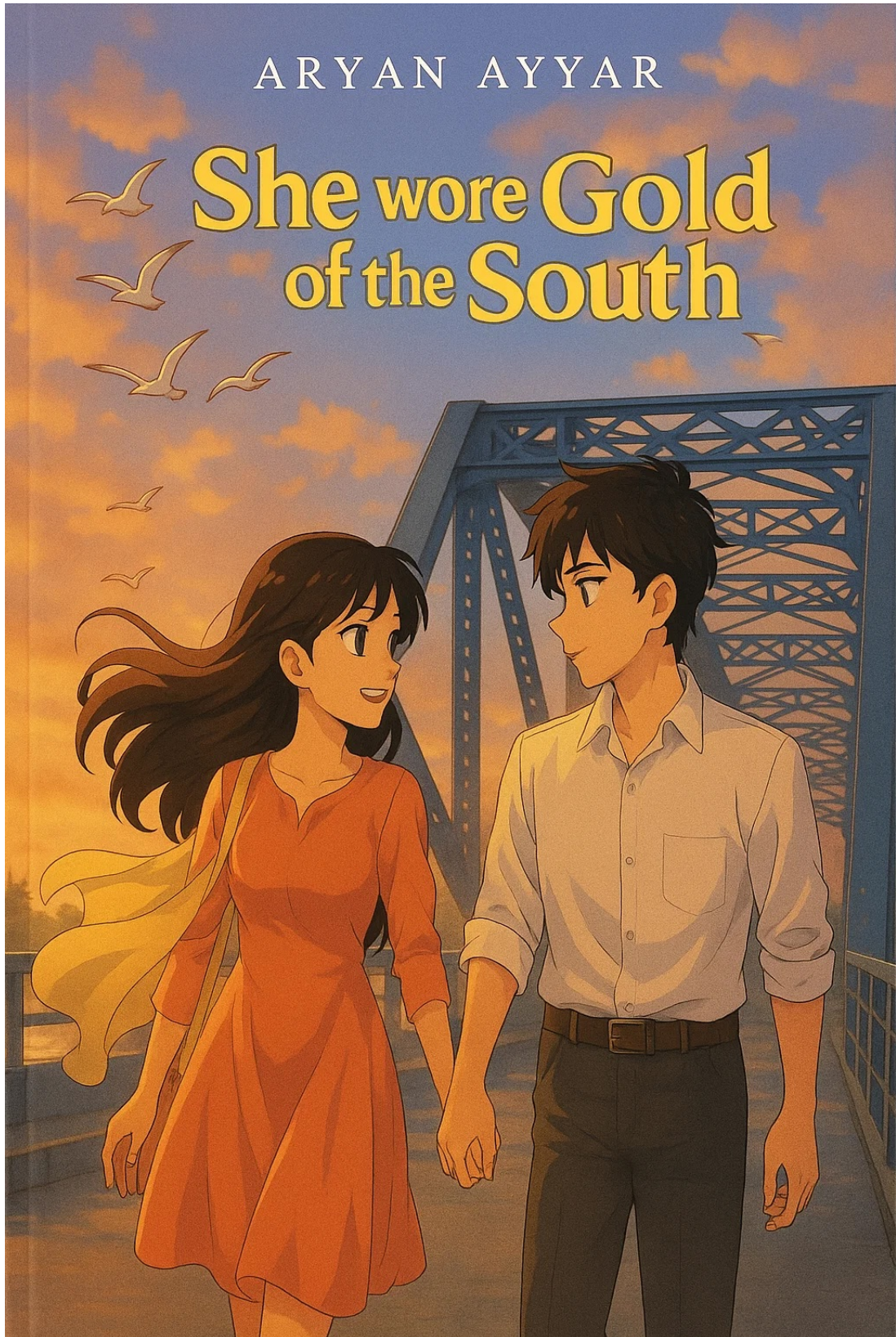


ARYAN AYYAR

She wore Gold of the South



Aryan Ayyar

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Author's Note

This book wasn't part of the plan.

I moved to Hong Kong to study financial economics — to understand markets, equilibrium, and the elegant logic beneath volatility. But somewhere between solving models and watching life unfold in quiet cafés, something else took shape. Not an academic paper, but a story. One I never expected to write.

During that year, I observed not just markets, but people. Cultures. Men and women — how they carry strength, how they hide longing, how silence often says more than speech. I saw tenderness where I least expected it, restraint that felt more intimate than passion, and small rituals that carried entire histories.

This novel grew out of those moments — of watching, listening, and slowly learning that not everything valuable can be optimized or solved. Some things are simply meant to be felt.

I wrote this at 24, between cups of coffee and pages of equations, in a year that changed me.

Aryan Ayyar

Chapter 1

L'Asymétrie au Comptoir

逞勢者多言，真正的高手默默結帳。

Domination talks; mastery settles the bill in silence.

CITIES inherit both weather and flags.

This harbour learned to live under seals and charters, through nights striped by sirens, and—one rain-polished midnight—a prince stood on a damp stage returning a key that had never truly fit.

. . .

SIX A.M. The mountain keeps its own weather. Fog braids low over tarmac laid like glass—seams tight, drains true—while a stream ticks under the road; a cow turns once in the scrub and lets the day pass. Up on the ridge, a bronze silhouette sleeps in cloud.

Good hour!

The world speaks softly enough to hear the car think—until throttle opens and the perfect surface shivers like a brief tremor, leaves lifting and spinning as if a fighter jet had skimmed the valley.

The Lexus climbs out of the bend under steady hands, headlights slicing the mist into panes. Overhead, green boards with two names for every place flicker past—seen, filed, unnecessary at this hour. The low growl cleans to metal; the curve translates itself through the wheel

without waste.

Soon, cables rise like harps and the bridge hums. Wind crosses at an honest angle, corrected with a finger's pressure. Inside, the sound thins to what matters: tyres, engine, the quiet breath of air over leather. Somewhere in the distance, a terminal glows with housekeeping lights; somewhere further back in time—crowns on old boxes painted over, an anthem learned without quite forgetting the old tune. The sky lifts from slate toward a careful lavender.

By the time the light decides, traffic sketches itself—red taxis like punctuation, a minibus shouldering the lane, a cyclist carving the shoulder with metronome steadiness. Steam climbs from a breakfast shop under a stingy strip of neon; laundry lifts like small flags on a high balcony. A ferry sounds a long, private note from a pier that once saluted different standards, and the water turns that note into a line.

From height to grid: the car leaves the big road for the dense one. Glass towers practice their reflections in water that doesn't complain. Characters blink awake on a signboard; bamboo scaffolds keep their night-cool smell. Left-hand traffic flows like a disciplined queue. The engine settles—civilised, alert—as the shoreline tightens into promenades and clockwork steps, as if the morning itself were dressing for inspection.

A final turn, and the harbour comes close enough to touch. He eases to the kerb outside a café where the grinders sing their first song and the awning holds the last of the night's rain. Brake. The soft catch of belts released. Heat ticks once, twice, finding its path out through metal.

Across the water, flags tilt to the breeze the way they always have—changed, layered, still moving. Here, the car rests a moment, breathing, while the city proves again that it remembers how to begin.

The engine's last tick fades into the concrete. Door opens: cool air with a trace of sea and detergent. Out steps a man the car did not predict—cotton shirt, sleeves rolled; plain trousers; canvas shoes clean but not proud. A cloth bag, the kind sold for vegetables and books, hangs from one shoulder. From a distance he could be mistaken for delivery, except for the way he pauses—briefly, gratefully—as if the morning had been lent to him.

Up the short ramp, past the awning still jeweled with last night's rain. A bell gives a single, obliging note.

Inside: a hum that's both busy and self-contained. The blower above the door exhales with every entrance and exit, shivering the air. Cantonese rises and falls in pockets—an elderly man discussing stocks, two women trading weekend gossip. The barista, a young woman with hair pulled into a loose knot, calls out orders in bright, unhurried tones. Somewhere deeper in the room, a coffee maker sighs under pressure, milk foams, cups meet saucers.

Through the wide glass windows, the city is already in motion—office workers spilling out of East Tsim Sha Tsui station, old men rotating their arms in measured arcs, joggers passing with their earbuds in, a Jain family in white on their way to the morning temple.

“Jo san [zou2 san4]”, he says, dipping his head slightly.

“Jo saaaan,” the old lady sings back from behind the counter, dragging the vowel the way only regulars earn. Her apron is flour-dusted; her hair is pinned with something that might be a jade comb. “Andy ah, how you been? Busy busy?” She wipes her hands on a towel and eyes the cloth bag, unfazed by the scuffed shoes.

He smiles, the kind that uses almost no muscle. “Existing is easy. What we do with it... that’s the part. Today I thought I’d drink something warm and let the city be beautiful. The rest is grace.”

“Aiya, always so *chim*,” she chuckles, though her eyes soften. “Same-same? Hot matcha, less sweet?”

“Yes, please. M4 goi [m4 goi1].”

She motions toward the window seat without asking; it might as well have a nameplate.

“You come more, ah. Last week no see you. I worry. This place need people who sit quiet.”

“Last week I was learning how to be quiet somewhere else.”

“Ha! You philosophers—no need pay rent?” She laughs at her own joke, then leans in, lowering her voice. “Andy, you look thin-thin. Eat more. Later got storm; morning is good. Take it.”

He tucks the cloth bag under his chair, smoothing the strap so no one trips. A square-ruled notebook edges out just enough to be noticed by no one. He wipes the faint damp from his soles on the mat—a small civic ritual.

At the counter, she lifts a small tin, sifts green powder into a steel pitcher, and whisks until it blooms. Steam darkens, then lightens as milk swirls in like fog remembering a hill.

She sets the cup down with both hands, the old courtesy. “Drink. Heart good, day good.”

He bows slightly in thanks. Steam nets his glasses and clears. Outside, the harbor breathes; inside, plates clatter, someone laughs into a phone, the barista calls out an order over her shoulder with military precision.

Sometime passes.

Andy is bent over his square-ruled notebook, pen moving in deliberate strokes, numbers and notations growing into a shape only he understands. The low murmur of the café flows around him, a kind of urban tide. Outside, a jogger slows to stretch; a gust pushes rain across the glass.

The barista drifts over, her steps quiet enough to belong to the room's rhythm. She lifts his empty matcha cup, tilting her head.

"How long you in Hong Kong this time?" she asks, eyes curious but not prying.

He keeps his gaze on the page for a moment before answering. "There's something old in this place... every time I leave, it finds a way to bring me back. First visit since I left."

She waits, as if expecting more, but he only offers a small smile.

"Borrowed a car from a friend," he adds after a beat. "They've doubled the parking fee since the last time I was here."

"You're leaving soon?"

"Three days," he says, as if the number has already been counted down in his head.

A pause. The café's hum softens into a shared quiet; outside, a tram bell drifts faintly across the harbour.

Just then—silence sharpens. The door opens.

Her

The door sighs open; the aircon blower answers with a brief, mechanical breath. She steps in. A small flip of her hair, an elegant frown that looks intentional, not irritated. The barista peels away toward the counter, where a short line has formed.

Andy glances up, just long enough to place her in the frame, then back to the page. But something—he couldn't name what—stirs at the edge of his attention. The pen hovers, the numbers blur, and he looks again. This time, he can't not look. Tweed jacket, neatly buttoned. A slim pencil skirt, two inches above the knee: enough invitation to notice, enough warning to say don't. A light wristwatch, a clean line of nail polish. Her hair is wavy from mid-length to the ends; she lets a strand coil between two fingers while checking her phone. A small handbag hangs at her shoulder, the kind that doesn't carry much beyond a message: I bring my own poise.

She opens WeChat. A chat thread at the top reads: "Mama's Boy". The typing ellipsis blinks. She doesn't wait. "fuck off," she types, then locks the screen with a soft click and glides to the end of the line, posture cool, expression precise.

She waits in the line, phone still vibrating at intervals. Without looking, she presses the side button to silence it. A final buzz, and she mutters in Chinese, "pervert". The man ahead of her, midway through ordering, glances back as if the word were aimed at him. She holds his gaze for a beat, raises one eyebrow—clear enough to say: don't look at me, take your coffee, and leave.

"Mocha," she says to the barista when it's her turn.

“With sugar?” the barista asks.

“Obviously not,” she replies, sharp as glass. The barista murmurs something under her breath; She doesn’t care.

Cup in hand, she scans the room. Most male eyes track her, each pair carrying a quiet, misplaced confidence—perhaps she will choose their table. The café is crowded now; no single seat remains. Her gaze sweeps the space like a hawk, pausing at a corner: a young man, unbothered, bent over a notebook, pen moving with unhurried intent.

Her choice is made. Coffee in hand, she begins to walk, heels clicking against the tile like a blade’s edge. Today, this man will either run—or he will be humiliated. He has done nothing; that isn’t the point. The point is that he is next.

She stops at his table, coffee in hand, her shadow cutting across his notebook.

“Are you always this serious before breakfast,” she says, voice cool, “or am I the only one who doesn’t get a reaction?”

He lifts his eyes, steady and unhurried. “Beauty that demands applause is just performance. The real kind doesn’t need an audience.”

A flicker crosses her face—surprise, maybe irritation—but it’s gone before it can be read. She pulls out the chair opposite him and sits without asking.

He closes his notebook halfway, leans back slightly, and offers a hand across the small table. The gesture is measured, almost old-fashioned.

“Andy,” he says.

She hesitates, weighing whether to take it. In the end, social reflex wins; she places her hand in his briefly. “Meilin.” The syllables are clipped, neutral.

“So, Andy, what is it you’re doing here? Solving the world’s problems?” she asks, tone edged with mockery.

“I love solving problems,” he replies simply, as though no irony exists in the question.

The door bursts open with a gust of damp air. A man steps in—mid-thirties, eyes frantic, breathing sharp. He spots her instantly and makes for the counter, voice trembling. “Meilin, please. I’ve been trying to reach you—”

She turns to him slowly, the kind of slowness that lets him know she is in control. Her reply is formal, even warm on the surface. “I heard you. Thank you.” But the warmth dies in her eyes, replaced by something cool and unreachable.

He tries again, searching her face for some trace of softness.

She takes out her phone, unlocks it, and scrolls to his name—“Mama’s Boy”. For the briefest moment, her thumb stills above the glass, a pause almost too slight to see. If her

hand trembles, it is only for the space of a breath, and no one in the room would notice.

A small, deliberate tap on “Delete Contact”. The screen goes dark. She slips the phone away with the same poise as before, the kind that says nothing touches her.

But the calm and composed man sitting beside her, without lifting his eyes from the page, has already seen it.

Andy watches, pen still resting in his fingers. If he feels anything, it does not show. His eyes drop back to the half-filled page, lines and numbers taking shape.

A phone vibrates on the table. Surprisingly this time, it's not hers but his. He glances at the screen: “Amma”. He answers.

“Anand, kanna! How are you, da?” His mother's voice carries both Tamil and English, warmth and instruction.

“I'm fine, Amma. Came to Hong Kong for work. Will be back soon.”

“Soon? Kanna, when are you getting married?” The question lands in the quiet between them.

Meilin tilts her head, caught off guard—not by the question, but by the fact that he had not reacted to her scene at all, as though her drama were weather passing outside a closed window.

Andy looks at her for the first time since answering the call. She meets his gaze. Something unspoken passes between them.

“No, Amma, I'm getting married soon,” he says. He reaches across the table and takes her hand, softly but without hesitation.

Her eyes widen, but the understanding clicks. Of course. She plays along, leaning toward the phone. “Hello, Auntie,” she says, her voice warm now, for effect.

A pause, then Andy: “I'll call you again, Amma”.

Amma:

Eat something, okay?

“You eat, Amma! This is Hong Kong, not Mars,” he chides.

He smiles faintly. “Okay Amma, will call you then? A bit busy now.” The line clicks dead.

He releases her hand, meets her eyes again. The room is noisier now, but in their corner, the air feels still.

The anxious man standing lingers for a moment longer, then leaves, carrying the silence of a man who understands the words “too late”.

The young man seated doesn't let go of her gaze. “We should talk,” he says—not a question,

not a request.

She leans back, studying him as though she's trying to decide whether this is amusement or trouble. "About what?" Her tone is light, but there's a thread of challenge running through it.

"About what happens next," he answers. The way he says it, it could mean anything—and everything.

The barista arrives with the bill, sliding it onto the table. Meilin reaches into her bag, but his hand is already there, the receipt folding neatly under his palm. He doesn't look at her while signing, doesn't make a show of it—just settles it as if the decision had been made long before she thought of paying.

She notices. She doesn't thank him.

Outside, the morning has thinned into daylight. Through the glass, they both watch the same moment: a man lighting a cigarette in the drizzle, the flare of the match catching before dying.

"Three days," he says quietly, more to himself than to her.

"Three days for what?"

He stands, slipping the notebook into his cloth bag, and looks down at her with that same unreadable calm. "You'll see."

Then he's gone, the bell on the door giving a single, obliging note.

Chapter 2

Le Marché des Égaux

Nalla udanpaadu yaaraiyum keezhpaduttaadhu; adhu iruvarukkum nanmai payakkiradhu.
A good agreement submits no one; it serves both.

CITIES relearn their skies as easily as they change timetables. Hong Kong folded away the turn over the checkerboard, the applause of wheels on concrete, and let the runway sail out to sea. The hill stayed. The birds kept their circuits. Bakers proofed dough before dawn; trams rang their soft brazen vowels; a ferry divided the harbour into equal parts patience and wake.

. . .

The old approach became a story told by windows and laundry lines, but the city did not pause to miss it. It recalibrated—one degree at a time—until the new lights offshore felt ordinary and the rain on Nathan Road sounded the same as before. Mountains do not ask to be useful to keep their shape. Neither does a city: it goes on, finding fresh descents into the same home.

. . .

It arrives on her Outlook at 8:41 a.m. A sender that looks like a glitch from a decade she never lived in professionally: andy.iyer@rediffmail.com. No subject line. No signature

block. No logo, no compliance footer, no “Sent from my iPhone” to excuse the audacity. Just the body:

From: andy.iyer@rediffmail.com
To: meilin.chen@company.com
Subject: (no subject)

Dear Ms. Sales,

I know what in your mind, I'll spend 3 days with you, if you spend 3 days with me - if deal, meet me at the waterfall in Harlech Road.

P.S If you have a life outside the glass building, I'm sure you know which place I'm talking about. Will be there at 10. I never keep a lady waiting.

A

She blinks at the typo; it irritates her precisely because the rest is so clean. Who still uses Rediffmail? How did he get her corporate address? She hovers over “Report Phishing”, then doesn't. Annoyance folds into curiosity; curiosity into a quiet, involuntary search tab.

Google Search: *Harlech Road waterfall*. Images: ferns beading water like mercury; a stone wall weeping in sheets; the railing dark with moss. A caption mentions *Lugard Road*, the loop with the postcard skyline; *Harlech*, the shyer sister tucked into trees. She knows the glass building; perhaps she should learn the hill that looks down on it.

By 9:07 she is on a bus that climbs past Mid-Levels laundry and bamboo scaffolds, past a school gate and the smell of morning noodles, then into the island's other weather. Windows cloud. The road narrows. She hates that she Googled it. Hates that she is already halfway up the hill before she will admit she is curious. She calls it reconnaissance, not compliance, and lets the fiction stand long enough to keep moving. The Peak Tram throws a green blur between trees; a bell pings somewhere above like a spoon on porcelain. Families tumble out at the terminus—kids tugging toward the playground near the Galleria, a paper cup rolling in a circle, a father lifting his phone to a harbour that refuses to appear on command. The Peak Tram throws a green blur between trees; a bell pings somewhere above like a spoon on porcelain. Families tumble out at the terminus—kids tugging at sleeves toward the playground near the Galleria, a paper cup rolling in a circle, a father pointing his phone at a harbour that refuses to appear on command.

Ten o'clock weather at the Peak is its own republic. Fog holds the ridge like a white argument, patient and complete. The air is eucalyptus and damp stone; the guardrails sweat. The city is there—she can feel its heat through the mist—but it chooses not to be seen. Meilin stands a moment at the promenade, where the coin-operated viewers look absurd, blind sentries facing a wall of milk. Stillness does what it always does: edits her.

She takes the path that leaves the crowd's grammar. *Harlech Road* curves under banyan roots like a sentence that refuses to hurry. Steps dark with moisture, tiny skittering of lizards, the soft textbook-rub of wind through leaves. On her right, gaps where the fog thins into brief windows—there, a suggestion of towers; there, a filigree of water; then gone. On her left, earth and fern and the occasional square drain that clicks once as it swallows a thread of runoff.

She checks her watch: 9:54.

The waterfall is close enough to hear—a disciplined hush—close enough to approach. She doesn't. Not for a man who writes from `rediffmail` with terms like a contract. She chooses a bench with a view the fog edits and re-edits, legs crossed, back straight, a posture of someone passing time rather than spending it. Below, the tram's bell drifts at 9:57, a faint green memory through the trees. The handrail near the cascade beads with water; the air tastes of eucalyptus and cold metal. She lets the minutes do their quiet arithmetic.

10:00. She is still seated. A runner ghosts past, shoes whispering on wet grit. The city remains a rumour behind milk.

10:02. She stands, smooths her cuff, and walks—unhurried—toward the sound she has been pretending not to measure.

The waterfall is not dramatic; it is a stone face that remembers every rain. He is already there at the rail, both hands set, his weight resting forward, gaze lowered into whatever private current runs beneath thought. Canvas strap across one shoulder. No phone. No fidget. He seems not to notice her.

She steps beside him, close enough to feel the cool off the sheeted water, and taps his shoulder once—light, deliberate.

He turns, a fractional smile, voice even. "Well, Ms. Sales, if I said I never keep a lady waiting, why does the lady keep me waiting? You could've just walked up here—unless, of course, which I would agree—the view from that bench is astounding."

The drop line keeps its cadence against the rail. She allows herself half a breath of victory, half a breath of respect; then the fog thins, briefly, as if the island were granting them a first,

small clarity.

She tips her chin, the temperature of her voice lowered half a degree. “How did you get my email? My address is corporate—confidential. No one gets it.”

He doesn’t flinch. “One who reaches to possess gets nothing; one who gives, receives everything.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Whatever.” He says it lightly, then takes her hand—brief, courteous pressure—and leads her a few steps along the rail to a gap where the fog loosens. The view opens: the dark enamel of the *Pok Fu Lam* Reservoir holding its oval of quiet; slopes pleated with banyan and fern; a white thread of road stitching the valley.

He points to a shoulder of mountain. “Back in the 1990s, this ridge mattered to every pilot on approach to *Kai Tak*. Miss this line and your path would be off—altitude, glide, everything would miscalibrate. You watched for the mountain, or you didn’t land.”

He lets the water speak for a beat. “Then the airport closed. No one looks for the mountain anymore. Doesn’t mean the mountain lost value. The same swifts cut the air, the same trees hold the slope. Just because the planes don’t need it doesn’t erase what it is.”

He glances at the reservoir, then back to her. “Interesting, life.”

She lets the mountain parable evaporate and returns to the ledger. “Fine. The deal. We’ll keep this crisp.”

He opens the small notebook again, pencil waiting. Warmth without push. “Proceed, Ms. Chen.”

She dictates, tone turned to boardroom:

1. **Order of days.** “The first three days are mine. The next three are yours. No substitution, no rollover.”
2. **Domains.** “On my days we stay in my world—office corridors, cafés I choose, meetings I define. On yours—wherever you choose. You don’t need to disclose now.”
3. **Names.** “On my days: *Ms. Chen*. On yours: *Meilin* is permissible. I call you *Andy* throughout.”

4. **Research.** “No background checks. No asking around. We meet as we are, not as dossiers.”
5. **Availability.** “Fixed times. I leave when the hour ends. No calls after 21:00.”
6. **Contact.** “One channel only: email. A single emergency number may be used for logistics. No social media.”
7. **Cost.** “Host pays on host’s day. Clean ledger.”
8. **Safety.** “If tempers rise, either says *runway* and we pause, circle back, or stop the scene. No pride squandered.”
9. **Exit.** “At any time, either may say *We’re done*. No explanation required. No chase.”

He copies each clause as if lining figures in a proof, precise and unhurried. A drop from the fall lands near **Exit**; he waits for it to spread, then writes through the halo.

“My three will be...elsewhere,” he says, pencil lifted. “I’ll tell you when it’s time.”

She shrugs, the concession no bigger than a breath. “Wherever you want.” The word slips into the fog like a thrown coin; she doesn’t watch where it falls.

He nods once. “One addition from me: a courtesy clause—speak as if the other has just come off a long flight. Gentle voice, even when precise.”

“Efficient,” she concedes. “Agreed. We start now. Day One is mine.”

He dates the page. The graphite catches a shard of light. “Understood. Where do you want me?”

She studies him as if placing a new hire. “On my left when we walk; half a step behind when we enter; no introductions unless I nod. If anyone asks, we’ll keep one short story. I’ll give it to you on the way down.”

He offers the smallest warmth, practical as a gift. “Umbrella? I brought two.”

She takes it without ceremony. “Good. We’ll take the tram. Don’t speak until we clear the turnstiles. Watch for my hand.”

He pockets the notebook. “Copy. And if the bench view is astounding,” a corner-smile, “I’ll let the bench keep its rights.”

Her phone hums once—WhatsApp, an unknown number. She glances down.

Unknown:

I don't buy your shit- I know you still want me.

Meilin:

You'll know what I want when my fiance thrashes you.

She locks the screen; the glass goes dark.

"All good?" Andy asks, tone gentle, eyes on the water.

She nods once.

They step away from the rail. The waterfall ticks against steel as if notarizing the terms; somewhere above, a child laughs near the playground; below, the harbour remains a rumour behind milk. They walk unhurried, close enough that his hand finds the small of her waist—light, steady—and the path gathers them into its curve until they are only two silhouettes receding into the weather.

Chapter 3

Hierarchies Invisibles

Honos sequitur officium, non potestatem.
Honor follows duty, not power.

HONG KONG'S towers are fluent in ambition. Elevators learn the names of those who rise often; lobbies remember who walked through without lowering their eyes. Yet in the higher floors, where the city's weather arrives softened by glass, the ones who have seen everything greet with a hand at the right warmth and a voice without sharpness. Respect here is not a protocol—it is a currency, and the richest spend it without counting.

. . .

“How the hell do you afford this thing in a city like this?”

The question hung between them as the Peak Tram groaned its way down through mist and banyan shade, past the glint of bamboo scaffolds and the slow return of glass and neon. Central rose to meet them in steel and sodium, the basement air of the car park cool and faintly metallic.

Andy was already there ahead of her, one hand on the Lexus's door handle, holding it open without ceremony. She stepped in as if the gesture were owed—she had seen it too many times from men who could not help announcing themselves. No thanks; only the small

adjustments of habit: skirt smoothed along the line of her thigh, both legs drawn in, back settling into leather.

“It’s not what you keep that counts,” he said, voice unhurried, “it’s what you’re willing to give away and still feel richer for it.”

She looked up at him. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I did.”

He closed the door then, gentle and final, as if the sound itself settled the matter.

They eased out of the basement into the open, the sudden daylight flattening the last of the car park’s sodium glow. Meilin slid her sunglasses into place with the same precision she used for signatures; Andy didn’t reach for his.

His driving was patient to the point of absurdity—every pedestrian, every bicycle, every delivery van was granted a kind of ceremonial right of way. Once, at a side street, he even braked for a stray leaf tumbling across the asphalt.

Meilin flipped down the visor, angling the vanity mirror until it caught both her hair and the shadow of her glasses. She adjusted each with small, efficient touches.

“Do you always drive this slow?” she asked, eyes still in the mirror.

He glanced over, mouth just at the edge of a smile. “Why? Do you like it fast?”

She didn’t answer. But under the glass, a faint warmth rose along her cheekbones, quick as a match flare before she tilted the visor back up. The traffic ahead moved on; so did he, unhurried.

33, Des Voeux Road, Central

“So what exactly is this thing again?” Andy asked, easing the Lexus into the narrow slip road off Des Voeux.

“Annual fundraiser,” Meilin said. “Private, small guest list. Clients bid on absurd things to impress each other, the money goes to children’s literacy, and everyone leaves feeling good about themselves.”

“And you want me there because...?”

“Because you clean up well, and I don’t like wasting an open invitation,” she said, her tone dry enough to leave the rest unsaid.

He glanced sideways. “And not because certain people might be attending?”

She was about to answer when they rolled under the portico. The security gate ahead rose without the sharp double-beep she was used to. No card swipe, no pause—just the smooth hiss of hydraulics. The guard straightened, offered a half-bow to Andy, and waved them through.

“Why didn’t it beep?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Magic,” he said, deadpan.

She shook her head, smiling despite herself. “You’re crazy.”

“I get that a lot,” he replied, steering into the cool shadow of the basement.

The lift released them into a lobby of pale stone and glass, the city stretched far below like a blueprint. A polished steel plaque read SEVENTY-ONE in small capitals.

The reception opened into a space arranged for the fundraiser—art installations in measured pools of light, scented candles breathing out something expensive and faintly botanical, white easels carrying foam boards stamped *We Care* in serif gold.

In the distance, the usual workday rhythms thinned but did not vanish: a clipped exchange at the copier, the low click of heels through a corridor where the scent of coffee masked the sharper smell of politics. People moved in threes and twos, their voices trimmed to cordial shapes, but the eyes said other things—running tallies, filing small advantages, passing verdicts between sips of champagne.

They had just stepped off the 71st floor lobby when a woman in a charcoal skirt suit crossed the marble toward them. “Meilin,” she said warmly, eyes flicking to Andy.

“Claire,” Meilin returned, the corners of her mouth lifting as she reached for Andy’s hand, lacing her fingers through his. “This is my fiancé, Andy.”

Claire offered her hand to him, then back to Meilin. “You should show him your office—event doesn’t start for another thirty minutes.”

Meilin glanced at Andy. “What do you think?”

“Lead the way,” he said, his tone easy, as if the day had been planned this way all along.

Claire excused herself with a smile, already moving toward the reception cluster. Meilin kept hold of Andy’s hand as they turned toward the lift.

The doors had almost closed when the three of them stepped in—two senior partners still deep in some deal talk, and between them, the man Andy had recognised from the café. A young woman slipped in behind them, her eyes skimming the cabin before settling somewhere between him and Meilin.

The lift resumed its climb. Andy felt the warm, controlled space of it close around them, the quiet interrupted only by the muted conversation ahead. Then her fingers found him. Not sudden—just there, brushing the inside of his wrist as though she had every right. They lingered a moment, light enough to feel like an afterthought, but certain enough to send a pulse into his chest.

Slowly, she traced upward. Across the ridge of his forearm, the warm give of muscle under fabric, the faint scrape where the seam of his jacket shifted. His breath came shorter. The movement was unbroken, patient, her nails grazing now and then as if marking a route only she could see. When she reached his shoulder, her other hand closed on the top of his arm—steady, claiming him as hers.

She paused there, as though testing the stillness between beats, before her touch moved again—fingertips sliding from his shoulder to the silk at his throat. The knot of his tie sat loose, comfortable. Not for long.

She looked at him then, the whole of her attention narrowed into that one point of contact. Her fingers adjusted the tie, the pad of her thumb brushing his Adam's apple by accident or design, he couldn't tell. The knot drew tighter. Just a fraction at first—enough to make him aware of his own breathing. Then tighter still. He felt the collar edge press into his skin, the warm silk constrict slightly, the tie now more like a leash in her hand than an accessory.

His heartbeat was loud enough to drown the partners' voices. Each second in her grip lengthened, stretching into something that felt outside of time. He couldn't look away.

She could feel his pulse under her fingers. She knew the man from the café could see them, and she saw the young woman watching too—her mouth curving into a small, knowing smile.

Meilin didn't ease the knot until she had taken everything from the moment she wanted. Her palm rested flat on his chest for one final beat, an unspoken claim, before she stepped back as if nothing had happened.

The bell chimed; the doors opened. They filed out in the same order they'd entered, but the air inside the lift stayed behind—thick, charged, and unmistakably tinged with jealousy.

Chapter 4

L'Altitude de la Confiance

Manus quae vulnerat, eadem sanat.

The hand that wounds is the same that heals.

THE FLIGHT — *Taxi to Runway*

The cabin lights dim by half; the aisle signs hold their small, obedient glow. Hydraulic pitch rises and falls—a thin —as if the aircraft were clearing its throat before a sentence. Somewhere aft, a child tests the patience of vowels; a man negotiates for legroom as if arbitration could move metal.

Andy sits as though angle of attack were a private meditation—shoulders easy, hands quiet on the armrests, eyes unhurried. Calm does not perform; it occupies. He notices her only in the language of small intervals: the way she resets a strand of hair that needs no resetting; the careful swallow that tightens her throat once, twice; a watch checked for its comfort rather than its time.

Fog from pressurization ghosts the window and thins. The suspension gives a light, elastic bounce as they turn off the parallel taxiway; tyres hum against scored concrete. The cabin blower sighs; an overhead vent clicks one notch closed. In the galley, metal meets metal softly, as if to keep a pact with night flyers.

She keeps her gaze on the darkness beyond the plexi, not trusting reflection. Poise travels with her like a tailored coat, but here—where the floor itself will soon decide—something loosens at the hem. She drinks the small airline water as if it were an assignment in attention: tilt, touch, swallow.

The aircraft slows to the patience at runway's end. For a breath, the cabin becomes a held note—no acceleration yet, only the feeling of a door about to open. Time edits itself: announcement chimes go silent; reading lights look suddenly immodest; a phone is hushed by a look rather than a rule.

THE FLIGHT — *Hold Before Takeoff*

The aircraft completes its final turn, nose aligning with the runway's white seam. The engines hold their breath, a deep, coiled growl that makes every object in the cabin sit still. Three seconds—perhaps four—before thrust. Long enough to notice everything.

My right hand rests on the armrest, fingers curved loosely, the pulse at my wrist moving under skin. That small hollow, where a nurse presses before drawing blood, lies exposed. Her hand moves—unannounced, untested. Fingers close around my wrist with precision, the pads settling exactly over that hollow, the tips brushing the fine vein beneath.

Pressure increases. First a deliberate clasp, then a slow tightening, as though she is winding courage from the contact. Outside, runway lights stretch toward us; inside, her touch becomes the only measurement of time.

The engines begin to rise through the pitch, vibration running up from the floor into the seatback. Her nails start to press—gently at first, then with steady intent—into the thin skin near the vein. The spot is sensitive; the nerves respond faster than the mind. The pressure builds, incremental, deliberate.

Acceleration begins. The cabin leans into the force, and she leans into me. Her nails drive deeper, each fraction of new speed translated into another millimetre of intrusion. Close now to the vein, the sting sharpens into something that should be pain—but is not. Not to me. This is trust, raw and involuntary. A lady has chosen this grip over every other posture she could own.

I loosen my hand—deliberate, unhurried—the kind of give that knows exactly what will follow. She takes it without seeming to, and the angle shifts; her nails find the seam of softer tissue. The sting sharpens—clean, intimate, wholly hers. Outside, the runway blurs into a single white line, the roar swelling to fill everything, but the only thing I measure is the choice in her grip, and how each new fraction of pressure steadies her breathing. In that exchange, the hurt is no longer mine to keep.

Lift-off. For a moment we are caught between earth and air, and her grip is at its fiercest. Then the incline levels; the engines smooth. She releases.

Warmth leaves with her hand. Blood returns to the skin in a muted throb. The numbness

clears and the pain remains, honest and private. I turn my cuff down, hiding the mark. Not from myself—only from her. What happens in the air can stay there.

THE FLIGHT — *The Bandage*

Cruising altitude holds the cabin in a muted equilibrium. The engines hum at a single, sustained note; air recirculates in slow breaths from the overhead vents. I have drifted—half-asleep, half-aware—while the cabin crew move in measured passes, trays whispering across armrests.

Through the thin fabric of my sleeve, the bruise begins to speak. Not sharply—more like the memory of her grip returning in pulses. I shift once in my seat, eyes closed. The world tilts into a shallow dream.

A sensation stirs me: light contact, careful and deliberate. I keep my breathing even. Her fingers are at my cuff, easing it back just enough to uncover the skin. The air there is cooler. The mark must be visible now—its outline lying flush with the vein.

She does not hurry. Something from her vanity kit rustles; the faint scent of antiseptic reaches me. Then the touch returns, adjusting the angle of my wrist, her own fingers steady but weightless. A small square of adhesive smooths over the bruise, pressed once, twice, so the edges lie flat. Her thumb lingers for a breath—just enough pressure to fix it—then withdraws.

I keep my eyes closed. Not to hide that I am awake, but to give her this act without the cost of acknowledgment. The cuff comes down again, covering the fresh bandage as neatly as she found it.

She settles back into her seat, and the armrest between us is once again neutral ground. Outside, cloud tops drift in pale, unbroken light. Inside, my wrist carries the quiet proof of a care she will not name, and I will not ask her to.

THE FLIGHT — *The Small Battle*

She sleeps now, or something close to it. The tension that had braced her spine since boarding has ebbed, leaving her head turned slightly toward the window, lashes still. Sleep does not sit lightly on her; it claims her whole posture, as though the body has collected its due from the mind's vigilance.

The aisle comes alive with the clink and slide of meal carts. A faint aroma of reheated bread and tea powder travels ahead of the tray. The airhostess in the forward section pauses by

my row, offering a smile that lingers a fraction longer than protocol. She asks after my preference in a voice calibrated for conversation, not service.

“Tea or coffee?”

“Tea, please,” I answer, but the exchange does not end. She leans in slightly, eyes holding mine as though the choice could be revised.

“Are you sure? I can bring fresh coffee from the front—something stronger, if you like.” The suggestion folds warmth into invitation, more personal than procedural.

Before I can reply, a voice arrives from my left—soft, unhurried, but with the precision of a well-set blade.

“He doesn’t drink coffee, thank you.”

Meilin is awake, though she has not moved beyond turning her face toward the aisle. Her eyes are calm, the kind of calm that measures and places everything it sees. The statement is not sharp, yet it lands with a clarity that rearranges the air.

The hostess straightens fractionally, offers a professional smile, and turns her attention back to the cart. “Of course. Tea, then.” She moves on.

I glance at Meilin. She is already looking ahead again, adjusting the fold of her blanket as though nothing had happened. But in the corner of her mouth there is the smallest inflection—less a smile than a signature on a document she knows will be read by the right eyes.

Whatever this was—greeting, warning, or reminder—it was delivered with elegance sharpened to purpose. Not a raised voice, not a glare. Only the assurance, expressed without performance, that she knows exactly whose company I am in.

The tea arrives—light steam curling from a white cup, the tannin scent softened by altitude. I hold it with both hands for a moment, letting the heat work into the tendons of my fingers before taking the first sip. It is not remarkable tea, but it is warm, and warmth is its own argument at thirty-five thousand feet.

Across the aisle, a man adjusts his seat to the half-recline that makes sense only on long flights. The cabin settles into that measured quiet where trays have been cleared and screens begin to glow in patches. I drink the last mouthful, set the cup back on its saucer, and slide the tray forward with the muted click of a latch.

The bruise beneath my cuff throbs once, then quiets. I lean my head against the seatback,

the hum of the engines folding itself into my pulse. Breath slows; thoughts dissolve. The weight of wakefulness slips, and I let it go.

He is asleep—properly, deeply—as though the engines themselves were a lullaby written for him. Even in sleep, there is no slackness in his posture; only an economy of rest, as if his body refuses to waste the opportunity.

I study the line of his jaw, the even breath, the way his cuff lies smooth over the wrist I held earlier. The mark is there; I know it. I can almost feel it under my own nails still, a ghost of pressure. It should feel like a victory, that hold—but instead it sits like a question I have not decided to answer.

The cabin lights have shifted to their dim cycle. Somewhere forward, a kettle hisses; the scent of reheated rolls travels in the conditioned air. I let my head rest back, eyes open, watching the shadows move along the overhead bins.

From here, the distance between us is no more than the width of an armrest, yet it feels like two entirely different altitudes. He sleeps in his; I remain in mine, awake with the quiet knowledge that the next time my grip closes on him, it will not be because of turbulence.

Sleep takes me without warning. One moment I am watching the slow, even rise and fall of his breathing; the next, the cabin's white noise folds over me and the edges of the world lose their definition.

Hours pass, uncounted. When I open my eyes again, the light has shifted—thinner now, the sun angled low against the wing. The air feels subtly different, a faint change in pressure that tells me we are descending.

The captain's voice arrives over the intercom, calm and clipped: "Cabin crew, prepare for landing. We're expecting some turbulence on the approach. Please be seated and fasten your seatbelts." The seatbelt sign pings on with its familiar chime; a few passengers adjust their belts with audible clicks.

Ahead of me, a man stands and starts toward the lavatory. A flight attendant intercepts him with a practiced smile and a firm shake of the head, guiding him back to his seat. The cart rattles once as it is stowed; overhead bins latch shut in quick succession.

The turbulence begins in small, almost polite gestures—a gentle shift underfoot, a ripple through the water in my cup. Then another, heavier. The cabin tilts a fraction, rights itself,

tilts again. The hum of the engines takes on a deeper undercurrent, as though negotiating with the air.

My breath shortens. At first I tell myself it is only the recycled air, but the truth is in my hands: they are no longer still. My chest feels tight; a thin heat runs up the back of my neck. Another jolt, sharper this time, and the armrest presses against my ribs as the plane dips.

The dizziness comes next—a slow roll in my head that doesn't match the rhythm of the aircraft. I try to breathe it away, but each inhale is shallow, unsatisfying. Panic arrives like an uninvited guest: not loud, but undeniable.

I reach across the narrow divide to him. This time, my hand does not pretend. My voice is quiet but deliberate, each word chosen as if I have never spoken them before.

"I'm feeling anxious."

He turns to me fully. Something in his eyes tells me he understands exactly what it costs me to say this aloud. And then, without hesitation, he begins to do something I had never imagined—not in the air, not anywhere—not in my most unguarded thoughts.

He didn't take my hand; he offered his palm first and asked, gentle as a bow, "May I?"

I gave him my trembling hand.

He gathered my four fingers together in his, not binding, just enough pressure to make them aware of one another. A clean, deliberate hold. It was the kind of strength you imagine in a pilot or a naval officer—force that could crush bone if it wished, and the steadiness that chooses not to. The knowledge of it made me feel exposed and safe at once.

He folded my hand into his. His thumb found the strip of skin where nail turns to flesh—the thinnest place—and traced it in a single line for each finger, slow as a signature. Heat moved with that line; breath moved with it. By the time he returned to the first, I could feel my pulse in the beds of my nails.

Then he tightened his hold—gentle, firm—and lifted my ring finger. His mouth didn't rush. Warm breath first, a pause like a question answered in my throat, and then the kiss itself. He left it glistening, a seal. He waited—a breath suspended—until my exhale misted the air between us.

Another breath. He took my middle finger next, and the soft press became a faint, careful graze of teeth—no more than a suggestion. Heat climbed into my palm. The roof ticked; my gasp echoed softly. I forgot to breathe until he did.

Index. He slowed again, eyes never leaving mine, the salt-sweet taste of his mouth lingering on my skin, and the kiss arrived like a vow he was willing to be measured by. By then my eyes were wet and not from the rain. If he had asked me for anything at all, I would have said yes before hearing it.

Salt and something faintly sweet clung to my skin. He gathered my damp fingers in his hand and, without breaking the gaze, drew them up to my cheekbones. The touch was cool first, then warm as he stroked once, twice; I closed my eyes and felt the world narrow to the path his kisses had made. My breath mis-stepped—draw in, brief fall, the small startled skip of a heart that has just admitted something true. No one had ever touched me like that without asking.

Before he spoke, he turned my palm to face me and folded my fingers inward, tucking them softly so the small bones rose just above the nails. He knew that ridge—the place a strict metronome and a teacher’s pencil once found me for missed notes, the spot that hurts most when struck. He kissed there. Not to claim, but to mend. One knuckle, then the next, a quiet benediction laid exactly where the old lesson lived. Something eased in my hand that I had been holding for years.

When I looked again, he was close enough for me to see the softness at the edges of his control. He held my hand against his chest as if returning it to me. I pressed my kissed fingertips to my cheek—his salt, my heat, the ghost of his breath. Proof, not of possession, but of presence.

“Meilin,” he said, not instructing but offering, “you need not be so strong always.”

The world beyond our row begins to return in fragments—the low chime of the seatbelt sign, the soft percussion of luggage latches opening, the faint hiss of air as the vents adjust for descent. Somewhere forward, a phone begins to ring the moment the wheels touch; another chimes a second later, as if the race to reconnect had been agreed upon in advance.

People rise too quickly, pulling bags down as though the aircraft might change its mind and lift away again if they waited. A line forms in the aisle before the door has even opened; voices overlap in a dozen languages, each speaking of ground before we have truly left the air.

The sun finds the cabin through the small oval windows, falling in a stripe across my lap having reached to the land that I had trusted this man to bring me to – India.

Chapter 5

Au Bord de l'Eau, Avec Toi

*Samañjantu viśve devāḥ samāpo hṛdayāni nau |
Saṃ mātariśvā saṃ dhātā samu deṣṭrī dadbhātu naḥ ||*

May all the gods unite us; may the waters unite our hearts. May the air, the creator, and the sacred fire unite us as one

The stone was cool under my bare feet, the kind of cool that makes you stand a little straighter. The air smelled of sandalwood and jasmine; oil lamps stitched a trembling line of light along carved pillars. I had never worn a saree before. Today it felt less like clothing and more like a permission—weight at my hip, grace at my ankle, history in every fold I did not yet know how to command.

Andy walked beside me in a white vesti, shoulders quiet in the lamp-shadow. In this light he looked older than time and younger than breath, as if the temple had been waiting for him to arrive without a shirt and remember something only stone remembers.

The bell sounded, round and complete. The priest lifted the aarti lamp; flame circled the deity and threw a brief gold across Andy's face. When I bent to place my flower, my fingers shook. His hand arrived—warm, steady—cupping mine so the petals met stone and not the floor. The touch was small and hidden, but it steadied more than the offering. No one saw; maybe the deity did.

On the turn out of the sanctum, the edge of my saree loosened. He adjusted it with two careful fingers, not as correction, as care. The gesture landed in a place my breath had been holding since childhood.

I thought we would return to the others waiting by the front hall. Instead, his thumb found

my wrist, a gentle press. He leaned close enough for the warmth of his breath to displace the lamp-scent. "Come with me," he whispered.

We left by the side corridor, under a slant of banyan shade. The temple's outer wall gave way to a path of red earth threaded with roots, a hundred metres of old trees that have watched more vows than witnesses. The world opened to a pond held very still, dragonflies stitching silver above it. Stone steps fell into green water; on the far side, children were already splashing, their laughter carrying the way bells do when no one is looking.

He sat and slid his feet in first, a soft intake of breath, then guided my hand and my feet together into the water. Cold climbed my legs and surprised a laugh out of me; his fingers tightened once around mine, an anchor disguised as a courtesy. The surface took our reflections and braided them until the ripples forgot which line belonged to whom.

He was looking at the children. He did not smile. His face held a quiet I had seen in the sanctum, the kind that does not ask to be understood. His thumb moved over my knuckles, unthinking, as if counting a rhythm only he could hear.

To me it was a pond and a morning; to him, I sensed, it was a corridor between boy and man. Somewhere behind his eyes, a smaller version of him watched us from those steps—barefoot, unsure, now proud in the way only a child inside a man can be proud: not of conquest, but of gentleness performed where harshness used to stand.

We sat like that long enough for the water to forget our arrival. The children's voices rose and fell; a myna argued from a low branch; a dragonfly paused on the meniscus and decided to stay. I let my shoulder touch his. The temple was behind us, but its silence had followed.

When we rose, he did something that startled me in its softness. He lifted the hem of his vesti and, without theatrics, dried my feet—left, then right—pressing water away from skin as if returning me to ground. I steadied his shoulder with my hand, not because I would fall, but because the tenderness might make me.

He set the fabric down. I smoothed my saree, and he straightened the pallu once more, the way you smooth a page before you sign it.

We began to walk back along the shaded path, hand in hand. Somewhere near the first pillar of the temple wall, the children's laughter thinned into quiet. In that small silence I understood the vow he had made without speaking: that in this place, where stern voices were trained to march women through ritual, we would bring our own grammar—light, touch, and a listening that does not hush.

At the threshold, the lamps waited. I glanced at him. He did not bow; he arrived—standing a little taller than before, as if the boy at the pond had lifted him from the inside. Together, we crossed back into the bright.

Chapter 6

La Route de l'Éclair

First I followed the Periyar upstream into the dark and impenetrable forest of the High Range, where every step was earned in sweat, mud, and the echo of unseen rivers.

Lieutenant Benjamin Swayne Ward, 1817

IN 1817, Lieutenant Benjamin Swayne Ward of the British Army led one of the first recorded surveys into these hills. His account spoke of days spent hacking through tangled shola forests, leeches that clung to every step, and the constant mist that blurred distance into myth. He described the High Range as a place where rivers roared unseen, and where progress was measured not in miles but in endurance. For him it was cartography; for those who came after, it became memory and legend.

. . .

Port Blair, Midnight

The night air in Port Blair was thick with brine and cicadas, the road from the Officers' Mess cutting straight into darkness.

A two-star Gypsy growled over gravel, headlights opening and closing patches of jungle. The flag on its hood barely stirred in the damp air. In the front: Major General Vishwanathan Iyer, erect even in mess uniform, jaw set. Beside him, a Subedar Instructor with a stopwatch hanging from his neck and a crate of parts at his feet. In the back, Lieutenant

Commander Anand Iyer sat silent, cap square, his hands folded loosely as though waiting for something already decided.

The Gypsy stopped before the firing range. Floodlights snapped awake, bleaching the sandpit. Oil and iron scented the air.

"Subedar Saab," the General said, voice clipped. "Two rifles. Full disassembly and reassembly. Time both. We end this tonight."

The Subedar replied "Ji Saabji!"

Wooden crates slammed onto the table. AK-56 rifles lay scattered in parts—bolts, springs, barrels glinting under arc lamps.

The General rolled up his sleeves. He was sixty-one, two stars on his shoulders, and still the Academy record holder for the fastest strip and rebuild. He glanced at his son once, then barked

"Subedar Saab, we'll start now". The subedar said "Gentelmen, on on my mark, ready... Go"

Steel leapt into motion. His hands flew, brutal with memory, every spring slammed into place, every pin seated with aggression. His pace was a storm, the stopwatch ticking seconds into eternity.

Andy's movements, by contrast, were quiet—deliberate, almost contemplative. No sound wasted. Every part set as though precision mattered more than fury.

The General rammed the final pin, slammed the magazine well, and straightened with the confidence of a champion.

Then he looked left.

And froze.

Andy was already standing, rifle assembled, stock to shoulder, eye to sight. His finger curled and three sharp *clicks* cracked through the night.

Click. Click. Click.

The sound echoed through the sandpit—a weapon firing emptiness, a verdict without bullets.

The Subedar's voice wavered: "Sir... Lieutenant Commander Iyer has... completed first."

For a moment the range held its breath. The insects hummed; the stopwatch ticked against the Subedar's chest.

The General did not speak. He stepped forward, reached into his tunic, and withdrew a single commendation ribbon. His hand paused, the fabric held in his fist as though weighing something heavier than cloth.

Then, with deliberate force, he fixed it to his son's chest. The pin clicked shut.

"On the spot Cdr. Iyer. Officer like - Well done."

No more words. Shoes crunched gravel back to the Gypsy. Headlights cut the night again. The road closed behind them as if nothing had happened.

. . .

I woke to a quiet that felt older than me. The window panes were cool against my fingers; breath fogged and cleared as if the glass were thinking. Beyond it, the tea slopes and shola ridges were only half-drawn—ink lines inside a moving cloud.

The corridor smelled of wood polish and last night's rain. Floorboards answered softly under my steps. Downstairs, the lounge kept its private museum light: dark paneling, a curved bar that remembered other decades, billiard lamps hooded like secrets. Trophy heads watched the morning without opinion. In glass cases, silver that had learned not to shine too brightly; along the walls, team photographs in ranks, men in whites squinting into sun from the 1920s and after. I stood a moment and let the room tell me about continuity.

He wasn't there.

At reception a young man straightened as if he'd been waiting for me to appear in this story. "Good morning, ma'am. Anand sir left before dawn." "Left where?" "To the sholas," he said, as if that were an address. "When something moves him, he walks there at first light. He says it is his way of being thankful to nature."

Thankful. The word landed where last night's confession still warmed and ached. My reflex had always been armor—heels, schedule, immaculate tone. His reflex was a forest.

I stepped out to the garden.

The lawn was a green held taut, wide enough for golf but quiet enough for prayer. Yellow canopies wore a pelt of dew; benches waited as if abstaining from speech. Farther out, the fairway fell away to trees, then to a mild river I could hear but not see. Mist moved in sheets; hills appeared and withdrew like shy hosts. A koel called once and let the silence answer.

I walked the perimeter path, palm over palm along the cold rail. From here the club looked almost theatrical: white gables and long verandahs, red trim still wet from the night; a bell that could summon tea as easily as memory; a clock that ticked like a very reasonable heart. Somewhere behind the lounge, a cue struck—one clean click, then felt settling on felt. The ceiling fans inside turned with colonial patience.

A gardener raised his head and nodded. His shears made the same measured sound as the billiard balls. I liked the echo. I do not say these things aloud, but the symmetry soothed me.

I thought of Shenzhen.

Of the night I begged in a winter coat under a staircase while a man I loved watched the begging and chose to leave. I wasn't cold here; still, the air on my collarbones remembered. I wrapped my arms tighter and kept walking, skirting puddles that kept the club upside-down inside them. From the far edge of the lawn I could see the practice green; the flag was a single yellow note held very still.

He was somewhere inside that whiteness, counting gratitude like beads. I tried to be irritated by the privacy of it and couldn't. It felt, absurdly, like being included—an absence that placed me inside its radius instead of out.

On the verandah I found a chair and sat with my palms flat to the teak armrests until they warmed. The wood had that old-club shine: not glossy, but persuaded by years of hands. Beyond the balustrade, tulips of water shivered on the grass tips; one slid off and darkened the earth without ceremony. A boy rolled a trolley past, its wheels refusing to squeak, and somewhere in the kitchens a kettle took a breath. When the server arrived, I asked for tea to be brought outside. He nodded with the exact deference one gives to continuity.

The cup came with milk in a small, stubborn jug and sugar that I did not take. I drank it the way he would approve of anything: without a performance. The porcelain warmed my fingers; the steam rose and rewrote the air just enough to be noticed.

I tried to imagine him in the shola—trees stunted by altitude, leaves glossy with their own weather, roots holding the hill together where grass gives way to sudden stream. He would be walking like he always does, reading wind and incline the way other men read a room. He would pause, I thought, to look down into a pocket of water and let the surface settle before moving on. He would not be deciding anything. He would be letting the day decide how much of itself to show.

A thin patch of blue opened in the mist and closed again. My phone had no service and, for once, this did not feel like a trap. I set it face down on the table and aligned the cup with the grain. A small, silly act of order. It often helps.

When the sun finally pushed a warmer grey through the cloud, the lawn brightened by a single shade. The gardener straightened from the hedge. The club breathed. Somewhere in the wood behind the ninth, a bird stitched three notes together and then sat on them as if testing their strength.

I realized I was not waiting for him with the old restlessness—the one that keeps glancing at doors to punish them for staying closed. I was simply in the morning he had left me, in a place that knew how to hold its shape. He would return when the forest was done with him. That certainty arrived without argument and sat beside me like a second cup.

The mist was thinning by the time I wandered further along the garden path. That was

when I saw her—a woman in a pale shawl, hair pinned with the carelessness of someone who did not need to prove grace. She smiled as if we had been neighbours for years. I smiled back before I could stop myself.

We began to talk, unguarded. She told me she was proud to be a naval wife. Her husband, she said with a softness that carried pride more than vanity, was a fighter pilot. There was no competition in her voice, no games; she was speaking simply of her life. I found myself listening, and then answering, without the usual armour I carried into conversations with women. For the first time in years, I was not measuring myself against someone else. I was simply present.

She laughed lightly when I asked if it was difficult. “Of course it is. We live with absence. But also with pride. I would not change it for anything.”

Her gaze moved, and I turned to see him walking toward us: tall, broad-shouldered, easy stride. “This is my husband, Commander Parth Sharma. Everyone calls him Paddy.”

He shook my hand warmly, and for a moment I wondered if all naval men carried that air of precise courtesy. We chatted—the three of us—in the still-damp garden. She, with the affectionate exaggeration of a proud spouse, told me he was the best pilot in the Navy, preparing for test pilot selection.

Paddy chuckled, shook his head. “I may be the best now,” he said, his tone respectful rather than modest, “but as far as I know, I’m always the second best.”

I was about to ask what he meant when another figure appeared through the mist. Andy. His shoulders carried the forest with them, and his step was unhurried, certain. Paddy straightened, his voice lifting in the clipped cadence of tradition: “Jai Hind, sir!”

They hugged, shook hands—friends, not strangers. To me it looked half-formal, half-joking, a private code between men who had shared some academy. I smiled at the thought of it being only banter.

Andy turned to me with that quiet half-smile. “Come, get ready for breakfast.”

“Where have you been?” I asked, still holding the question from the morning.

“Nowhere much,” he said, light as mist, and left it at that.

The men walked back toward the club together, their voices low and easy. I stood a moment longer, recalling the receptionist’s words: **Anand sir walks into the forests at dawn whenever something has touched him deeply. He says it is his way of being thankful.**

I followed slowly, unsettled by the thought that gratitude could have such gravity—and that strangers seemed to salute him for it.

The dining hall carried its own gravity: teak beams, slow fans, porcelain cups with hairline cracks that had survived decades of mornings. The smell of buttered toast and freshly

ground Malabar coffee hung with the weight of routine. Couples sat apart, as the rules of the club required—each at their own table, the old planters' code of civility.

Andy's parents were already there. Major General Iyer and Mrs. Iyer had driven up from Kochi the previous night in their small Maruti 800, and now they sat side by side at a table near the window. The General's upright bearing seemed to square even the chair beneath him, while Mrs. Iyer poured tea with the composure of someone who had long ago stopped needing to be noticed. They inclined their heads politely to me, no more, no less. At this club, formality was its own affection.

Our table was set just beside theirs—white cloth, silver cutlery, a small vase with a single rose. I felt the morning air still lingering on my skin, a thin chill that had not yet given up. It was then that Andy reached under his arm and drew out a folded sweater.

It was pale grey, soft to the touch even from sight alone, the kind of knit that seemed spun more of air than wool. He unfolded it without a word, and with a quiet nod asked me to slip my arms through.

I did.

He stood close enough that the fabric brushed his chest before it found my shoulders. The first button rested just below my collarbone. He fastened it with slow precision, his fingers grazing the hollow of my throat. I felt the warmth of the knit rise at once, as if the wool carried some private fire of its own.

The second button—slightly lower—pressed the sweater more firmly across my sternum. His touch lingered a moment too long on the loop of thread, steady, deliberate. I drew in breath without meaning to.

The third aligned just above my waist, his knuckle brushing against me with the smallest friction. My skin answered before my mind could.

By the fourth, time had thickened. The sound of cutlery and fan-blades dimmed; I could hear only the quiet slide of wool closing around me, his fingers moving with a composure that revealed nothing and everything at once.

When he reached the last, he looked up briefly—not into my eyes, but at the line of buttons he had drawn, as if completing a proof. Then he smoothed the edges of the sweater across my shoulders with both hands. The gesture was not possession; it was shelter.

I remembered Shenzhen. The staircase. The winter night when I begged a man not to leave and he watched me cry before he walked away, leaving me shivering in a coat that did nothing.

Now, the sweater held me like a second skin, and his touch was the opposite of absence. The warmth was not just fabric—it was chosen, placed, buttoned for me. I lowered my gaze

to the porcelain cup before me, afraid my face had betrayed too much.

Andy pulled out his chair, sat down across from me with the same composure as if nothing had passed. “Coffee?” he asked, as though it were an ordinary morning.

And yet every button still pulsed against me, each one a mark of intimacy disguised in civility. The General spoke lightly at his own table, Mrs. Iyer listened, the club remained as it had always been—but my body was no longer the same.

It was General Iyer who broke the formality of breakfast. “Anand,” he said in the clipped, resonant tone of a man used to being heard, “you should take your to-be wife to Kundala. Every couple in this family makes that walk at least once.”

Andy’s reply was simple, almost offhand, but I caught the gleam in his eyes. “That was already in my mind, Father.”

The General nodded, satisfied. They rose together soon after, father and son moving with the same long stride, their conversation pitched low. I watched them angle toward the corridor, Andy holding the keys, already giving instructions to the reception about cleaning our room while we would be away. There was something in the precision of it—unhurried but exact—that reminded me of the salute his friend had given earlier.

That left me with Mrs. Iyer.

Her manner was softer, her voice carrying the patience of someone who had balanced a soldier’s absences with a household’s daily rhythm. Her eyes fell on my sweater. “It suits you,” she said gently. I must have coloured, because I heard myself answering, “Andy bought it for me.”

Her smile was small but satisfied. “At last,” she murmured, “my son has begun to know what to buy for a lady, and when.” She stirred her tea once, twice, before adding—so lightly it could have been mistaken for an afterthought— “Military life makes men strong, yes, but it also teaches them to close their hearts. They can be brave in the field, yet clumsy with affection.”

The remark was offered like steam above a cup, dissipating almost before it was seen. I brushed it away with a polite smile, telling myself it was only the wistfulness of a mother.

Soon Andy returned with the keys in hand. We walked out together to the gravel drive where the car waited, its silver bonnet already misted with dew. He held the passenger door open for me. The gesture, simple as it was, drew my body into the memory of his fingers fastening buttons an hour earlier. I sat, smoothing the sweater across my lap.

Behind us, the General and Mrs. Iyer stood watching. She said something sharp in Tamil; he protested, half-amused, before conceding with a shrug. Her scolding softened into a smile, his reply into silence. I could not hear the words, but the play of it was clear: a general

in uniform, yes, but a husband in practice. I admired the scene—its quiet choreography of power and affection.

Andy started the engine. Before we pulled away, he lifted his fingers in a crisp salute to his father. The General returned it gravely, then let his shoulders relax into laughter as Mrs. Iyer nudged him again.

As the car rolled down the club's drive, I turned to Andy. "You saluted your father. And Paddy saluted you. What is all this?"

He kept his eyes on the road, the hint of a smile at the edge of his mouth. "Dreams," he said. "Military dreams. My father trained me early to live inside them. Sometimes they return in gesture, in habit. Not command—just memory."

He downshifted smoothly into the curve, leaving the High Range Club behind. I leaned back against the sweater's warmth, uncertain whether I had been given an answer or a riddle.

The Road to Kundala

The road wound out of Munnar in long green ribbons, slipping through tea slopes that rose and folded like silk being shaken. For two hours we had been climbing steadily, past workers with baskets on their backs, past eucalyptus groves where the scent cut the air sharp, past turns where valleys opened suddenly only to close again.

Andy drove with a patience that both comforted and annoyed me. His hands rested lightly on the wheel, his foot measured on the pedal. The old cautionary phrase came from his lips as if it were scripture: "Speed thrills, but kills."

We were only four kilometers from Kundala now, the final climb through denser woods ahead. I watched the dial, then him. "Do you ever drive fast?" I asked.

He did not look at me. "A little fast, sometimes. When no one is sitting beside me."

"And why is that?"

"There is no need to take life that fast," he said, in the flat tone of a lecture delivered often enough to become truth.

I leaned closer, testing the line. "Would you drive fast for me, if I told you to?"

His reply was cold, immediate. "No."

The bluntness unsettled me more than refusal. It made me curious. I tilted my head and looked at him for a moment. "Do you always get what you want?" he asked suddenly, eyes still on the road.

I smiled, the smile I reserved for boardrooms and adversaries. "I'm sure you won't be the first one to disappoint me."

That was when he turned. Just for a breath, his eyes met mine. There was no challenge in them, only decision. His leg shifted, pressing down with sudden force.

The engine roared. The car leapt forward.

The world blurred—the tea slopes, the stone culverts, the thin fences—rushing past in a single stream of green and grey. The bends came at us like waves, and he cut through each with the calm precision of a blade. His hands did not jerk the wheel; they wrote lines through air, clean and exact.

My heart skipped, stumbled, then raced to catch up. Every nerve in me thrilled, a rush I had not invited yet could not refuse. My body pressed into the seat, breath shallow, skin alive to every shift of gravity. I wanted to laugh, but the sound tangled with shock and stayed inside me.

The last kilometers disappeared under us. The woods thickened, tall shola trees arching overhead, their trunks damp with moss. The car surged into shadow and light, a rhythm of acceleration and curve, until suddenly the road straightened.

Andy's foot pressed harder.

The needle rose—ninety. I felt my body sink further into the seat, the navy-blue leather of the Mercedes embracing me with its cold firmness, the sweater warming the space the car refused to yield.

A hundred. The sound of the engine changed, no longer mechanical but alive, the deep-throated growl of a machine bred for both grace and violence—like breath taken deep into the lungs before a shout.

One ten. The hood stretched before us, long and gleaming, a dark blade cutting through the mist. Each tree blurred into streaks of green, as if the car itself refused to let the world keep its shape.

One twenty. The Mercedes no longer felt like a vehicle but a force—metal and will fused into a single surge, every vibration coursing through the leather, the glass, the floor beneath my feet.

One thirty. My heart skipped, then raced to catch up, each beat a pulse of the needle's climb. The car hummed with a precision that made me shiver: every movement exact, every shift of Andy's hand on the wheel as deliberate as a pianist striking a key.

Time no longer advanced in seconds but in increments of speed—ten by ten, thrill by thrill—each mark a threshold I had never crossed before.

“Okay—okay, slow!” The words escaped me, half-laugh, half-plea, before I even knew I had spoken.

He eased it down to eighty—still too fast, but steady as if he had meant this all along.

Then, with the same calm precision, he braked hard. The car halted before a white-and-red barrier: STOP HERE. Beside it, a board weathered by rain read: *Dense forest ahead. Entry restricted.*

Silence. Only the cooling tick of the engine.

I sat back, sweater warm against my racing chest. In Shenzhen, I had begged a man not to leave and he left me cold in the night. Here, I dared another man to go faster, and he had answered—not with hesitation, not with cruelty, but with flawless control.

I thought of the way his hands had not jerked, only written the road as though it were a language he already knew. This was not reckless speed; it was trained precision.

And the realization settled like heat in my skin: He had refused, until I asked. He did this only because it was me.

Andy unbuckled, opened his door, and stepped out as if none of it mattered. He walked toward the forest entrance, shoulders loose, gaze lifted into the trees.

I lingered, still flushed, before opening my own door. The air was damp with moss and rain, sharp against the warmth he had wrapped around me. He did not look back to see if I followed. He didn't need to.

I stepped across the barrier and followed him into the sholas.

Into the Sholas

The barrier stood before me, stark red and white against the dark green of the trees. The board leaned beside it, its warning painted in fading strokes: *Dense forest ahead. Entry restricted. Proceed at your own risk.*

I stopped there, unwilling to step farther. My heart still carried the shock of speed, the rush of the Mercedes pressed into my skin. But this was different. The forest did not roar; it waited, silent and impenetrable, and I felt its weight pressing against me.

Andy had already crossed the barrier, a few steps ahead, pausing to take in the shadows of the sholas. When he turned back, there was no impatience in his face. He walked to me, each step unhurried, until he stood close enough that I could see the flecks of light in his eyes.

Without a word, he reached for my hand. His touch was not commanding, not insistent; it was gentleness itself, the kind of touch that could be broken with the smallest pull away. He looked into me as though nothing else existed.

"Meilin," he asked softly, "do you trust me?"

The words were simple, but the weight of them stilled everything in me. It was not a

question of the forest, or the warning on the board. It was a question of us.

My chest tightened. I felt the sweater across me, the warmth of the drive still alive in my body. The world narrowed to his eyes, the quiet force in them, the patience of a man who could wait a lifetime for an answer.

I lowered my gaze, because to hold his was too much. My voice came out smaller than I had ever heard it. "Yes," I whispered. "Yes, I do."

I felt the words more than I heard them, felt their truth before I could understand it.

Andy's hand closed gently around mine, sealing the moment without further speech. Then, with the same quiet composure, he turned toward the forest. I followed, not with doubt or question, but with the certainty that wherever he went, I would go.

We walked in silence at first, my hand still in his. Not because of love—at least not yet—but because his gaze at the barrier had been so intense that I could not deny him. Now the warmth of his palm guided me over roots and damp stones, and though every step felt like uncharted territory, I let him lead.

The forest folded around us: dense canopies of shola trees, their leaves dripping with last night's rain, the air cool and moist with the scent of moss. With each turn, the road and its noise receded, until there was nothing left but the press of foliage and the sound of our footsteps.

At some point, the strangeness of his hand in mine changed. It was no longer only his leading me; I began to walk beside him, as though the forest itself required that we hold on to one another. I had never felt so unguarded in my life. And when I looked up at him, I saw the same ease in his face: a man stripped of roles, stripped of armor.

We spoke then, gently, as though the forest would not allow loudness. I told him how life in Hong Kong was measured by seconds—by elevators, phones, and meetings that allowed no pause. "And here," I said, "time moves as though it has no obligation. Every leaf could fall and no one would hurry it."

He smiled, looking up at the canopy. "Then let us agree," he said, "that while we are in these woods, we will live as we are. No performances, no masks. Only ourselves."

I nodded. For once, I wanted nothing more.

We came to a stream cutting across the path, water bright over rocks. I hesitated at the edge. "My shoes will be ruined. And I can't see how to cross without slipping."

Before I could finish, he bent swiftly, lifting me in his arms. Like some impossible echo from a film I had once seen, I was carried, weightless, pressed against the certainty of his chest. His step did not falter as he crossed, water splashing around his shoes.

He set me down gently on the other side. I should have laughed, or teased him. Instead I

only stood still, aware of how much closer the forest seemed now that he had carried me through it.

The trees grew thicker, darker, and the path narrowed into a tunnel of green. I felt the depth of the woods, the ancient weight of them, and for a moment my chest tightened with unease. He said nothing—only held my hand tighter. That wordless assurance was enough. And then, suddenly, the forest broke open. We had reached a spot so quiet it seemed even Benjamin Swane Ward would have paused here and said nothing.

We stood at a ridge. Before us stretched the most secluded and breathtaking view I had ever seen: the sholas falling away into valleys, the blue waters of Kundala Dam glinting in the distance, the manicured expanse of the golf course catching sun like a hidden emerald. Mist curled at the edges, turning the scene into something half-remembered from a dream.

I gasped, pulling him forward, pointing, laughing with the thrill of discovery. Words spilled from me as I described the slopes, the glittering water, the sweep of the valley. I could not stop talking—about the way the light curved on the dam, the sudden breaks of mist, the smell of wet pine in the wind. Every thought turned to language, every sensation demanded to be named.

And he let me.

For the first time, he simply listened. No smile to tease, no silence to correct, no stillness to test me. Just his presence, steady as stone, letting me speak myself out of the mask I always wore. I was not poised, not elegant; I was something far more, something I did not recognise in myself until I heard the sound of my own laughter against the trees.

But then he did something I did not expect.

His arm came around my waist, deliberate and unhurried, drawing me against his chest. The movement was so certain that my words trailed into nothing. His other hand followed the curve of my back, slow, inevitable, until it rested at the small of my spine. His thumb brushed once, lightly, at the base of my spine. I felt it ripple up my back like heat drawn through silk. My knees softened; a breath I hadn't realized I was holding slipped out as soundless as the mist around us.

We looked at each other then—unguarded, vulnerable, no longer protected by words. His fingers at my spine reminded me of the buttons he fastened that morning. Not possessive. Just steady. The silence stretched, and in that silence, time loosened its grip. I became aware of my own breath first—how shallow it had become, how the air caught at the top of my chest like a clasp refusing to open. His gaze held mine—not demanding, just sure. I felt the answer bloom across my skin before I had formed the thought. My knees softened. My fingers tingled. I knew what was about to come. I could have resisted; the thought even flickered across me. But I did not. It was a choice I made, clear and deliberate.

My breath caught and deepened, curling against the inside of my sweater. I knew he could feel it—my chest rising, the shift of fabric brushing his wrist. And I knew, with a certainty that startled me, that for the first time in my life I wanted what I thought would happen next. Wanted it not as proof, not as conquest, but as surrender to a man I trusted—in this sacred land.

My lips tingled—not from his touch, but the nearness of it. Every nerve in me stretched forward, uncertain whether to lean in or hold still. I stayed. And then he kissed me.

His lips met mine—not in haste, not with hunger, but with intention. His breath warmed my cheek first. Then the soft pressure of his mouth, like silk drawn tight. The kiss moved slowly, as if he meant to taste not just my lips, but the silence between us.

I had been kissed before—hungrily, impatiently, sometimes even well. But never like this. Never with the kind of attention that made time irrelevant and made me the centre of gravity.

When he pulled back, my lips still tingled, tender and a little parted. I barely had time to draw a full breath before his mouth found mine again—firmer, deeper, and this time I leaned into it. I felt the moss beneath my boots shift slightly, the earth adjusting to hold us both.

Each kiss was deliberate—measured like breath held between heartbeats. By the third, heat rose behind my ears, spilled down the line of my neck. My skin prickled beneath the sweater, every thread suddenly awake. My chest tightened—not with fear, but with the certainty that something in me had already broken open.

This time, I kissed him back. Not with skill, but with something wilder—urgency, surrender, longing I had never admitted to myself. My lips moved on instinct, finding his, then parting. One hand lifted, unthinking, to his jaw; the other pressed to his chest, where his breath stuttered once beneath my palm.

I don't know how long we stood there, only that his hand at my waist never moved, and mine never let go.

When we finally stopped, he said nothing. He took my hand again, and I let him. My fingers still remembered his mouth. I couldn't speak—not because I lacked words, but because my lips felt too new to shape them.

I had come here with armor and attitude. But now, kissed and breathless in these sacred forests, I could no longer tell if I was the one being led—or if I had chosen this man to lead me.

Chapter 7

Elle Portait l'Or du Sud

除了一之外，去所有不是衣，而是得。

To remove every layer except one is not undressing. It is remembering.

IN Southern India, the act of giving gold to a daughter-in-law is not merely ceremonial — it is a quiet, enduring rite. A necklace is not just an ornament. It is a thread of trust passed from one woman to another, linking generations in silent solidarity. It carries the unspoken blessing of continuity: of care, of tradition, of protection. It whispers that she is no longer just a guest — she is family. . . .

He lifted me.

Not in a rush—not like desire had swept him off his feet. He lifted me like someone reclaiming something that had once been broken. One arm curled beneath my knees, the other supporting my back, fingers steady just below my shoulder blades. I felt the shift as my weight left the earth, and for a breath, the world tilted.

My cheek found his chest, almost involuntarily. The fabric of his shirt was warm from his skin and still faintly scented with the sholas—damp leaves, sandalwood, the echo of rain. Beneath it, his heartbeat was slow. Slower than mine.

We didn't speak. Some things don't survive language.

The garden stretched before us like a hush made visible. The lawn glistened under starlight,

and the path was slick with dew—each stone a mirror for the night. His footsteps were silent, careful, as though he didn't want to disturb the silence that had grown between us, soft and sacred.

His arms adjusted slightly as we moved—never gripping, only holding. I wasn't afraid of falling. I was afraid of how safe I felt.

A breeze lifted a few strands of my hair across his jaw. He didn't flinch. His grip shifted slightly, his palm warming the silk of my blouse at the small of my back. I pressed my thighs together instinctively—not to close myself, but to feel the pressure of his strength against me. My breath deepened. Quietly, involuntarily.

The air was thick with hibiscus and the ghost of cigar smoke from some distant veranda. The stars overhead weren't blinking; they were watching.

Somewhere behind us, a bell chimed once—delicate, like a servant announcing a carriage. And for a fleeting second, I wondered if this was what it might feel like to be carried across a threshold—not just into a room, but into something unrepeatable.

We reached the steps.

He didn't ask if I was alright. He knew I was. And I didn't ask where we were going. Because I knew.

When he paused before unlocking the door, he looked down at me. Not as a question.

As a vow.

And in that silence between us, my breath answered.

The door opened with a soft metallic sigh.

He didn't fumble with the key. He knew exactly where it turned, how the latch yielded, the way silence needed space to breathe.

Inside, the room was dark—save for the single lamp he'd left on before dinner. It glowed amber, like memory. The light did not rush to fill the space. It just... waited.

He stepped in, still carrying me.

My breath had deepened. I hadn't noticed until now. Not frantic. Just... fuller. As if my chest was no longer obeying thought but rhythm—his.

With every step across the polished wooden floor, the silence grew thicker. My heart beat harder. Slower. Then harder again. Not fear. Not even nervousness. It was something deeper. Older. The feeling of being at the edge of something I'd never return from.

I could hear it in my ears—the rush of blood, the heat spreading across my neck, my collarbone. My fingers gripped his shirt tighter, but he said nothing. Only held me closer.

He didn't head for the sofa. Or the table. Or the mirror.

He walked straight to the bed.
And just before he lowered me onto it, he paused.
His eyes met mine—steady, unblinking. A gaze I couldn't look away from even if I'd tried.
“Are you nervous?” he asked.
His voice was quieter than usual. Not hesitant. Reverent.
I held his gaze. For once, I didn't think about how I might appear, or what I should say, or how strong I needed to be.
There was nothing to weigh.
No defences to raise.
No cost to calculate.
And for the first time in my life, I said exactly what I felt.
”Not with you tonight.”
Something shifted then.
Not in the room.
In us.
Like the last lock falling open.
He nodded once—barely—and placed me on the bed as if he were returning something precious to its rightful place.
My back sank into the cotton sheets. My legs were still curled slightly from where they'd rested on his arm. I didn't move. I just watched him.
And in that stillness, lit only by the hush of the lamp, I let him see me.
Not with makeup.
Not with wit.
Not even with strength.
Just me.
The woman who had finally stopped pretending she didn't want to be loved like this.
He knelt.
Not because he had to. Not for theatre. He knelt before me as I sat at the edge of the bed—still warm from his arms, still wrapped in the aftermath of those four words.
His fingers reached for my right ankle. I didn't flinch.
The strap of my heel gave way slowly under his thumb. The buckle slid free with a sound

I can still feel. His other hand lifted my heel from the floor, then slipped the shoe off as though it had a memory.

The second followed even slower. Not hesitant, but reverent.

He placed them beside each other, next to his own shoes. Perfectly aligned.

Not discarded. Not carelessly tossed.

Side by side.

Like equals.

Like a path chosen.

When he looked up, I expected him to rise.

But he stayed still.

He looked at me—not the way men look at women they want. Not like hunger. Not even like awe.

He looked at me like he'd already made a promise to something he hadn't yet touched.

That look.

It undid more of me than his hands ever could.

My spine softened. My breath deepened. My palms rested against the bed not for balance—but to anchor myself.

I wanted to kiss him then.

Desperately.

But something in his gaze asked me to wait.

To let this silence be the first gift we shared.

He leaned in. Slowly. As if waiting for breath to guide the moment, not desire.

When his lips were just an inch from mine, I stopped him—not with panic, not with fear.

With my hand.

I touched his wrist. Lightly.

Not to hold him back.

But to hold the moment still.

To let myself feel it—fully, consciously—before surrendering.

His eyes didn't ask why.

They understood.

He waited.

And in that held breath between our faces, I felt the world fall quiet. My pulse in his wrist.
His warmth brushing my lips.

Then I let go.

And the night began.

He didn't rush.

Even in the quiet, I could hear his breath—not shallow, not shaken. Measured.

Like he had done this before. Or dreamed of it enough times to know not to waste it.

He reached for the first button of my sweater—the very one he had fastened that morning during breakfast. His fingertips grazed the base of my throat.

A pause.

Then, slowly, he unfastened it. The button gave with a soft snap, the kind that barely registers unless your whole body is listening.

Mine was.

His knuckle brushed the skin just beneath the hollow of my collarbone. I drew in a breath without meaning to. He didn't look down. He looked at me.

And in his gaze I saw something I wasn't ready for—not desire.

Devotion.

He moved to the second button.

My chest rose beneath his hand. His touch wasn't greedy. It was patient. It was the kind of slowness that asks for memory, not permission.

The third opened with a sigh.

By the fourth, I was no longer thinking about clothing.

I was thinking about how it felt to be seen like this—not unwrapped, but *understood*.

When the last button gave, he let the sweater fall slightly from my shoulders—just enough to slide it down my arms, his fingers trailing along the inside of each sleeve. My skin answered with heat.

He didn't fold it immediately. He looked at it in his hands—pale grey, soft wool—as if it had touched something sacred. Then he folded it along the spine, pressed the crease with his thumb, and laid it on the table as one would lay a prayer cloth.

And then, he turned back to me.

Not to take.

But to tend.

His hands came to the hem of my blouse—not to lift it. Just to smooth it gently, as if realigning it restored some invisible poise. Then lower, along my skirt—the waistband, the line down the side, the light adjustment at the hip.

The way I would have done it myself.

Had I just stood.

He knew.

And I felt it.

Every motion told me: he had studied how I carry myself. And tonight, he carried it for me.

Not to undress.

To honour.

I breathed out, and in that breath was everything I had never let anyone see.

He stood before me now, shirt still on, trousers fitted—a final sheath between reverence and release.

I reached for his belt.

Not with haste. Not with uncertainty.

With ceremony.

The metal buckle was warm from his body. I undid it slowly—first the clasp, then the soft slide through the first loop. It gave with a low, private sound. I pulled it further, one loop at a time, watching his breath catch ever so slightly with each draw.

The leather moved like something alive—supple, worn, loyal.

I didn't drop it.

I didn't toss it aside.

I held it in both hands, coiled like a blade.

Then I looked up.

And offered it to him.

Not like a token.

Like a sword.

A gift.

Something only he had earned the right to hold.

His eyes locked on mine—something flickered in them then. Heat, yes. But also awe. He took it from me silently, his fingers brushing the inside of my palm as he did.

For a moment, he just held it. As though weighing what it meant to be given such a thing by a woman like me.

Then—

He stepped closer.

With practiced slowness, he brought the belt around my waist.

He didn't fasten it.

He didn't tie it.

He wrapped it.

Until it circled me entirely—until the leather lay snug across my blouse, pressing me inwards, gathering me into myself.

Then he pulled.

Not violently.

Not suddenly.

But with force. Deliberate. Possessive.

My body met his with a quiet gasp. Our torsos aligned—breath to breath, pulse to pulse.

His hand held the leather at my lower back. His eyes held everything else.

And just before he kissed me—truly kissed me—I realised:

I hadn't given him power.

I had revealed it.

He stood still.

The belt was still wrapped around me, the leather warm from his hands, my breath still caught somewhere in my throat.

And yet, he waited.

He didn't move to kiss me. Or press me closer. He just stood there, eyes on mine, inviting me to decide what came next.

I reached for his shirt.

The top button was stiff—a little tighter than the rest. My fingers grazed his collarbone as I worked it loose, brushing the base of his throat. I didn't look down.

I looked at him.

His gaze didn't falter. If anything, it deepened—like he was watching not what I did, but what it meant.

Then, with perfect calm, he reached for the top button of my blouse.

Unfastened it.

Slowly.

The fabric eased away from my collar.

Neither of us said a word.

We paused.

Smiled.

Not nervously.

Knowingly.

I reached for the second.

This one came easier. The heat of his chest rising just beneath it. As the fabric loosened, I felt warmth—not from him, but from me.

He watched my breath shift.

Then answered with the second button of mine.

Our smiles deepened—not coy, not playful.

Grateful.

The third.

By now, his chest had begun to reveal its shape—the line of muscle, the slope of skin. I unfastened it slowly, and for a moment let my fingers rest just above where his heart beat.

Then he did the same.

He didn't hurry. He didn't leer. He simply let the moment exist.

One button.

One heartbeat.

We stood that way—two people peeling away layers, not of clothing, but of caution. Unfastening not with haste, but with a kind of reverence.

With each pair of buttons, we gave each other more to hold.

And asked for nothing in return.

By the time we reached the last ones, I knew.

This wasn't seduction.

This wasn't a fall.

This was a *decision*.

Taken together.

Gently.

Unmistakably.

I let his shirt slide off his shoulders. He caught it before it fell and folded it behind him. Then he reached for the hem of my blouse—not to pull it away yet, but to hold the edge, like the final page of a letter.

We stood like that—not quite undressed, not quite clothed—held in the quiet between breaths.

And in that quiet, everything that was about to happen had already been promised.

He looked down at my left wrist.

Then up at me.

“May I?” he asked.

Just those two words.

Nothing in his tone suggested control. Only care. Only presence.

I nodded.

Slowly, he lifted my wrist with both hands — not just to remove the watch, but to hold it first. To feel the pulse beneath the metal. His thumb brushed lightly over the skin where the strap ended — where the day usually ended, too.

He turned the crown of the watch gently.

The second hand stilled.

And something inside me did too.

Time had not stopped.

It had been **offered**.

He placed the watch into the drawer beside the bed — not dropped, not pushed — but laid it flat, aligned, almost ceremonially.

As though closing the last page of the day.

I watched him do it.

Then instinctively, I reached behind my neck.

The necklace.

The one his mother had given me at dinner — gold, delicate, resting just above my collar-

bones.

I touched the clasp.

He saw it.

And in a single, quiet motion, he reached out and caught my hand.

His fingers didn't tighten.

They just held mine, midair.

He spoke for the first time in Mandarin — not perfect, not practiced.

“就吧。”

(jiù zhè yàng ba) — Let it be.

My fingers loosened from the clasp.

Not because he asked.

Because something in his voice — in the way he tried to speak in my language — felt more intimate than undressing.

His hand moved gently to the back of my neck. Brushed my hair aside.

Then adjusted the chain so it lay just right along my collarbone.

And finally — slowly — he pressed a kiss just beneath it.

Not possession.

A benediction.

The necklace stayed.

So did something else.

He moved closer.

His hands didn't rush.

They came to the side of my waist — to the zipper at the back of my skirt.

He didn't ask. He didn't need to.

I felt his fingers find the tiny metal tab.

And then—

Zzzzzzz...

The sound was soft.

But in the stillness, it might as well have been thunder.

Each inch it slid down sent something deeper unraveling inside me. I could feel it in my chest — the racing pulse, the tension rising along my throat, the subtle shiver that rolled down my thighs.

My breath caught.

Not from fear.

From knowing.

From the unbearable awareness that I was being slowly — **deliberately** — undressed by a man who wasn't just touching my body.

He was **reading it**.

When the zip ended, he didn't push the skirt down.

He waited.

So did I.

For a breath. For a beat. For a choice.

And then — I let it fall.

It slid from my hips with a whisper and folded itself onto the floor.

I didn't step out.

He didn't ask me to.

We both just stood there — skin against air, silence against breath — until I reached for him.

My fingers came to the buttons of his trousers.

Not the belt — that had already been given.

Just the buttons now.

I didn't unfasten them.

Not yet.

I held the top one.

Looked up.

And smiled.

Playfully.

Knowingly.

"You're sure?"

That's what my smile asked.

He answered with his hand.

He brought it to mine — slowly — and tightened my grip.

Not forcefully.

Just enough to guide me.

“If you’re going to do this,” his eyes seemed to say, *“then let me help you do it like you mean it.”*

Our hands moved together now — his over mine, mine over the buttons. One by one, they gave way.

The fabric parted. Warmth met skin.

He let me do it.

And in that letting — he made it mine.

The last button released.

And this time, I was the one who pulled something away.

He pulled me closer.

Our skin met — first at the hips, then at the chest, then everywhere else in between. Heat passed between us without needing direction.

We moved together toward the bed — not stumbling, not desperate.

Just aligned.

I climbed in first.

He followed.

The sheets were cool. The air was not.

He pulled the blanket over us — not like covering, but like closing the outside world behind a curtain.

Under it, we found our own weather.

Warmth.

And fog.

Our breath deepened. Not from exertion. From recognition. Each inhale fuller than the last, as if our bodies had finally stopped pretending they were strangers.

I felt his chest rise against mine. The slow press of skin meeting skin, soul meeting soul.

And when his mouth found the space just below my collarbone — just beneath the necklace that still remained — I forgot how to separate breath from heartbeat.

The room blurred into fog, and the only thing left was the sound of our breathing.

Not hurried.
 Not spent.
 Just... deepening.
 Like tides pulled by something older than memory.

My lips parted once. I think I was trying to say something—
 but the air was too thick.
 Each breath slower now, fuller... heavier.
 Like my body had begun to forget the world even before my mind did.

The fog thickened.

The edges of thought softened.
 I felt my chest rise, then his. Then mine again.

In... and out.

Slower.

Deeper.

As if every inhale was a memory, and every exhale, a surrender.

I clearly remember what happened next...
 I remember every breath, every pause, every promise made without sound.
 And I will remember them — always.

That night..He...he did not just.. touch me. but something... Deeper The necklace stayed...
 there,
 and... and so did we.

But you know,
 the....the way he...

“就吧。”

(jiù zhè yàng ba) — Let it be.

And so, we will.

Chapter 8

La Bénédiction de l'Aube

Kausalyā supraja Rāma, pūrvā sandhyā pravartate.
O noble son of Kausalyā, Rāma—dawn has arrived.

THERE is an old rhythm to mornings in South India. Before the traffic, before the clatter of steel tumblers, a voice of devotion is carried into the air. The 'Suprabhātam'—literally “auspicious awakening”—is a set of verses composed in the fifteenth century by Prativādi Bhayankaram Anna, a disciple in the Sri Vaishnava tradition. They were written for Lord Venkateswara of Tirupati, to rouse the deity gently at dawn: to greet him with praise, to summon him into the day.

Over centuries the verses spread far beyond the hill temple. Radios carried them into homes, gramophones placed them beside coffee filters, television folded them into the background of family mornings. For many households, Hindu and otherwise, it is not the alarm clock that wakes the day but the cadence of “Kausalyā supraja Rāma...” — a call that is less command than caress, reminding even the restless that dawn can be greeted with reverence.

. . .

It was to this sound, faint through the mist, that we woke.

My body was tired, my breath slow; last night had left me both weightless and undone. Andy lay beside me as though the hours had only deepened his calm. He did not look exhausted, only steady, his thumb brushing mine in small circles that kept me from sinking

back into sleep.

He kissed my fingers one by one, slow and unhurried, and when I opened my eyes, his gaze was already waiting. We rose together, our hands still joined, and walked into the old bathroom at the far end of the corridor.

It was colonial in its proportions—arched window half-fogged by dawn, porcelain tub worn smooth by decades, brass taps that sighed as if reluctant to yield. Scented candles flickered on a narrow sill, their smoke trailing faint spirals into the cool air.

We stepped into the shower first. Water fell warm over my shoulders, the sound a curtain that closed the rest of the world away. He kissed me there—slow, deliberate, as if confirming that the night had not been a dream. My back pressed against the tiles, his palm steady at the nape of my neck. I let the heat soak through my tiredness until my knees softened.

Later, he turned the taps toward the tub. A brass vessel waited, polished, heavy with water that steamed faintly. He motioned for me to sit on the low step, and when I did, he lifted the vessel.

The first pour fell warm across my hair, sliding down my scalp, through my strands, along the curve of my spine. I closed my eyes. His hands steadied the flow, careful not to startle, careful not to miss a single place.

Each pour seemed to rinse something older than fatigue—salt air from Shenzhen stairwells, the memory of begging in a winter coat, the weight of nights I had hidden from myself. His eyes never left mine, even as the water streamed.

It was not just washing. It was ritual. Every tilt of the brass felt like a vow unspoken: "you can trust me—I am here for you."

The candles trembled with each draft. Water gathered at my collar, ran across my skin in small rivers, and still he poured, patient, as if each vessel was part of a ceremony only he knew.

When he finally set the vessel down, my hair clung wet and heavy across my shoulders. He brushed it back gently with his hand. I looked into his eyes and found them unchanged—calm, precise, wholly present.

I smiled. Again, it was not armor, not performance. It was simply gratitude, quiet as dawn.

When he finally set the vessel down, my hair clung wet and heavy across my shoulders. He brushed it back gently with his hand. I looked into his eyes and found them unchanged—calm, precise, wholly present.

Then, without a word, he reached for a large white Kaveri towel folded on the brass rack. He wrapped it slowly around me, the fabric rough with cotton, its warmth drinking the water from my skin. He drew it across my shoulders first, then down my arms, then lower,

pressing it gently along my legs.

At the end he knelt, drying my feet with the same unhurried care he had shown at the temple steps. Left, then right. The cloth caught the last of the droplets before they could touch the floor. I steadied myself with a hand on his shoulder, not because I might fall, but because the reverence of it made me weightless.

When he rose, I took the towel from his hands. It was my turn. I drew it over his shoulders, across his chest where the water still glistened, down his arms where his muscles rested loose under the skin. He let me—silent, steady—as if the gift was not being dried but being allowed to return the gesture.

The towel gathered water, but it gathered something else too: a symmetry. His patience, my gratitude. His ritual, my answer.

When I finished, we stood facing one another, the towel heavy between our hands, the candles burning low. For once, there was no mask left on either of us. Only the quiet of dawn, and two bodies learning what it meant to tend as much as to desire.

On the small table by the bed, my wristwatch lay in the drawer. He had turned its crown last night, stilling the second hand before kissing my wrist. Time had not restarted yet; it seemed to wait, obedient, for us to return.

The necklace his mother had given me still rested against my collarbone, damp now from the bath yet gleaming as if it had never left its place. He adjusted it gently, making sure the chain lay straight, his thumb brushing my skin just once.

Clothes from the night before waited too—not scattered or abandoned, but folded with care. Nothing here looked ruined by passion; everything bore witness to it. Even our silence seemed aligned, as if the room itself had been invited to keep its dignity.

After the bath we dressed in silence, his white shirt and my dress laid neatly where we had left them. The window was still misted, the air faint with sandalwood.

Andy reached for a small speaker, pressed play, and a voice entered the room—low, deliberate, centuries old.

“Kausalyā supraja Rāma, pūrvā sandhyā pravartate...”

I did not understand the words, but I felt their weight. They rose and fell like a tide, at once intimate and vast. It was not music to be listened to; it was music to be lived inside. The chant folded itself around us, a call not only to wake a God but to rouse something human.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, then took my hands without asking. His grip was warm, steady. For a moment he simply let the sound fill the room. Then he began, voice even, as if continuing the verse rather than interrupting it.

“Last night,” he said, “I told you what happened to me in the cockpit—the panic, the

disqualification. But that was only half. The other half was my father.”

The next line of the chant unfurled—“*Uttiṣṭhōttiṣṭha Govinda...*”—arise, arise.

The chant played on, verses rising and falling like breath. Andy sat beside me, his thumb tracing slow arcs across my knuckles. His eyes stayed on mine as he began.

“My father could not bear that I was no longer flying,” he said. “To him, weakness was worse than failure. For months I lived under that silence. Every mess dinner, every posting—it was there, unspoken.”

I tilted my head slightly. “You never spoke of it?”

He shook his head. “Not once. Until Port Blair.” His voice lowered. “One night a conversation between us deepened... and broke. In front of everyone. He dragged me out to the firing range. Two crates of rifles. Floodlights. A stopwatch. He wanted proof.”

The Suprabhātam swelled, the syllables steady as a drumbeat.

“What kind of proof?” I asked softly.

“That he was still stronger,” Andy said. “That aggression would always beat calm. He had built his life on force, on speed. I chose precision.”

He paused, his grip tightening just slightly on my hands. “The contest began. His fingers moved like a storm—parts snapping into place, every second hammered into steel. He finished in record time, faster than anyone before him.”

I leaned closer without meaning to. “And you?”

Andy’s eyes darkened. “When he looked left, expecting to see me still assembling... I was already standing. Rifle clean. Sight steady. I pulled the trigger three times into the dark.”

His voice dropped to a whisper, almost lost in the verse: “Click. Click. Click.”

The sound seemed to echo inside me. For a moment I felt as if I had been there—floodlights burning, the night holding its breath.

I swallowed. “So... who won?”

Andy’s lips curved, not in triumph but in something quieter. “He beat his own time. Faster than anyone alive. But victory isn’t only in speed. It’s in being ready first. And when the Subedar called it, he had to admit it—his son had taken aim and test-fired before him.”

The chant reached its closing cadence, blessing the day. Andy turned toward the window, mist pressed against the glass.

I held his hands tighter. He had not spoken to defend himself, only to be heard. When he finally looked back at me, I whispered the only word that seemed enough.

“Andy.”

Chapter 9

La Grammaire Lente de l'Adieu

What we keep is not proof, but witness.
What we keep is not proof, but witness.

THE older man's voice had been steady, the kind that could end an argument without raising itself. Keys crossed the room like a verdict disguised as courtesy. I did not understand the medals on his chest, only the sentence: "Drop her at the airport like a gentleman, Andy." His fury lived between the words; his manners carried them to the door.

Outside, the rain had rinsed the bungalow awake. Wet fronds pressed the boundary wall, a line of green eyelashes. The MARUTI 800 waited in a color that might once have been sky. Vinyl seats kept the night's cool. Andy turned the ignition; the engine cleared its throat, small and stubborn. The wipers began their metronome: left, right, return.

We did not speak.

Sena Vihar slid away—guardhouse, hibiscus, a bicycle with a cloth bag for milk—then Panampilly's quiet lanes, then the city gathering itself. A bus shouldered past with a red smear of gods on its bonnet, "Limited Stop" painted like a promise it wouldn't keep. At Vyttila, flyover pillars held up gray; at Edappally, hoardings shone on wet concrete, English vowels sharing space with Malayalam curves. Rickshaws stitched the traffic. A boy ran barefoot with an umbrella too large for him, the canopy a private planet.

Condensation folded my face into the city's—palm leaves and my cheekbone sharing a single pane. Diesel, wet earth, and the metallic sweetness of last night's steel tumbler: the house had woken to coffee and silence. His shoulder had smelled of soap; my hair had

remembered rain long after the rain forgot us.

On the Aluva bridge the river widened, brown and certain. A fisherman under a blue tarpaulin became a dot, then a thought. The dashboard rattled a little at fourth gear; a coin in the ashtray chimed and fell quiet. I wanted the road to invent a new distance between here and the airport. I wanted a sign that did not lead anywhere.

Andy drove like a man reading weather, not maps. Hazard lights for an ambulance. Space made for a truck with fogged mirrors. He adjusted the fan from two to one without asking. The wipers lifted a beat when a spray from the median drifted over; it felt like someone closing a book gently.

At the red light a boy lifted a steel kettle toward the window. Andy opened his wallet for a ten-rupee note. Between a sun-creased photo of his parents and the license sleeve, something red lay flat as a comma—a single love bean, *hongdou* ([hóng dòu]), the bead from my phone charm that had snapped off in the café a week ago. He had kept it. Not as proof. As a quiet sentence he'd never said aloud.

None of this was apology.

Beyond Aluva the signs began to say “Departures” as if the word had been waiting its entire life for our car. Rubber trees withdrew; the runway lights announced their geometry through cloud. He eased the MARUTI into the final lane, engine a low patience. We had not touched the radio. We had not touched each other since the door.

COK Departures · Drop-off lane

He pulled to the curb under a corrugated awning slick with monsoon and said, quietly, “Walk to the counter. I’ll park and come.” I nodded. The MARUTI blinked once, twice, and slid away into the small choreography of taxis and trolleys.

Inside, the terminal air was overcooled and lemon-clean. Sliding doors exhaled; announcements practiced a calm I could not borrow. The floor held a diluted version of the rain we’d carried in on our shoes. A queue braided itself along a chrome stanchion; a child dragged a soft suitcase that squeaked when turned.

Five minutes.

I chose a counter and stood without committing to it. My phone showed no new message. On the glass I was a faint overlay—coat, a mouth that did not know what shape to keep. Somewhere a security wand ticked against a belt buckle; a kettle in my memory breathed once and went still.

Ten minutes.

I walked the length of the hall as if he might be hiding behind a pillar like a misplaced thought.

Up the stairs to the gallery, down past the currency desk, up again to the washrooms with doors that sighed.

My hand found the silk of my scarf and then the soft cord of my phone charm—the bead missing from its loop, the *bongdou* ([hóng dòu]) he had kept in his wallet beside a sun-creased photograph. I pressed the empty loop to my lip and tasted metal and citrus.

Fifteen minutes.

I circled back to the curb where the rain misted like breath on glass. No small blue car. No shoulder I knew. I dialed. The call thought, failed, tried again. The ringing felt like a coin dropped in a deep bowl.

Something in me—taught to be stainless by a Guangdong apartment with thin walls and careful voices—lost its voice and found a sound older than speech. It arrived without asking permission. A heat behind my ribs, then up through the throat—salt, air, and a shape I had never made in public.

I cried. Not beautifully. Not cleverly. The sound broke out of me—raw, public, undeniable—and heads turned. A woman stalled her trolley; an attendant took a half-step, then chose mercy and distance. A tear hit the check-in tag and veined it into a map.

“Sir? Ma’am? Are you all right?”

I shook my head no and yes—both true. I walked faster, scanning doors as if one might open back into our morning, where time was still arguing on our side. The departure board clattered through cities that would not hold me. I set my palm to a column and let its cold argue me back into my body.

Then the reel unspooled—not kindly, but in sequence, each clearance like a tower waving us through.

The first handshake in the café: the bell had given one obliging note; awning jewels still held last night’s rain. He was all understatement—cloth bag, clean canvas shoes, a square-ruled notebook tilted to the light. Men like this usually look up when I enter; he did not. When he finally did, the eyes were calm, unhurried. His palm: warm, ordinary, steady. No capture, no contest—only parity, as if the hand itself could be a treaty. I felt my wrist change its script. The world measured us before we had words.

The Peak arrived in weather: Harlech held fog like a courtroom holds silence; eucalyptus edited the air; water kept time. He stood at the rail reading wind—no phone, no fidget—and nodded at a thinning in the white: the shoulder that once guided every landing into Kai Tak—corridors of air you only see when you learn how to look. “The airport moved,” he said, almost to himself. “The mountain didn’t forget how to be necessary.” Use is not value. I heard it without him saying it, and the line stayed when the fog closed again.

Then the cruise-ship night, the company party: Hong Kong turned to necklaces on black water; the band lacquered the deck in brass and velvet. He wore a mode jacket—ink-dark, clean lines, the collar quiet against his throat—making formality a language he spoke without trying. Our “contract” was meant to time out at midnight. At 11:41 a client joked about chemistry; at 11:44 flashbulbs asked for proof. We staged a kiss for the room and forgot the room halfway in. He didn’t seize. He arrived—mouth first at the corner of my smile, then the lower lip, a breath’s pause that asked and waited. Warmth gathered where my sternum keeps its secrets; salt from the harbour lived on his mouth; my jaw unclasped by itself. He kissed like he was reading a line twice to be certain—patient, precise—until the part of me that performs went quiet. At 11:55 the band melted into something slow and conspiratorial. For five minutes we danced the way people dance when a rule is about to run out—hips close, my back learning the weight of his palm, my breath finding his collar. The second hand behaved like a stranger; the minute hand kept its bureaucratic march; we ignored both. When the houselights brightened for docking, he threaded our fingers once more, his thumb settling on the small tendon at my wrist—the quietest anchor. “Good luck,” he said—not as an escape clause but as benediction—and let go last, gently. The night kept the print of his hand longer than skin should.

The dare arrived on the Western Ghats. “Why drive faster when we can drive slowly,” he said. “Because a lady is asking you to,” I said. “Do you always get what you ask?” “Up till now, yes—and I don’t think you’ll disappoint me.” Then the man who, with me, kept to patient lanes rolled his wrist. The small car leapt clean into the hills—throttle open, engine gathering itself, switchbacks stitching the slope. Rain glazed the tarmac; guardrails flashed; eucalyptus and wet earth rose like a tonic. He drove like a pilot reading wind—precise lines, no bravado—while my heart lost a beat and then another, a bright, unforgettable skip that rewrote my pulse.

After, his mouth found my fingertips. He took my hand, palm up, and paused as if learning a script. Ring first, then index, middle, and little—each kiss deliberate, a soft seal and a breath’s wait, counting my fingers into a language; the smallest vows handled first. The look he gave me over the knuckles while kissing my ring finger said a simple, unhurried sentence: one day, this one. I shivered. By the fourth my fingertips were wet with him—warm, salt-sweet, a shimmer of his breath. He turned my wrist and guided those damp tips along my cheekbones so I wore the proof of what he’d said without words.

Last night: not hurried, not solemn. Closures unhooked like small doors in a familiar house. His attention traveled as if reading a text he’d finally been allowed to keep; my body, for once, did not need to audition for mercy. His whisper at my ear—“You don’t need to be so strong always.” The sentence I had forbidden the world to say arrived like rain through a window I’d sworn shut.

And the bead: a single *bongdou* from my phone charm—love-bean, longing seed—kept flat in his wallet beside a sun-creased photo of his parents. Proof of nothing; remembrance of everything.

And now—the edge where the film burns white. He was gone. The space where he should be, bright as pain. I blinked hard; the terminal swam and then came back into its lines. The board kept changing cities. None of them had his name. For the first time I understood absence as contour: the sudden outline of my life when the one person who refused to kneel—and refused to make me kneel—was not standing inside it. The hall buckled—announcements, white light, wheels over tile—and then steadied. I wiped my face with my soft silk scarf. I stood very still and let the minutes count themselves without me.

Epilogue

I told her in a café that did not know either of us—stainless tables, a bell that refused to ring. She is the kind of friend who believes in leverage and timing, in asking twice if once does not bend the room. I kept my scarf on. I kept my voice plain.

“He did come back,” I said.

At the terminal I had become a small disaster against a column. My face was salt; my hands would not obey; the board kept changing cities that had no use for my name. Then a voice behind my left shoulder, light as if we were almost late for a movie:

“Hey—what happened, Meilin? Sorry I was late; I went to get my notebook. You know I try never to keep a lady waiting. Sorry for that.”

I turned. The relief was a violence. The first slap surprised both of us; the second colored his cheek the way the monsoon colors tile. He put a palm to the sting and laughed once—not bravado, not wounded pride—something boyish that belonged to a place before proofs.

“Why didn’t you tell me to stay?” The words jumped out of me like a fire chooses air.

He blinked, actually confused, and for the first time I saw how young a certain part of him was. “You told me you hate me” he said, as if reporting a price that had not printed yet. “If I’d known you wanted me to get you back, I would have. Of course I would have.”

“And yet you left me standing here.”

When I could breathe, he held out the reason for his absence: a blue notebook softened at the corners, graphite worn into the whorls of his fingers. “I went back for this,” he said. “It’s the one with the theorems I can’t quite pretend weren’t mine. I wanted you to have it. Goodbye gifts are supposed to be impractical, but honest.”

“Who do you think you are?” Her voice is a wire pulled tight.

He tries to steady the moment with thought, the way he always does. “Who am I? If one knew who one is, then—”

“Shut up.” The word lands like a stamp. Heads turn; the PA clears its throat for someone else’s gate. “Your father was right—you run. From trouble. From facing it. From me.”

He breathes once, a quiet four-count in his thumb against the notebook’s spine. “Yes. I do.” The admitting costs him; he pays. “I have trained for years not to let fear fly the plane. I withdraw when the picture is wrong. I keep the world wide and slow so I don’t get intimidated or anxious.”

He takes the hit. “Withdrawal is a maneuver,” he says softly. “But not from you. Not now.

And you're not the only one who calls it *strength* when it's fear."

Her chin lifts. "Say it."

"When I look at you I still see the shy pianist who learned to keep time with a watch because a boy once walked out while the door stayed closed. You stopped showing softness because someone made you beg for it." He swallows. "You don't do that anymore. You test instead. And I didn't want to fail your test by wanting you."

Something fragile and furious moves across her face. "Don't you dare analyze me right now."

"I'm not analyzing. I'm telling you I'm scared too. And I'm still here."

The hall breathes around them: a stroller clicks, a suitcase wobbles, Gate 12 announces a delay to Delhi. She is shaking very slightly; the gloves hide it from everyone but him.

"You left me," she says, softer now and somehow sharper. "You left me to guess."

"I left for two minutes and a bad habit. I'm done with both. If you want me to say it plain: I should have said *stay*. I should have asked."

"You should have," she snaps, and then the snap frays. "Because I was ready to fail my own test." Her eyes are bright, furious, wet. "Who do you think you are, coming in here with your notebook and your quiet voice and—"

"A man who will not run now," he says, louder than he has ever been with her. Heads turn again. For once he doesn't lower his tone. "A man who is soft with you because he chose to be. Not because he can't be anything else."

The wire between them hums. Heat climbs her face; his cheek still holds her hand's map. They are both breathing too fast and not backing away. The space, for once, does not widen; it narrows to a single, useful line.

She steps the last inch. He doesn't move to meet her until she does; then he does, decisively. The kiss is not a claim; it is what happens when two people stop arguing with the weather and let it rain. For a moment the terminal forgets its grammar—no departures, no arrivals, just a held breath between announcements.

"Idiot," I said, and tucked it to my chest.

"You don't give me goodbye gifts if you're not going to say goodbye."

He tilted his head, doing the thing where he listens with his eyes first. "Then let me ask you something without poetry. What will you do in Hong Kong if you go back?"

"I don't know," I said, honest because the notebook was heavy. "Return to the glamorous, empty circuit. Beautiful decks, sharper heels, fewer hours of sleep."

"If not Hong Kong—Guangdong? Friends who remember you before you were a quarterly target?"

I shook my head. "I sold that village to buy this city. The price included friends."

"Family?"

He knew the answer but asked anyway, tenderly, like a test he hoped I'd fail. "You know I don't have one."

He nodded, once. The terminal's white air seemed to get out of the way for his next line. "What if you had both now—work that respects you and a home that won't ask for proofs? Meilin—will you do me the honour of being my wife?"

Something opened in my chest as cleanly as a door drawing back on good hinges. "Yes," I said, because there was no other word. I kissed him and said it again, into the corner of his mouth where he first arrived that night on the water: "Yes." And then, with everything I had been refusing the world, I put my forehead to his and said it a third time, slower, as if signing a document with my breath: "Yes."

We walked back to the drop-off lane as if there were no lanes and no drops, his hand wrapped around mine the way a solution wraps around a condition. The rain had become a mist you could walk through without acknowledging; the MARUTI 800 waited in its square of weather like an old witness.

"One question," I said, because control likes receipts. "Why the Maruti today? Your father never gives it to you. What happened—what's the family secret the Iyers guard like a treaty?"

He unlocked the door and smiled at a place over my shoulder, as if addressing a previous generation that was willing to be overheard. "Now that you're technically Chan Iyer, I can tell you. In the eighties my father chased my mother across half of this state in a white Maruti. He had a rule—half superstition, half discipline—that the Maruti leaves the house only when the driver deserves the woman in the passenger seat. He said that when I met the one I'd be proud to marry, the keys would make sense in my hand. It's been twenty-eight years. Today was the first time he put them there."

The engine cleared its throat; the coin in the ashtray gave a small, domestic note; the wipers rehearsed their single line. We pulled away, not fast. I kept the blue notebook on my lap with two fingers on the spine, like a pulse.

Across the table, my friend—perfect hair, rings that know their own light—looked at me as if I had betrayed our quiet pact with the world. "So... that's how you caught him?" she said finally, almost impressed. "Make a genius run back for a notebook and then marry him."

“No,” I said. “My trick was to stop kneeling, and to stop asking others to. He turned back by himself. The rest was witness.”

Outside, the city ran its errands. Inside, I set the notebook down between the coffee cups the way people set down passports before a border—proof you do not have to show, but carry anyway.