil. A long thin oblong, a shorter handle, a line across where the two met.

'What's that?'

'That,' Salim said, 'is a customer.'

She took the books from him one after another and turned the pages herself. 2033. 2034. 2035. The little bat appeared beside cardiology, beside sea-facing, beside the school. It appeared beside the three dates she had copied from Rekha Gaikwad's screenshots. It stood beside the 'h' entries in Dev's notebook like a man waiting at a bus stop he used every day. She counted them with the calculator, pressing the plus key for each one. Sixty-three.

'He doesn't buy for himself,' she said.

'Never. He buys and he gives. A seat here, a doctor there. Then later, people owe him.' Salim drank the cold tea at last and made a face. 'I first drew that bat in

2026, Madam. In Crawford Market. A young man changing dollars after a club tour in Dubai. Very polite. He asked after my daughter.'

Meera looked at the drawing. Somebody had been standing at the front of every line she had touched for ten years, and the only thing written beside him was a toy.

The pod was in Kharghar, on the second floor above a mobile-repair shop, and it rented by the hour. ₹180, paid in advance to a girl who did not look up. It held one desk, two moulded chairs and a fan that clicked on every turn. Somebody had left a sticker on the glass that said HUSTLE in orange letters. Farhan had peeled half of it off before he sat down and then stopped, as if the other half were evidence.

He had come straight from moving Salim to a lodge in Ghansoli run by a man he said owed his father a favour. He was still in uniform trousers and a civilian shirt. That was the only thing about him that looked undecided.

'Every query goes in a log,' he said. 'My badge number, time, what I opened. Her office gets a daily summary at nine.'

'So by nine tomorrow she knows.'

'By nine tomorrow she knows I looked.' He cracked his knuckles, one hand, then the other. 'She doesn't know what I found unless I find something.'

He began with the obvious doors. Ledgerless revision history: suspended. Allocation category tables: suspended. Human Care queue archive: a grey padlock and a line of text about the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, section numbers included. Meera watched each refusal come up and wrote the time beside it on her electricity bill. 11.04. 11.06. 11.09. The fan clicked. Downstairs someone was testing a speaker with the same four bars of a film song.

'She was thorough,' Farhan said.

'She was thorough about allocation. Try what doesn't allocate.'

He tried housing maintenance, which was locked. Drone fleet, locked. Depot inventory, open, and useless: fourteen thousand lines of soap and rice. Then he went to facilities, scrolled past lifts and water tanks, and opened a folder called VF-OPS, vertical farm operations, Towers 1 to 14.

It opened.

Neither of them said anything. Farhan clicked Tower 9 and the screen filled with machine talk: harvest cycles, nutrient pumps, humidity at 78 per cent, 79,

78. Each line had a time stamp to the second. Nobody had thought to lock it because nobody thought lettuce had anything to hide.

'Eleventh,' Meera said.

He filtered by date. The night of 11 February ran to 2,316 entries. Most of them were the same few machines reporting that they were still doing what they had been doing a minute before. He scrolled in pages of fifty. She read over his shoulder with her glasses on the end of her nose, the cord swinging against his collar until he moved his chair.

At 23:41:07 a line was different. A cleaning unit, CL-9-04, assigned to the harvest gantry on level three. Status: MANUAL PAUSE. No fault code. No obstacle flag of the kind the harvester had raised at 5.40 the next morning when it found Dev.

Farhan scrolled on. CL-9-04 said nothing at all for a long run of lines. Pumps cycled. Humidity went to 80 and came back. Then, at 00:00:12:

CL-9-04. Status: RESUME.

Meera took out the calculator. She did not need it. She used it anyway.

'Nineteen minutes,' she said. 'And five seconds.'

'They pause them for repairs. Blocked nozzle. Somebody walks through.' He said it quickly, the way he used to say the Index had not moved in four years three months.

'At twenty to midnight. On the gantry. Eleven metres up.'

He did not answer. He was looking at the column to the right of the status line, the one headed AUTH, which was narrower than the others and had been cut off by the edge of the window. He put his hand on the mouse and did not move it.

He moved it.

The column widened. The AUTH field for the pause at 23:41:07 read ALC-SVC-03. The resume at 00:00:12 read the same.

'Service account,' Farhan said. 'That's a service account. Shared login. Could be anybody with the password.' He was already opening a second window, typing with two fingers, then four, then giving up on speed and going back to two. 'Facilities has its own. Pest control, the pump contractors, the Tower 2 lot from Pune. They all have service logins. If somebody borrowed one…'

'Look it up.'

'I'm looking it up.'

The directory was open too. Nobody had locked the list of who was allowed to do what, only the things they had done. It was a habit Meera recognised from banks. You hid the transactions and left the signature cards in a drawer.

Farhan typed ALC-SVC-03 and pressed enter. The fan clicked four times before the answer came.

ALC-SVC-03. Owner: Allocation Department (Office of the Deputy Director). Issued 14.06.2033. Permissions: Ledgerless revision (full); facilities override (emergency); VF-OPS (manual control). Holders: 3.

'Three,' Meera said.

'It doesn't say which three.'

'No.'

He sat back. The moulded chair creaked under him. Downstairs the film song started again and stopped at the same bar. On the glass the half of HUSTLE that remained read HUS, which was what Meera's mother used to say to a dog.

'A technician could have asked for it,' he said. 'Emergency override. Somebody rings the deputy director's office, says a cleaner's jammed on the gantry, they read out the password over the phone.'

'At twenty to midnight.'

'People work nights.'

'Then there'll be a work order.'

He searched VF-OPS for work orders on 11 February. There were 2. A nutrient pump on level one at 14:20. A humidity sensor in the seedling bay at 16:55. Nothing on the gantry. Nothing after dark. He searched the 12th in case somebody had logged it late. Nothing.

He did not say anything for some time. Meera let him have it. She had watched men arrive at this point before, in better-lit rooms with worse coffee, and she knew that if she spoke first they would spend the next hour arguing with her instead of with the screen.

His phone buzzed on the desk. He turned it over. A message from Ghansoli: *Old man sleeping. Snoring like a bus. Ate two plates.*

'He's eating,' Farhan said.

'Good.'

'Madam.' He kept looking at the phone. 'The office of the deputy director. Allocation. That's the floor where I took you on the second day. Where they gave you tea.'

'Yes.'

'Where he asked about your husband.'

'Sudhir,' Meera said. 'Yes.'

She opened her purse and found the card. It had sat behind her Vashi bus pass for eight days. Arjun K. Malhotra, Deputy Director (Allocation), a direct line, an extension, an email address with a full stop between the first and last names. She laid it on the desk beside the keyboard, face up, under the AUTH column.

Then she took out her phone and opened the photograph of Salim's ledger, the page from August 2035, and put that beside the card. The little bat. Three strokes of a pencil.

Farhan took a screenshot. Then another of the directory entry. Then he photographed the screen with his own phone as well, which was against the rules and which she did not mention.

'By nine tomorrow she knows I looked,' he said.

'By nine tomorrow,' Meera said, 'so does he.'

She held down the memo key on her calculator until SARASWATI SC came up, and 7.00 under it, and she typed beneath both, slowly, one letter at a time: ALC-SVC-03. HOLDERS 3.

The fan clicked. The clock in the corner of the screen said 11.52. They had eight minutes left on the ₹180.

CHAPTER 11

Allocation

Nobody on the creek ground wore whites except Arjun Malhotra. The other twenty-one men played in track pants and Provision T-shirts, the standard grey with the zone's lotus on the chest, and two of the fielders were barefoot. Arjun had cream flannels with a crease. He was sitting on an upturned crate at the square-leg boundary, strapping on a pad, and he looked up and smiled before Meera was within twenty metres of him.

'Mrs Kulkarni. You came to watch.' He tightened the top buckle. 'We're 61 for 4. I'm in next. Bad timing for a visit, or good, depending how I bat.'

It was 7.38. Behind him the creek lay flat and brown and smelled of low tide and of diesel from a dredger moored past the mangroves. About forty people stood along the rope: wives with steel tiffins, a boy with a scorebook, three old men on plastic chairs who had clearly been arguing about the field placings since six.

Farhan stopped beside her. He had a buff folder under his arm and he did not open it yet.

'Sir,' he said. 'We need ten minutes.'

'You can have the whole drinks break.' Arjun nodded at a woman holding a flask. 'Sunita's boy got his Saraswati result on Friday. Ninety-one per cent in maths. Tell him, Sunita.'

Sunita did not tell anyone anything. She was looking at the folder.

Meera took it from Farhan and laid three things on the grass at Arjun's feet, in order. First, the printout of the Tower 9 maintenance log: CL-9-04, paused 23:41:07 to 00:00:12, authorised ALC-SVC-03. Next, the photocopies from the

Panvel municipal annex, four flats at Sagar Darshan in the names of Rohit and Simran Malhotra, Suresh and Nalini Kapoor. Last, a narrow cloth-bound book from Salim's tin box, the third of five, its corners singed brown.

Arjun looked at them the way a man looks at a menu in a language he can read but would rather not.

'Ah,' he said. He laughed and turned to the rope, to the old men on the chairs. 'You see what happens. Five years of free rice and people still need something to talk about. A cleaning robot stops for twenty minutes, my cousin buys a flat, and now I'm a gangster.' He reached for his other pad. 'Mrs Kulkarni, every family in this zone has a cousin in Sagar Darshan or wishes it had.'

Somebody on the rope chuckled. One of the old men said, 'He's not wrong.'

Meera opened the ledger at a page she had marked with a bus ticket. Most of it was Salim's shorthand, small and slanted and unreadable to anyone but Salim. The bottom third was not. Salim had told her, sitting on her sofa with his hand in a bandage, that a man who buys on 'later' writes his own promise. Ink binds better than talk, he had said, and then asked if she had any biscuits that weren't Provision ones.

She read it out without raising her voice. There had never been any need to.

'Owed to S.Q. One cardiology position, Human Care, for his sister-in-law, before thirty August. Against: one flat, Sagar Darshan, batch three, to be named by S.Q. Fourteen August 2035.' She looked up. 'Then there is a small drawing of a bat. Then an initial. A.'

Halfway back to his mark, the bowler had stopped walking.

Nobody on the rope said anything. The boy with the scorebook closed it. Somewhere behind them a drone went over towards the farms, a thin whine like a mosquito in another room, and Meera could hear it all the way to the creek.

Arjun's hand stayed on the pad's buckle, the strap half through.

* * *

The pavilion was a tin-roofed shed with four concrete steps and a scoreboard of hooks and painted plates. Somebody had hung 61 and 4 and left the overs blank. Farhan walked Arjun there with one hand near his elbow, not touching it, and the drinks break began behind them without anyone calling it.

Arjun sat on the second step. One pad was still on.

'You can take that off, sir,' Farhan said.

'I'd rather not. I may still bat.'

Meera stood on the bottom step with the ledger closed against her hip. Farhan stayed on his feet. His notebook was a cheap spiral one from the Depot 6 shelf, and he wrote the time at the top of the page. 7.51.

'Dev Rao,' Farhan said. 'Did he pay you, or did you pay him?'

'I paid him.' Arjun said it at once, as if relieved to be asked something he could answer. 'Eighty thousand in October. Another lakh and a half in December. He came to me. I want that on your page, Farhan. He came to my desk and asked how a man with a sister in Hyderabad gets her boy a scooter on an engineer's stipend.'

'And you told him.'

'I told him there was a way to be useful.' Arjun looked at the creek. 'He was good. Better than the two before him. Fast, quiet, and he never asked who the names were for. I thought he was finally relaxing. Five years in grey shirts, eating off one plate. I thought, good, he has discovered he's human.'

Meera thought of the tile in the bathroom of 7-14 and the soft new grout. Three shirts, evenly spaced on the rail. Men who are relaxing do not hang their shirts like that.

'When did you find out about the notebook?' Farhan said.

'Fourth of February. He told me himself. Sat in my office and said he had every move since November written down, in pencil, in a book I would never find. Said a reporter from a Delhi paper was coming on the fifteenth.' Arjun rubbed the buckle with his thumb. 'He wasn't asking for money. I offered. He laughed. He said he'd been paid to learn and he'd learned.'

'So you wanted him dead.'

'I wanted the book.' His voice rose for the first time, and the three old men on the plastic chairs turned their heads together. He brought it down. 'I wanted the book back. That's all. A notebook. Paper. You burn it and it's gone and nobody is hurt. Two lakh forty thousand people keep their rice. Kavita keeps her number. Dev keeps his job, even. I told him that.'

Farhan's pen stopped. 'When did you tell him that?'

Arjun did not answer. Out on the square a fielder was rolling the ball along the pitch with his bare foot, slowly, to nobody.

'Sir.'

'He said if I wanted to talk I should come where there were no cameras.' Arjun smiled, very slightly, at the joke that was not his. 'He said the cleaning units on Tower 9 film the walkways and nothing else, and the harvest gantry is a walkway, so I should switch one off. He gave me the unit number. Wrote it on a slip.'

'CL-9-04,' Meera said.

'Yes.'

'And you went up.'

Arjun unbuckled the pad at last and set it on the step beside him, carefully, the way he might set down a sleeping child.

'Eleven-forty,' he said. 'It was cold up there. I didn't expect that.'

'Who spoke first?' Meera said.

'He did. He was sitting on the rail with his feet hanging over the lettuce, eleven metres up, like a boy on a wall. He said, "You came." As if he'd bet against it.' Arjun turned the pad's buckle over in his fingers. 'I had the bag with me. I put it down on the grating between us. I said there was three lakh eighty in it and it was his, and the book was mine, and we could both go to bed.'

'And?'

'He opened it. Looked inside. Counted one bundle, standing up, with that pencil behind his ear. Thirty-seven notes. He said, "Your man can't count." Then he zipped it shut and pushed it back to me with his foot.'

Farhan wrote. Meera watched his hand and saw it was steady, which surprised her a little.

'He had a book,' Arjun said. 'Blue. In his shirt pocket, I could see the corner. He took it out and held it up and said the reporter would have a copy by Friday whatever happened to this one. I didn't believe him. Nobody copies anything here. There's nothing to copy onto.' He stopped. 'I reached for it. That's all I did. I reached for it, and he pulled back, and the rail on that side is lower because of the harvest arms. Waist height on him. He was a thin man.'

'You held on to the book,' Meera said.

'I held on to the book.'

For a moment nobody spoke. On the field someone had found a thermos and was pouring tea into paper cups, and the smell of it came across the grass,

cardamom and too much sugar.

'I took it home and burned it in the sink,' Arjun said. 'Before I burned it I opened it. Twelve pages written on. Grocery lists. Measurements for a bookshelf. A phone number for a plumber in Hyderabad.' He looked at Meera with something close to admiration. 'He brought a dummy. He knew exactly what I'd do.'

Meera thought of the polythene behind the tile and the last entry, 10.02.36, no initials. A man who had already decided he was not coming back to write the next line.

'The bag,' she said.

'Yes.'

'Eleven metres of stairs, past a dead man. Nineteen minutes on the camera. That's time enough to carry it to your car twice.'

'I had time.'

'So why leave it?'

Arjun considered the question properly. She disliked him most at that moment, for the care he took.

'Because of him,' he said, and tipped his head at Farhan. 'No offence, Farhan. Think what a policeman in this zone has seen in five years. Nothing stolen. Nothing sold. A robbery needs something worth robbing. Find a dead man with three lakh eighty beside him, untouched, and what goes through your head? I'll tell you. Nobody took it, so it doesn't matter. Money is the one thing here that proves nothing happened.' He spread his hands. 'Take the bag away and somebody asks what was in his pockets. Leave it there and the case is a fall. A sad man, a bad night, a low rail.'

Farhan's pen had stopped again. The page said 7.58 in the margin, then nothing.

'You didn't count on her,' Farhan said.

'I didn't know she existed.' Arjun bent and began unbuckling the second pad. 'I asked about her afterwards. Sudhir's widow. I'd heard of the Economic Offences Wing. I thought it was closed.'

'It was,' Meera said.

* * *

Farhan made the call at 8.04, standing by the sightscreen with his back to the step. Meera heard only his half. Yes, madam. The creek ground. No, madam, I think you should come yourself.

The match did not stop so much as run out. Both batsmen leaned on their bats. At the end of his run-up the bowler sat down and took off his shoes. Somebody's son, eight or nine years old, kept bowling a tennis ball at the empty stumps and nobody told him not to. On their plastic chairs, the three old men had given up pretending to watch the cricket.

Kavita Menon arrived at 8.31 in a white consortium car that parked on the grass, which nobody was supposed to do. Running shoes, a pale kurta, hair not done. She did not look at Arjun. She came as far as the boundary rope, a length of blue nylon pegged at intervals and frayed where the fielders had trodden on it, and stopped there, as if the rope meant something.

Meera walked out to meet her. Farhan stayed on the step with Arjun and the two pads.

'He's told you,' Kavita said.

'Some of it.'

'Then you don't need me.'

'I need to know when you knew.'

Kavita looked at the pitch. The boy's tennis ball hit the middle stump and rolled back to him. 'Knew is a strong word.'

'Suspected, then.'

'The morning of the twelfth. Before you came.' She said it plainly, as she said everything, like a figure on a slide. 'Dev brought me one page in December. Handwritten. He wouldn't email it. Four categories, initials, dates. I told him to bring me more. On the twelfth Arjun was in my office at seven-fifteen with tea for both of us, and he already knew it was the gantry. The duty officer hadn't called anyone yet.'

'And the privacy note that shut me out.'

'He drafted it. I signed it.'

Meera took the calculator out of her pocket. She did not need it. She used it anyway, because Kavita was a woman who believed numbers, and Meera wanted her to watch one being made.

'Under one per cent,' Meera said. 'That's what you told me. Two hundred and forty thousand residents.' She keyed it in. 'Two thousand four hundred people. Say each of them pushes one person back one place. Rekha Gaikwad's husband went back fourteen times. He died at number three on the third of September. Dev Rao died on your gantry with your money beside him, and you let a sub-inspector who trusted you write it up as a fall.'

'It wasn't my money.'

'It was your number.'

Kavita did not answer that. Behind her the driver had got out of the car and was standing by the bonnet, smoking, careful not to listen. The air smelled of the creek and somebody's diesel generator, and of the cardamom tea still going round in paper cups.

'Do you know what the Index was for?' Kavita said at last. Her voice had dropped. 'For the funders. For Delhi. For the next zone and the one after. I used to say that if it ever moved off zero they would close us, and everyone inside the fence would go back to standing in ration lines in Govandi.' She glanced at Farhan on the step, then away. 'I still think that's true.'

'And Dev?'

'Dev was point nought nought something. I had decided that before I met him.' She pressed her lips together. 'On the twelfth I sat in my office and watched the Index refresh at nine. Zero. It would have said zero if they'd found ten of him. That's what I built it to say.'

On the field the boy bowled again and missed, and walked down the pitch to fetch the ball himself.

Meera put the calculator back in her pocket without clearing it.

* * *

Farhan had stood up. He did it slowly, the way a tall man gets off a low step, and took the handcuffs from the back of his belt where they had sat, as far as Meera knew, since he was issued them. They were the old steel kind with a chain between. The zone police did not carry the plastic ones. There had never been enough arrests to justify the order.

Arjun watched him come. Both pads were off now, laid side by side on the step with the straps tucked under, like kit being returned to a school store.

'Stand up, please, sir,' Farhan said.

Arjun stood and held out his wrists before he was asked. Meera saw Farhan notice that and decide not to accept it. Instead he turned Arjun by the shoulder and cuffed him behind, one wrist and then the other, checking the gap with his little finger the way they teach at the training school in Nashik and nobody remembers afterwards. It took eleven seconds. Meera counted, from habit.

'Arjun Kishore Malhotra,' Farhan said. 'I am arresting you in connection with the death of Dev Rao at Tower 9 on the night of the eleventh of February. You have the right to know the grounds of your arrest, and I have told you. A person of your choosing may be informed. You may consult a lawyer. You will be produced before a magistrate within twenty-four hours.' He paused, not to search for the words but to let the last ones land. 'Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'Who do you want informed?'

Arjun thought about it. 'Priya,' he said. 'Not her parents.'

Farhan wrote the name down. His hand was steady and so was the pen, and the margin of the page said 8.47.

Only then did Meera look past them at the ground. She had expected noise. A crowd had grown while she was talking to Kavita, perhaps forty people: the two teams, the wives with their steel tiffins, a vegetable seller who had wheeled his cart off the road to see, the three old men, now standing. Nobody said anything. The boy with the tennis ball had stopped bowling and was holding the ball against his chest with both hands.

One of the old men spoke first. He was thin, in a checked lungi, and he addressed Meera rather than the police, as if she were the one who would know prices.

'The flats,' he said. 'Sagar Darshan.'

'Some of them.'

'And Human Care?'

'Some of that.'

He nodded, unsurprised. It was the face of a man checking a sum he had done in his head years ago and been told was wrong. Behind him a woman in a green sari said something in Marathi to her neighbour, too low to hear, and the

neighbour took out her phone and opened the Ledgerless app and stood looking at it, at her own number, whatever it was, in the white morning light.

Kavita had not crossed the rope. Her driver had put out his cigarette.

Farhan walked Arjun to the jeep. At the boundary he lifted the blue nylon with his free hand so that Arjun could duck under it without stumbling. Nobody on the rope made a sound.

Meera followed with the pads, since nobody else was going to.

At the jeep Farhan opened the rear door, waited, closed it. Then he stood with one hand on the hot metal of the roof and looked at the depot screen at the edge of the ground, where the Index sat as it had sat for four years and three months.

'What's the real number, madam?'

'I don't know yet.'

'But not that.'

'No,' Meera said. 'Not that.'

On the screen the figure refreshed at nine o'clock exactly, and came back 0.00.

CHAPTER 12

The Real Index

By the third draft Meera had stopped calling it the Rao file. Avinash Deshpande had told her on the phone that a report with a dead man's name on the front got read as a death and filed as a death, and that if she wanted anyone in Mantralaya to turn past page two she should call it something dull. So the cover sheet now said *Observations on Allocation Irregularities, Panvel Provision Zone, February 2036*, and underneath, in smaller type, her name and her old rank, which she was not strictly entitled to use.

She wrote it at the kitchen table in Vashi because the flat had no other table. Sudhir's chair stood at the far end with the March newspapers stacked on it. The cooker clock said 11.52. The ceiling fan turned on its lowest setting, and every few seconds a page lifted at one corner and settled again under the calculator she was using as a paperweight.

Forty-one pages. Thirty-eight of them had been easy. Dates, positions, the twenty-three entries in four categories, the odds she had worked out on the bus and checked twice since: 3.065×10^{-13}. Salim's ledgers transcribed into columns, with Salim's own translations initialled in the margin in a hand that still shook from the burn. The cleaning unit paused for nineteen minutes and five seconds. Four flats, two families, one marriage certificate from 2019. She had written reports like that for twenty-six years. You put the numbers in order and let the order do the talking.

Page thirty-nine was where Deshpande had asked for something more.

'A conclusion, Meera. A paragraph. The Additional Chief Secretary will read the first page and the last page. Give him something for the last page.'

'The numbers are the conclusion.'

'He doesn't read numbers. That's why he has us.'

She had pointed out that he did not have her. He had laughed and rung off.

She had tried it four ways. The first version blamed the consortium, which was accurate and would be read as a pensioner's grudge. The second blamed Arjun Malhotra, which was also accurate and let everyone else go home. The third ran to two pages and sounded like Ishaan explaining chairs. She tore that one in half and then, because it was her own handwriting and she could not stand to see it lying there, in quarters.

The fourth version she wrote at 12.10 a.m. and did not change.

In late 2025 a businessman in America predicted that within ten or twenty years work would become optional and money would cease to matter. On the evidence of the Panvel Provision Zone he was correct about prices. Food, clothing, household goods, standard housing and basic clinic care are produced by machine and distributed at no charge to approximately 240,000 residents, many of whom previously went without. This officer observed this herself and does not dispute it.

He was not correct about people. Whatever machines cannot produce has remained scarce: the hours of human doctors, places in the one human-taught school, sea-facing land, electricity above the daily quota. Access to these has been rationed by queue. Queue position has therefore acquired a price, and has been bought and sold for rupees, gold and future obligations since at least April 2033. Money has not disappeared from the zone. It has moved to wherever the shortage is.

The official Scarcity Index measures the availability of what is not scarce. It has accordingly read 0.00 for four years and three months.

She read it aloud to the fan. It sounded like a woman who had been right all along, and that was the trouble, because she had not been. She had walked into Depot 6 on the twelfth of February expecting to find the lie in the pressure cookers, and there had been no lie in the pressure cookers. The woman in the maroon nightie had got her five litres in forty-one seconds. Farhan's mother ate twice a day. Meera had spent the first week of the case sneering at a thing that worked, and she had nearly missed the part that did not because she was so busy looking for the trick.

She took a fresh sheet and copied out the paragraph again with one sentence added after the first: *This officer initially assumed otherwise and was mistaken.*

Then she put the pen down, and the calculator back on the pile, and went to bed.

* * *

Kavita Menon resigned on the sixth of March, a Friday, at four in the afternoon, which Meera knew was chosen so that the Saturday papers would carry it under the cricket.

She saw it on the screen above the ticket window at Vashi bus depot while she was waiting for the 4.35. No sound. A clip of Kavita at a lectern in the glass building, her hair as neat as it had been the day she offered Meera tea, reading from a single sheet. The ticker underneath ran her statement in English and Marathi, slowly enough to read twice.

The Panvel Provision Zone has fed, clothed and housed nearly a quarter of a million people for five years. That achievement is real and I remain proud of it. I accept that our measurement of the zone's performance was incomplete, and that I was slow to act on concerns raised within my own organisation. I am stepping down so that the work can continue.

Concerns raised within my own organisation. Meera turned it over. Dev Rao had raised them inside a bathroom wall. Rekha Gaikwad had raised them at a police post and got her photocopies back in four days.

A man beside her in a security guard's uniform watched the clip to the end and said, to nobody, 'She's going to Geneva. Some UN thing. My brother-in-law drives for the consortium.'

'Is she.'

'Two lakh a month, he says. Dollars, not rupees.' He shook his head. 'Somebody always lands soft.'

Meera did not tell him that she had read Kavita's file and that the Geneva post was an advisory panel which paid nothing at all, only expenses. It did not seem to matter which of them was wrong about the money. Kavita would be on the panel either way. She would sit in a room by a lake and explain to people from other countries how to feed a city, and she would be mostly right, and she would believe it, and Meera found she could not work up the contempt she had been saving.

The 4.35 came at 4.41. She sat by the window and watched the Index on the depot screen at Sanpada go by. Still 0.00. The consortium had not changed it on the day of the resignation. They were waiting to see what they could get away with.

* * *

Farhan rang on the eleventh at 7.15 in the morning. A month to the day, almost to the hour, from the call that had started it. She did not mention this, and neither did he.

'They want to publish a revised methodology,' he said. 'Not a number. A methodology. A forty-page document about how a number might one day be calculated.'

'That's what I'd do.'

'You're not helping.'

'I'm not on the case. I've got a letter that says so.'

She could hear traffic behind him, and a bus braking, and somebody shouting about a parcel. He was outside the zone, then. Probably at the Panvel court, where the chargesheet was due.

'I've had the State Statistics Office run it,' he said. 'Off the record. A woman there called Joshi, very old, very rude, she used to do ration-card audits in the nineties. I gave her the revision logs and Salim's tables and your twenty-three entries. She built the Index the way it says it's built in the original 2031 paper, except she counted the four categories they left out.'

'And?'

'Point three one.'

Meera sat down on Sudhir's chair, on top of the newspapers. Point three one. On the original scale, she worked out, that meant roughly three residents in ten who needed something the machines could not make had waited longer for it than the system said they would, or not got it at all. She did not need the calculator for that.

'They won't publish it,' she said.

'They will,' Farhan said. 'I've attached Mrs Joshi's calculation to the chargesheet as Annexure F. It goes in at eleven. Once it's filed it's a court record, and once it's a court record any journalist in Maharashtra can pay ten rupees for

a certified copy. The consortium can publish it themselves this week and say they found it, or a newspaper can publish it next week and say they hid it.'

There was a pause in which she could hear him being pleased with himself and trying not to be.

'Inspector Bhosale know about this?'

'He signed the forwarding note. He didn't read it.' Another pause. 'Madam, I want to ask you something. When we started. You thought I was a fool.'

'Yes.'

'Was I?'

She looked at the fan. It had a crack in one blade that Sudhir had meant to fix in 2029.

'You thought the zone saved your family,' she said. 'It did. You were right about that and I was wrong. You were wrong about the rest, and so was the zone, and you're the one who's fixing it. I don't know what that makes you. Not a fool.'

He said nothing for long enough that she thought the line had dropped. Then he said, 'Eleven o'clock,' and rang off.

The consortium published 0.31 on the fourteenth, in a press release that described it as the product of an internal review. The depot screens changed at midnight. Meera did not go to look. Tanmay sent her a photograph at 12.03 a.m. of the screen outside Block H, the new number in the same green as the old one, and underneath it, in the same message, a question about whether his power supply had arrived yet. It had. It was in a box by her door, and had been for nine days.

* * *

Rekha Gaikwad lived on the fourth floor of a resettlement block in Sector 11 with a window that looked straight into the window of the block opposite, close enough that Meera could see a calendar on a stranger's wall. 2036. A picture of Siddhivinayak.

Rekha had made tea before Meera arrived. It was already in two cups on the table, already going cold, which Meera took to mean that she had not been sure Meera would come and had decided to be ready anyway.

On the table, also, was an envelope. Thick cream paper, the consortium's blue logo in the corner, her name typed and the flat number written by hand. The flap was intact. A cup ring had dried on one corner.

'It came on Tuesday,' Rekha said. 'Registered. I had to sign.'

'Do you know what it says?'

'Mrs Pawar on the second floor opened hers. Her father was in the orthopaedic queue. Two pages. "Deeply regret." "Systemic shortcomings." There's an offer of priority care for any surviving family member for five years.' Rekha turned her cup round once on the table. 'Priority. That's the word they used.'

Meera did not say anything to that. There was nothing she could say that the word did not already say.

'The Sub-Inspector came,' Rekha said. 'Shaikh. He brought my photocopies back. All of them, in a new file, with a receipt. He said they'd been entered as evidence in a murder case and he'd made his own copies.' She almost smiled. 'He apologised for the police post. Properly, standing up. He's very tall when he stands up.'

'He is.'

'I liked that better than this.' She touched the envelope with one finger, the way you test whether an iron is hot. 'He was there. He'd read them.'

Meera drank her tea. It was cold and very sweet. Through the window the stranger opposite came into the room and took the calendar off the wall and turned it to March and put it back.

'Will you open it?' Meera said.

'Sanjay was number three,' Rekha said. 'On the morning he died. I still have the photograph. Three.' She put the envelope under the sugar tin, square to the edge of the table. 'I'll keep it. I don't need to read it.'

When Meera left at 5.20 the envelope was still under the tin, and Rekha was marking exercise books at the same table, a red pen in her hand, the cup ring slowly fading on the cream paper.

* * *

Ishaan came to dinner on the twentieth, a Friday, and he came in an autorickshaw from Panvel, which cost him ₹640 because the driver had to wait while he got something out of the back.

Meera heard the knock and opened the door and found her son standing on the landing with a chair.

It was teak, dark, oiled, with a curved back made of three slats and arms that ended in a shape like the end of a rolled newspaper. The seat was woven cane. She could smell the oil from the door.

'Mind the frame,' Ishaan said, and carried it past her and set it down at the empty end of the kitchen table, where Sudhir's chair had been. He had moved Sudhir's chair to the window. He did this without asking, and without looking at her, and she let him.

They ate dal and rice and a cabbage sabzi she had made too salty. He told her he had two new commissions from Bandra and that Mrs Bhatia in Sagar Darshan had cancelled hers, because her flat was one of the nine occupied ones and her husband's cousin had been called in for questioning and she had decided she did not want anything delivered to the building. He thought this was funny. He thought most things were funny, Meera had noticed, when they were about people who had money.

He asked about Salim. She told him Salim was still in the Ghansoli lodge, under Farhan's eye, and complaining that the lodge tea was made with powdered milk, and that he had asked for, and been given, a copy of the 0.31 press release, which he had annotated in Urdu shorthand and returned to Farhan with a note saying the real figure was higher.

'Is it?' Ishaan said.

'Probably.'

Afterwards he washed the plates without being asked, which was new, and she sat in the teak chair because there was nowhere else to sit while he was at the sink. It held her. She could not think of a better way of putting it, and she was glad she did not have to write it in a report. Her back did not hurt. Her feet reached the floor. The arms were exactly where her arms were.

'You measured me,' she said.

'In February. When you carried the chair to Kharghar. I watched how you held it.' He dried a plate. 'Your left shoulder's lower than your right.'

'Since 2004.'

'I know. Bhendi Bazaar. You told me about it when I was six.'

She had forgotten telling him. She ran her hand along the arm. The grain went with her palm, never against it, and she supposed that was also something he had done on purpose.

She got up and went to the cupboard above the fridge and took down the steel tin where she kept cash, because she was the last person in Vashi who still did, and counted out notes on the counter. The pension came in on the first. There was ₹38,000 in the tin. She counted it twice, the way she counted everything, and then she took out the calculator and stood looking at it.

'Don't,' Ishaan said.

'Sixty thousand. I can give you thirty-eight now and the rest on the first of April.'

'It's not for sale.'

'Everything you make is for sale. You told me so. Machines made things cheap, people made—'

'I know what I told you.' He hung the tea towel on the oven door, folded in half, the way she did it, the way he must have learned to do it in this kitchen. 'If you pay for it, it's a chair you bought. I didn't make you a chair you bought.'

She stood with the notes in her hand. Thirty-eight thousand rupees. Seventy-six notes. A tenth of what had been in the bag.

'Then what is it?' she said.

He shrugged, and picked up his phone to call an auto, and did not answer, and she understood that he did not have a word for it either and was not going to pretend.

When he had gone she put the notes back in the tin and the tin back above the fridge, and sat down in the chair again, and switched off the calculator, which was still showing 60,000.

* * *

Pallavi Rao came down from Hyderabad on the twenty-sixth for the second hearing, and Meera met her at the property room of the Panvel police station at 10.30 in the morning, because Farhan had asked her to and because there was a form that needed two signatures and Pallavi did not want the second one to be a stranger's.

The clerk was a heavy man with a fan aimed directly at his face. He brought the items out one at a time and laid them on the counter and ticked them on a printed list.

Three grey shirts, folded. One pair of rubber sandals. One steel plate, slightly bent at the rim where Meera had used it on a bathroom tile. One steel tumbler. One spoon. One pencil stub, sharpened with a knife.

The notebook was not there. The notebook was Exhibit 4 and would stay in the court's custody until the trial was over, which Farhan thought would be 2038. The ₹3,80,000 would not come back at all. It had been deposited with the court treasury on the eighteenth in 760 notes, in their two colours of rubber band, and it would go wherever money went when no one could prove it belonged to anyone.

The clerk brought the last item and put it on the counter.

The green canvas bag. Empty. Folded once along the middle, the way bags fold when they have been full for a long time and are suddenly not. Someone in the property room had brushed it down; it was cleaner than it had been on the bonnet of Farhan's jeep. The buckle was brass and had gone dull. On the inside of the flap, in faded laundry marker, there were initials Meera had looked at a dozen times and never managed to read.

'Item seven,' the clerk said. 'One bag, canvas, green. Recovered beside deceased.'

Pallavi looked at it for a long time.

'This wasn't his,' she said.

'No,' Meera said.

'The Sub-Inspector told me. The other man brought it. To give him.' She touched the buckle. 'And Dev said no.'

'Yes.'

'So why are you giving it to me?'

'It was found with him,' Meera said. 'That's how the form works. Anything recovered beside the deceased goes to the next of kin unless it's evidence. The money is evidence. The bag isn't.'

The clerk turned the list round and pushed it across with a pen. Pallavi signed. Meera signed underneath, as witness, with her old rank, and the clerk did not look at it.

Pallavi put the shirts and the sandals and the plate and the tumbler and the spoon into a cloth bag she had brought from Hyderabad. She put the pencil stub into her handbag, separately, in the zipped pocket. Then she picked up the green canvas bag by its strap and held it a little away from her body, as if it were wet.

Outside, the sun was already hard on the station yard. A drone went over towards the zone carrying something in a white crate. Across the road, on the screen above the bus shelter, the Index said 0.31.

Pallavi stood at the top of the steps with the empty bag hanging from her hand and looked at Meera.

'What am I supposed to do with it?' she said.

About the Author

Sushil Choudhary writes fiction about people and the systems they live inside. The Last Rupee introduces Meera Kulkarni, a former economic-offences investigator who believes every mystery has a ledger somewhere. In this near-future crime story, Choudhary blends a fair-play detective plot with questions about technology, abundance and what people value when things become cheap. The novel is set in a provision zone near Mumbai, where nothing is supposed to cost anything and someone has died anyway. Readers who enjoy grounded characters, careful clues and stories that take ideas seriously will find all three here.