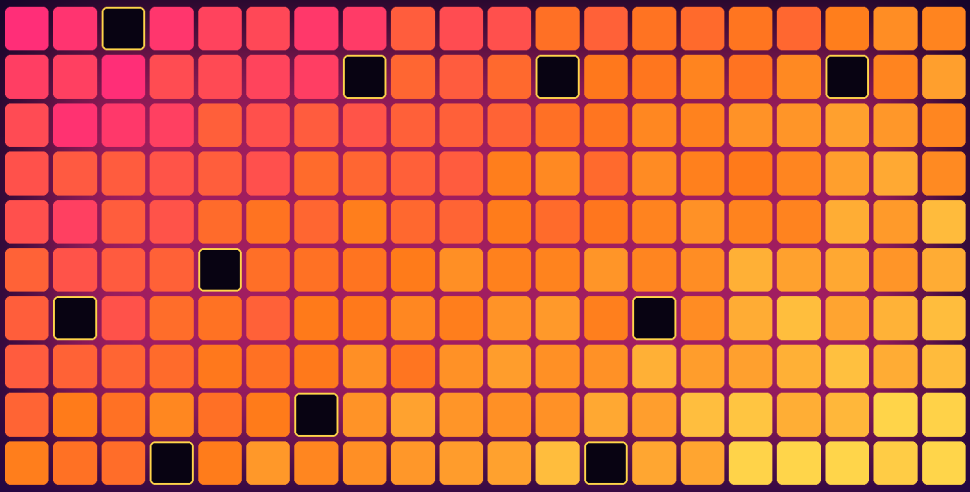


200 UNITS · 10 IN THE DARK · FIVE PERCENT

FIVE PERCENT DARKNESS

AN INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL CRIME NOVEL

Translated from the original Maithili by the author

GAJENDRA THAKUR

VIDEHA

FIVE PERCENT DARKNESS

A NOVEL

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GAJENDRA THAKUR

An International Financial Crime Novel

VIDEHA

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Five Percent Darkness

Gajendra Thakur

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PART ONE

The Empire of Five Hundred Rupees

CHAPTER 1

The Night of Five Hundred Rupees

Evening was falling beneath the railway bridge in Darbhanga. When a train passed overhead, the noise made the glass jars in Rani Devi's little shop tremble. They held biscuits, sweets and puffed rice. Rani kept looking at the telephone in her son Amresh's hand. Golden letters flashed on the screen: 'Win back what you lost. Only five hundred rupees.'

The shop under the old railway bridge seemed much smaller by day than it did at night. Between trains, porters from the station, rickshaw pullers and a few students came for tea. Rani served everybody the same measure. She could remember how many biscuits she had sold; the arithmetic of the numbers that appeared and vanished on her son's telephone was beyond her.

That very morning, the man who supplied sacks of flour had warned her that there would be no fresh sack until the old debt was paid. At first Rani had regarded the loss of five hundred rupees as a matter of a game. Now she could see, in those same five hundred rupees, ghee, rice and two months of school fees.

'Have you opened that game again?' Rani asked.

Amresh switched off the screen. 'What can happen over five hundred rupees, Ma? If I win, I'll get a thousand.'

Rani did not snatch the telephone from him. Looking towards the sack of paddy in the corner of her room, she said, 'And the five hundred you lost yesterday? Where did that go?'

'You must understand how a game works. You have to lose sometimes at the beginning.'

That night Amresh could not tell his mother that he had lost eighteen thousand rupees in three months. He had three screenshots of his winnings and more than a hundred messages recording his losses. He kept thinking that one good win would clear all his debts.

To Amresh, the bright colours on the telephone screen were proof that he could win. On the day of his first victory he had put five hundred rupees into the shop's cash box and declared, 'See, Ma? A telephone can earn money too.' Every loss after that he had described not as a defeat but as a temporary interruption. Starting another game was the easiest thing in the world; stopping to write down the accounts was the hardest.

The previous day at school, his classmate Gaurav had asked, 'Show me proof of what you won earlier.' Amresh had shown him an old picture. 'And

proof of the money you've lost?' Gaurav asked. Amresh had no answer. While their teacher explained a problem about interest, Amresh wrote figures on the back of his notebook: five hundred, eight hundred, one thousand. He imagined no law of mathematics could stand in the way of recovering lost money.

When the bell rang for games, Gaurav and Amresh stood beside the banyan tree at the back of the schoolground instead of running off to play. Gaurav opened his lunch box and offered Amresh half a paratha. 'Why should a man who turns five hundred into two thousand need a paratha?' he laughed. Amresh laughed too, though he had eaten nothing since morning. After losing again at gambling that day, he had felt it was wrong to take another five hundred from the box at home. Instead of admitting his mistake, however, he had decided that today would be his lucky day.

In a corner of the schoolground a small boy was struggling to untangle the string of his kite. Once a string becomes hopelessly tangled, its beginning and its end are caught in the same knot. Amresh helped him for two minutes. When the string was straight again, the boy ran off without thanking him. Amresh wondered whether, if he spread out the accounts of his debts in the same way, one knot might come free of the others. Then his telephone flashed, and he forgot about the string.

In Delhi, a telephone call from Darbhanga showed Nilima Jha, who examined documents relating to financial crime, another side of that evening. Rani's sister had been her classmate in college. For a month, hundreds of unfamiliar payments had been entering Rani's bank account and leaving again within minutes. The bank staff had said, 'Your shop's digital sales have increased. What's the problem?' But the shop had never made sales of that size.

On Nilima's desk lay a map of Darbhanga, official financial forms, a list of earlier complaints and a half-finished cup of tea. She had worked in Delhi for many years. Yet when a woman said in the language of home, 'Money comes into my account, and then it disappears,' her helplessness was clearer than anything in the vocabulary of a bank.

Nilima did not begin by teaching Rani how to open a screen in a mobile application. She asked whether Rani could obtain a printed statement from the bank, whether she could register a complaint, and who had operated the account through which the money had passed. Until she had answers to these three questions, Nilima wished neither to name a thief nor to accuse an honest employee.

'Does somebody else use your account?' Nilima asked.

'Once, a friend of Amresh's got me to sign some papers. He said they were for a banking facility. He gave me five thousand. I didn't understand all the terms.'

Rani's first recollection was not of the inside of a bank but of the space outside her shop. Amresh's friend had arrived carrying a mottled bag.

Showing her some papers, he had said, 'Auntie, payments for your little business will reach you faster if the account is in your name.' He showed her the bundle of five thousand rupees at the very moment when she owed exactly five thousand in rent.

Nilima wrote everything down, but she did not reduce the story to one line: 'Rani sold her bank account for five thousand rupees.' There were two distinct possibilities: that she had knowingly surrendered control out of greed, or that she had signed with incomplete information and under pressure. The difference was essential if the investigation was to reach the heart of the crime.

Nilima remembered an old letter from Rani's sister. During their college days, whenever the two students had too little money for a meal in the canteen, Rani used to send them roasted chickpeas from her shop. More important than the chickpeas was the slip of paper that came with them. On it Rani would write, 'Keep studying. Don't give up your work halfway.' Now Rani could not understand the transactions being made in her name. Nilima felt that educated people had a duty not to blame those who had been denied the chance of an education, but to listen to them properly.

At that moment the electricity in the Delhi office went off for an instant. The computers did not shut down, but the corridor lights dimmed. Through the glass Nilima saw her assistant Anand adding up figures from the accounts in another case. She wondered how many people in the city counted numbers every day and where the voices of the families behind those numbers were kept. She wrote down Rani's statement in Rani's own words, unwilling to replace them with hers.

After putting down the telephone, Nilima wrote on one sheet of paper: 'No corresponding trade in the payment account.' On another she wrote: 'The user loses five hundred, the account holder receives five thousand, but how much does the person in between earn?'

Just then a message arrived from an unknown number: 'The answer to that calculation is five per cent. And if you wish to stay alive, don't come to Darbhanga.'

There was a picture attached to the message. It showed no bank table but a lavish hotel table with a silver tumbler on it. Reflected in the glass was the face of Nilima's former superior, Vivek Sood, who had supposedly died in an accident six months earlier.

Nilima's first impulse was not to circulate the photograph. She preserved the original image received on her telephone, noted the time separately and told a technical examiner she knew that its original source would have to be traced. A place-name shown on a telephone screen was not, by itself, verification. A photograph could startle a person; it could also lie.

Nilima always remembered two things about Vivek Sood: his neat handwriting and an old burn on his right palm. When they had first met at the office, Vivek had shown her the scar and said, 'Don't erase the marks of

your mistakes. Look at them, and you'll avoid making the next one.' Remembering those words now, with his death certificate before her, left Nilima weary.

Nilima examined the time and location attached to the picture. It was three in the morning, and the place was Macau. The death certificate had been issued in Delhi, and its date was four days earlier than the photograph.

Outside, a police siren sounded in the street. For the first time Nilima understood that the loss of five hundred rupees might not be the end of a game, but the first door into a crime.

CHAPTER 2

Open to India, Closed to Everyone Else

At the cybercrime branch in Delhi, Inspector Arunima Rao was displaying a gambling page called 'Amber-9' on a large screen. Red and blue symbols spun across it. Beneath them ran the invitation: 'Stake one hundred, change your luck.' There was no definite company name on the page. The address for complaints produced only an automatic reply.

Inside the investigation room were four people and two screens. Arunima Rao read each line of information carefully. She was not in the habit of reaching a conclusion the moment she saw a table. 'It's a foreign website,' an assistant remarked. 'What is your evidence that it is foreign?' she asked at once. 'The domain address? The company's registration? The person who actually gives the orders?' The assistant began to examine his notes again.

Nilima drew two columns on a sheet of paper. At the top of the first she wrote 'What we have seen'; over the second, 'What remains to be checked'. In the first went Indian telephone numbers, prices in Indian rupees and local promotions. In the second went geographical restrictions on customers, the real owner, overseas banks and the final recipient of payments. Keeping the two columns apart was the first discipline of an investigation.

'Can nobody in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Nepal play on this site?' Nilima asked.

'Before we answer that,' Arunima said, 'we must separate two things. The internet connects the world, but a service can still choose its customers. Advertising, approval of accounts, telephone country codes and arrangements for payment can all be used to target a particular group. What we have evidence of, at present, is that games denominated in Indian rupees on this site are operated through Indian accounts. The claim that people in every other country are excluded will have to be examined separately.'

'So it is not a special affection for India. It is a calculation about a market.'

'Perhaps. What would they gain from gamblers outside India if the business they want is inside India? But don't turn a supposition into evidence.'

Amresh's deposit of five hundred rupees appeared on the screen. Beside it were two numbers: a transaction number and an account identifier. Behind

it lay the details of five other accounts used for withdrawals. The inquiry found that the accounts receiving the money were held in the names of a weaver in Gujarat, an elderly woman in Bihar, a student in Assam and two small traders in Maharashtra. Three of four people who gave statements said they had received some money in return for signing bank papers.

The weaver in Gujarat watched the threads moving on his loom all day. He was astonished to hear how much money had entered an account in his name. The student in Assam said he had handed over his papers believing they were for a scholarship application. One of the traders in Maharashtra opened his sales ledger and said that his shop had never sold goods worth such sums. These statements did not all point to the same conclusion. Taken together, though, they showed that the name on an account and the person who actually operated it might be quite different.

Arunima needed an interpreter when she spoke to the student in Assam over the telephone. The young man mixed Bengali and Assamese as he spoke, and the Hindi used by the police frightened him. On being told that an account stood in his name, he asked for the first time, 'Then what happened to the papers I filled in for my studies?' Nobody at the other end of the line knew the answer. Arunima did not fill the silence with a guess. She said arrangements would be made to record his written statement in his own language.

The weaver in Gujarat, with the sound of the loom behind him, asked, 'The bank may know how much extra cloth I have sold. My family knows when I actually received money. Will anybody write down that second thing?' 'We shall record both,' Arunima replied. After the call she told the assistant, 'If the interpreter gets even a few words wrong, the meaning of the witness's intention may change. Keep the original recording and the approved statement separately.'

Arunima placed the weaver's statement first on a list for verification, not on a list of the accused. 'If we frighten people who come forward to give evidence, next time nobody will tell us about a fraudulent bank account,' she said. Nilima was silent. In the language of law, this was a question of rights. In Rani's language, it was a question of livelihood.

Arunima opened a map. Tiny dots were scattered all over the country. No boundary joined them; only an unbroken trail of transactions did.

'How much business?' Nilima asked.

'An anonymous source says two thousand crore rupees in a month. But we don't yet know whether that means total deposits and withdrawals, actual stakes, the total wagered in repeated rounds, or net earnings. A number creates a sensation; defining what it measures helps establish a crime.'

The assistant's eyes brightened at the figure of two thousand crore. Turning over a sheet of paper, Nilima asked, 'If the same five hundred rupees is gambled three times, where will you count it?' Add the first

deposit, the stakes, the withdrawal, the second deposit and the final balance, and a very impressive figure can be put into a news report. But calling all of that fresh money arriving in the account would be precisely the mistake that could give the accused a defence.

Arunima wrote: 'Figures not yet verified.' The words were few, but the decision mattered. If a report set out to find a particular guilty person from the start, evidence pointing towards innocence might pass unnoticed.

'And the five per cent?'

'An alleged commission to local intermediaries on certain amounts. Not every banker is a criminal. Not every account holder is knowingly involved, either. We must examine the part played by each link in the chain.'

There was a small clock in the room that seemed to pause for half a moment before striking the hour. Nilima looked at her watch. In Darbhanga, Rani would probably be getting ready to close her shop. In Delhi, the question of five per cent stood written down as a number. In Darbhanga, the same words had made a mother afraid to pick up her son's telephone.

'What if we get the website blocked first?' Anand asked.

'Where there are legal grounds, we shall try to have access blocked,' Arunima replied. 'But we shall still have to find out whose instructions sent money through Rani's account. Shut one door and you have not emptied the whole house.'

This time it was Anand, not Nilima, who drew a question mark on the paper. For the first time he understood that when a screen was shut, the people behind it became invisible; they did not cease to exist.

Meanwhile another complaint came in. A retired teacher in Patna had been tricked out of one lakh and eighty-three thousand rupees on a video call by people claiming to have placed him under 'digital arrest'. The first destination of his money was one of those same five accounts.

The retired teacher's voice trembled over the telephone. He had been told that his bank account was connected with a serious matter of national security. Behind the callers was a backdrop resembling a courtroom. Several times they had ordered him not to speak to his family. Terrified, the teacher had not told even his wife the truth.

Nilima did not treat the teacher's money as if it were the same as Amresh's gambling losses. One person had placed bets out of the hope of gain; the other had been cheated through fear. The methods of the crimes were different. Even a common banking route did not necessarily mean the same criminals were behind them.

Arunima turned off the screen. 'The question now is not whether the site is foreign or Indian,' she said. 'It is why money from different frauds is flowing down the same tunnel.'

CHAPTER 3

The Dead Man's Attendance

The death certificate of Nilima's former superior, Vivek Sood, was examined again. In the photograph taken after the accident, the person identified as Vivek had no old burn mark on his hand. Vivek had carried such a mark on his right palm for twenty-five years, ever since he had burnt it on a hot stove.

Seeing the name written on the hospital papers, Nilima remembered the day of the accident. When the news of Vivek's death had reached the office, everybody had been asked to observe two minutes' silence. Nobody had thought it important to ask whether anyone had actually seen his body or had merely read the certificate.

Showing her a copy of the old documents, Arunima said, 'The body that was wrongly identified must have a family too. We must not assume that Vivek is alive. But it is just as necessary to find the name of the person who died.' Sometimes a criminal investigation was an attempt to restore a wrongly written name to its proper place.

Arunima called for statements from the doctor and the relatives who had identified the body. There was a name on the papers, but Nilima could not be certain from the photograph. 'The suspicion is serious,' she said, 'but it would be too early to say that Vivek is alive.'

On the day the news of Vivek Sood's death had arrived, Nilima had opened the drawer of her desk and searched for an old letter from him. The letter concerned a disagreement over an audit in their office. Vivek had written, 'The document that suits me best is the one whose evidence I ought to examine most carefully.' At the time she had taken it for a stern remark. Now, looking at his photograph, the sentence returned to her. But memory could not change the identification of a dead body.

'You want him to be alive,' Arunima said quietly.

For the first time Nilima raised her eyes. 'Yes. And that is why my first claim may be wrong. You must stop me if it is.'

Arunima closed the file. The admission did not lessen the trust between the two women; it increased it. When an investigator acknowledged what she wished to be true, it became easier to recognise the influence of that wish.

That night a notebook arrived by courier. On its first page, in what looked like Vivek's handwriting, were the words: 'Five per cent is not an

item in the accounts. It is the price of silence.' Inside were dates of journeys to four cities, the names of two fictitious companies and the words 'India only'. A page had been torn out, leaving only half a sentence: 'The licence from Malta...'

On several pages the same words had been written on different dates: service, consent, security. Beside them were question marks. Nilima knew Vivek's handwriting as intimately as she recognised a young shoot, but recognition alone did not prove the document genuine. She took out two old specimen signatures from the office and put them aside for comparison.

A little fibre of paper protruded from the torn page. Nilima reached towards it, then withdrew her hand. To alter something that might one day speak in court, merely to satisfy one's curiosity or fear, was the first step away from justice and towards injustice.

Nilima recognised the smell of the notebook. Vivek always kept neem-scented paper at the office. Then she looked at the courier receipt and stopped short. The sender's name was 'Rani Devi'. Rani was in Darbhanga, and she had not closed her shop for a single day in the past five days.

'Someone wants to drag Rani into my investigation,' Nilima said.

The clerk's signature on the courier booking receipt bearing Rani's name was indistinct. Arunima did not immediately treat Rani as guilty on the strength of the receipt. Someone could have misused her name, supplied a false address, or forged the receipt itself. They decided first to establish who had actually delivered the parcel and when it had been handed over.

Nilima saw again the sack of paddy in Rani's shop. If that woman were behind the crime, why would she send a parcel in her own name? But that, too, was imagination rather than evidence. Silently she asked herself who knew so well that frightening a mother in Darbhanga might stop an investigation in Delhi.

Arunima immediately contacted the local police to arrange protection for Rani. A fresh message on Rani's telephone said: 'Ask too many questions and your son won't come home.'

Amresh did not return from school. Two hours later he was found in the lane behind the house, trembling with fear. Two men had told him, 'If you close your mother's account, the whole town will see the proof of your debts.' He had not seen their faces. But the strap of one man's slipper was torn, and his accent was local.

Malati, a woman officer at the local police station, did not thrust a sheet of paper in front of Amresh. She first asked Rani, 'Does your son want to speak now, or would he rather wait a little?' 'Now,' Amresh said softly. Malati listened and repeated a few words. 'You did not see their faces. One had a torn strap on his slipper, and his accent sounded local. Is that all?' Amresh said yes. Malati thanked him, but she did not show him photograph after photograph and turn identification into a guessing game.

On the way home Amresh asked, 'Ma, what if those men take me away again?' Rani searched for an answer. She knew that 'Nothing will happen' would be the sweetest of lies. 'I have told the police,' she said. 'I won't send you anywhere alone. If you're frightened, tell me, not the people on the telephone.'

Amresh looked at his mother. For the first time they were sharing their fear. Until then each had been trying to conceal a separate shame.

When Amresh reached home that evening, he gave his mother his telephone for the first time. He could no longer bring himself to read the messages that had arrived in the name of a classmate. Rani placed her hand on his forehead and asked only, 'They didn't hurt you, did they?' 'No,' Amresh answered. But the fear in his eyes was much greater than his debts from gambling.

Nilima did not ask a long series of questions over the telephone. She advised that Amresh should make a statement only if he wished to, with the local police present. A child's fear, a family's humiliation and a bank's transactions were three different matters. The real success of that night's investigation was not the discovery of a foreign name. It was Amresh's return home.

Nilima understood that the cheapest guard employed by an empire of crime did not live abroad. It lived inside the victim's shame.

CHAPTER 4

The Account’s Second Owner

Outside the bank, Rani Devi wiped her slippers twice. Black water had collected on the roads of Darbhanga after the night's rain, but there was not a speck of mud on the bank's steps. For the first time in her life she was afraid of leaving footprints on a clean floor. She carried a paper bag containing her passbook, a photocopy of her Aadhaar card, the receipt for her shop's rent and the paper band that had once held a bundle of five thousand rupees. The money had gone towards the rent she owed, but Rani had been unable to throw away the band.

Her son had come home the previous night, but she had not seen him sleep as he used to. Now and then he would get up, look at his telephone and turn off the screen again. His mother was beginning to understand that he was less afraid of the debts than of the whole village finding out how much he had lost.

The employee issuing tokens inside the branch said, 'For a statement of transactions, go to that window.' Rani replied, 'I don't want a statement. I want my account.' The employee looked surprised, then wrote a number on a small slip of paper.

The officer responsible for compliance was a middle-aged woman. Her nameplate read 'Sujata Thakur'. She asked Rani to sit opposite her. First she offered her some water. Then she said, 'The account is in your name. Who was given the means to operate it is another question. Tell me quietly, from the beginning.'

Rani told the story of the five thousand rupees once more. A boy had arrived carrying a mottled bag. He was a friend of a friend of Amresh's, and had said his name was Manish. 'Auntie,' he had said, 'you run a shop. I'll arrange a facility for digital sales. You'll have to sign a few papers.' That was the last day on which the rent could be paid. Rani had looked not at the thickness of the papers but at the number of banknotes.

'So you believed they were giving you five thousand rupees to take up this facility?' Sujata asked.

'They told me the shop would have a name of its own and the income would grow. I never asked when goods would actually be sold in exchange for the money.'

Rani held out her palm. 'I count biscuits with this hand, Didi. When a jar worth fifty rupees is emptied, the account comes right. But when I see

these enormous figures in the bank, it seems that somebody has opened another shop in my name.'

Sujata did not turn the computer towards her. She laid out a printed statement obtained through the authorised procedure. Some of the deposits were much larger than the shop's normal sales for a whole month; within a short time, payments had passed on to other accounts. With a red pencil Rani circled the date on which her shop had been closed. On that day the family had held the memorial meal for her eldest sister. Amresh himself had put the lock on the shop.

'I cannot forget this date,' Rani said. 'That day I counted the names of people, not rupees.'

'We still have to establish what business those deposits belonged to,' Sujata said. 'I am recording your statement in writing. But money having reached your account does not by itself make you guilty.'

Rani remembered another question. 'If I have the account closed, will the people who threaten me come back?'

Sujata was silent for some time. 'Threats are a police matter outside the bank. From our side, I can begin the procedure for a safety-related complaint and an examination of suspicious activity. Any restriction on payments will also have to follow the rules and the necessary orders. But I cannot tell you that handing over your papers here will make everything all right.'

The answer gave Rani no immediate comfort. Yet this was the first person who had not offered her false reassurance.

Rani then took out an old notebook she had brought with her. Among the entries for biscuits, one page bore Manish's telephone number and, beneath it, a few small words in his handwriting: 'Contact facility—district in-charge.' Rani's eyes rested on them. She had never thought to ask who the district in-charge might be.

'Is this your handwriting?' Sujata asked.

'The number is mine. The other words are his.'

'Keep the original paper with you. When you show the original to the police, obtain a receipt. I shall mention it in your statement.'

Rani had imagined that a visit to the bank would expose her own fault and her son's in two sharply different directions. But when she turned the page, she saw that after Manish's name were little codes for three districts: Supaul, Madhubani and Samastipur. They were not accounts on either side of a ledger, merely fragments of names. She could not understand what the codes were for.

As she came out of the bank, three men stood beneath an umbrella. An old customer waved to her, but another man lifted a telephone to his ear and said, 'Yes, she's just come out.' Rani assumed that he meant her. She turned to look. The man walked away across the road.

Suddenly Rani felt ashamed. Why was she hearing signs of a crime in an unknown man's voice? Fear makes invisible witnesses appear on every side of a person. She drew her sari more tightly about her. At that moment she remembered again the seriousness of Sujata's work: what one had seen was one thing; what one had understood was another.

When Rani returned to the shop, Amresh was sitting with his head bent over his schoolwork. Behind a jar he had put not his telephone but an old paper receipt.

'What is this?' Rani asked.

'I've found another name for the man who gave us five thousand. Manish said he was saving money for his sister's wedding. A boy in my class says he opens bank accounts in three villages.'

'What a boy in your class says is not proof,' Rani replied.

It was the first time Amresh had heard his mother speak in this way. 'Why do you talk like that now?'

'Because I don't know the true name of the man who left five thousand rupees with me. From now on I must keep an account of my mistake and his mistake separately.'

That evening Sujata reread her written observations inside the bank. Reports of complaints from three different districts had reached different branches. The documents did not prove that the same person operated all three accounts. But one sentence recurred in all three statements: 'A payment facility for the shop.'

She sent a formal request for examination to the senior compliance department. A little later the reply arrived: the old acknowledgement marks on requests from all three districts were registered under the name of the same intermediary organisation. The remaining letters of the name were unclear.

Sujata folded the paper and placed it in a secure file. Outside, the bank's gate was being shut. Only one question rose in her mind: if this woman was the owner of her account, since when had she been forbidden to see her own money?

CHAPTER 5

The Court of Lies

At dawn Shivshankar Mishra took from his cupboard the notebook in which he had calculated the expenses of his daughter Madhavi's wedding. No date had yet been fixed; he had merely written down a few possible days. On the first page were two lines: 'Attendance of all' and 'Savings'. Three times he passed his thumb over the figure entered against the savings. The one lakh and eighty-three thousand rupees written on the paper were no longer in the bank.

His wife, Sharda, said, 'You haven't slept all night. Tell your daughter.' Shivshankar turned his face away. A year earlier he had taught his daughter that criminals were afraid of the law, not innocent people. His real fear now was that his voice alone would tell her he had failed to preserve that lesson in his own life.

Four days earlier he had seen on his telephone screen the faces of men who called themselves investigating officers. First came politeness, then an accusation, and after that the names of his family. The video had a background resembling a courtroom. The worst thing was not the loss of money. It was that Shivshankar, sitting in his own home, had asked the men on the telephone for permission even to open his own door.

His daughter Madhavi came in. 'Babuji, I want to see that notebook.' For a moment he felt that he had no right even to conceal what he had kept hidden. But as he handed it to her, he said, 'Listen to my story before you look at the accounts.'

Madhavi opened the window. Outside, the milkman rang his bell. The day was beginning in the most ordinary way, while Shivshankar's life was no longer ordinary.

Arunima Rao and Nilima Jha came to his house that day. The teacher had already submitted a written complaint, and he kept a copy of his statement safely with him. Until then Shivshankar had thought only that the paper recording his private humiliation had reached the police. He had never imagined that the story might one day reach a newspaper.

An old calendar bearing an image of Durga Puja hung in the retired teacher's room. Opening the passbook of his remaining pension savings, he showed it to the police. 'There was a uniform on the screen. There was a seal. They said I was involved in money laundering, that there was a court order, and that I must tell nobody.'

'Did you see a written order from any court?' Arunima asked.

'They showed me everything in the video. They even forbade me to call my daughter.'

'That was no digital arrest. It was a fraud designed to frighten you. You are not the accused. You are the complainant.'

The teacher's eyes filled with tears. Nilima studied the small figures in the passbook carefully. Part of the money had reached Rani's account, but the bank's written statement showed that money from other people had entered the same series just before that portion. The point at which cybercrime and gambling met was a payment route shared by distinct criminal operations. There was still no basis for calling them one organisation.

Shivshankar said something that Nilima wrote down in her notebook: 'I had saved it for my daughter's marriage. Those people told me to deposit the money for the security of the country.'

Meanwhile a journalist had arrived at Arunima's office: Revati Karn. For six months she had been putting together the stories of families in Bihar, Bengal and Gujarat. She had more than photographs of ruined homes. She had bank complaint numbers, police acknowledgements and old messages from mobile telephones.

'There is something you haven't heard yet,' Revati said. 'The loudest voice that promoted gambling is now conducting a campaign against it.'

She showed them a photograph. It had been taken at the opening of the 'Safe India Campaign' in an expensive auditorium in Patna. A businessman named Viraj Sahni stood on the platform. Behind him, in large letters, were the words: 'Save the younger generation from gambling.' There was a small cut mark beneath his left ear.

'Who is this man?' Arunima asked.

'His company's name appears in Rani's papers. And the expenses of his lecture are paid by an organisation registered in Malta.'

For the first time, a centre within India began to emerge on the investigation map.

Arunima was not counting the people standing in the photograph. Her gaze had settled on the date it was taken and the advertising board behind the platform. Details of the stage expenses were publicly available, but where the sponsor's name should have been, there was only a short phrase: 'Partner organisations'.

'Where did your source get this photograph?' Arunima asked.

Revati closed her notebook. 'From the public website of the opening ceremony. But the original photograph is public; the identity of the person who told me about it is not. There is a difference between those two things.'

'I shall obtain the original photograph through the official procedure,' Arunima said. 'And the fact that Viraj's company name is printed in Rani's papers does not, by itself, make him the owner of a criminal enterprise.'

'That is all I am saying, too. But Rani was given five thousand rupees for the signatures she made, while thousands were spent decorating the stage in Patna. Someone may be playing a part contrary to the work he professes to do. In that case, asking questions is my job.'

There was no excitement of victory in Revati's voice. As she travelled by train from Darbhanga to Patna the previous night, a widow had told her, 'Write my story, but don't print my bank account number.' Revati had put that request on the first page of her notes. In the haste to discover guilt in the movement of money, it was easy to expose the name of a poor person.

'What will you publish?' Nilima asked.

'Nothing yet that I cannot prove. I shall send two questions first. One: under what head of account does Viraj Sahni's company receive payment for this banking-related service? Two: what is the actual contract with the Malta sponsor of the Safe India Campaign?'

'And if they don't reply?'

'Then I shall write that they did not answer the questions. I won't fill the empty space with my own guesses.'

That day Nilima heard an unusual patience in Revati's voice. The patience of a government office and the patience of a journalist were not the same. The first waited for papers to withstand the scrutiny of a court; the second risked the confidence of its readers by postponing publication. Yet somewhere the unseen people whom both wished to protect were the same.

In Shivshankar's room Madhavi closed the wedding notebook. After a long time she asked her father a question for the first time: 'Why didn't you call me?'

Shivshankar was silent. He remembered the men on the telephone saying, 'If you tell your family, your arrest is certain.' The words seemed to ring in his ears again.

'I taught you not to remain silent when you are afraid,' he said slowly.

'Then begin with me now,' Madhavi replied.

She gathered the pension receipts, the old messages on the telephone and the copy of the complaint in one place. Her question did not ask for useless consolation: 'Will the money come back?' Shivshankar could not answer. Arunima had already told him that an investigation might trace the money; to guarantee its recovery would be a lie.

That evening Revati watched an old advertisement in her newsroom. A video warned against the dangers of gambling, but immediately afterwards another advertisement invited viewers to 'Change your luck'. It was a contradiction in the complicated world of publicity. There was still no proof that the two advertisements had the same sponsor.

Revati looked up the company's name in public records. Viraj Sahni's photograph appeared at many functions: donations to a hospital, books for a school, a youth celebration in the city. There was genuine happiness on the children's faces in those pictures. Revati did not remove them. To erase

the existence of good work simply in order to ask questions about a crime would be another kind of falsehood.

A journalist friend said on the telephone, 'Write the headline: A gambling empire behind the campaign to save the young.'

'I shall write that headline when the documents can bear its weight,' Revati replied. 'At present I have some names leading from the meeting to the bank. I do not have the owner of an empire.'

After she put down the telephone, a new message arrived. It was short: 'Look at the second signature on Rani Devi's page.' There was no sender's name.

Revati did not open the image attached to the message. She immediately told Nilima, 'Someone wants to show me a path towards evidence. But someone may also be pushing me towards the wrong door.'

Nilima wrote in her notebook: 'Lead; source under examination.' It was the third time in two days that she had had to practise the same discipline. Outside, the sunlight was fading. In a glass-fronted building in Patna, the white poster of 'Safe India' gleamed. In the teacher's home the wedding notebook lay closed.

On a map the distance between the two places was small. On the road to proof it was much greater.

CHAPTER 6

The First Map of Money

In the investigation room in Delhi, Nilima Jha laid out four coloured pencils but did not pick up any of them. A map of the country lay on the table. She was not ready to search the map for a criminal's address. Arunima told her, 'These figures may show us how far the crime has spread. But we shall also have to account for every colour we put over the lives of people.'

The first list contained five accounts about which initial complaints had already been received. Separate transactions appeared beside the names of a weaver in Gujarat, a student in Assam, an elderly woman in Bihar and two small traders in Maharashtra. In some cases the account holders had themselves ordered payments; in others they claimed that transactions had been made from unknown telephones; elsewhere people knew money had arrived but could not explain why. The statements were still being checked against the actual bank records.

Nilima began the first line not with Rani's name but with a date. On that day Rani's shop had been closed, yet an unusually large deposit had entered the account. A second line stopped at the date of Shivshankar Mishra's complaint. A third followed the payment made for Amresh's game. Some of the money in all three appeared to have gone towards the same intermediary account.

'I must not write yet that the same man is responsible for all three crimes,' Nilima said.

'But the route taken by the money is the same,' said Anand, her assistant.

'A railway station can be one place. That does not mean every passenger is travelling for the same reason. A common banking route may mean there is someone giving common instructions, or merely that a service is available to different customers. We need sources, not a verdict decided in advance.'

Anand lowered his head. To him the figures were an interesting puzzle. Nilima, however, could see behind them Rani's closed shop and Shivshankar's daughter. Their responses were different, and the investigation needed both.

Beside the preliminary details received from the branches lay a list of further records requested through the proper procedure. Information about many accounts had not yet arrived. Some institutions had acknowledged receipt; others had asked for a revised form. A delay in receiving

information did not make it less true, but a change in the timing could alter the outcome of an investigation.

On the computer screen the same five hundred rupees appeared three times as different movements: first a deposit into a gambling account, then a stake in a game, and finally a separate entry for the sum remaining. 'If we add all three and say fifteen hundred rupees of new money has come in, the arithmetic will tell a lie,' Nilima said. 'They are records of different actions, not different sources of fresh money.'

'Could the unverified figure of two thousand crore rupees a month be distorted in the same way?' Arunima asked.

'It could. We cannot yet say whether the figure is right or wrong. And if we begin to direct our investigation towards that great number, we may fail to see the smaller figure that contains the real crime.'

On a fresh sheet Arunima wrote: 'Money flows, total wagers, new deposits, earnings and withdrawals—to be calculated separately.' Nilima looked at the five words in the document. Their weight seemed more frightening than Rani's five hundred rupees.

A reply arrived from one of the branches. The physical acknowledgement receipts for complaints from three districts bore almost the same words: 'A payment facility for the shop.' But the signatures of those who had filled in the forms appeared different in all three places. The official identity of the person whom Rani had called 'Manish' was still unavailable.

'The intermediary is one and the same,' Anand said again.

'What makes you say that?' Arunima asked.

'The same sentence. The same category of accounts.'

'That might equally be the result of a copied advertisement. If the signatures are different, write down that difference too.'

Anand drew a question mark in another colour. For the first time he understood that a question mark occupied space on a map, but could do much less harm than putting a criminal's name there.

The telephone rang unexpectedly. It was Sujata Thakur from the Darbhanga branch. 'Rani Devi has given us her written statement. I have begun the procedure to preserve the original bank records. But there is something new. In some old letters relating to that organisation, the person named as the contact is different.'

'What name?' Nilima asked.

'I have not yet received a clear copy of the paper. To tell you a name now would mislead you. If the person's identity is confirmed, I shall send it.'

Nilima put down the telephone and wrote 'Unknown' on her list. Until yesterday she would have wanted a definite name in that place. Today accepting uncertainty seemed to her the hardest task in an investigation.

In the afternoon part of Shivshankar's bank receipt became lawfully available for technical examination. The first recipient of the money and a

later transaction through Rani's account seemed to belong to the same chain. But the origin, the intermediate accounts and the final beneficiary did not appear along a single unbroken line. There were gaps: papers that had not arrived, and papers that had not yet been requested.

'What shall we put in these gaps?' Arunima asked.

'Gaps,' Nilima replied.

For a few moments the room was silent. Somewhere in the corridor an employee was laughing. In an inquiry into crime, silence could sometimes be deadly. Yet it was equally dangerous to fill every blank sheet with a conspiracy.

Before evening, a message came from Revati. Two editors had asked her to publish the photograph of the campaign in Patna. She had refused because the source of Rani's papers had not yet been fully checked. 'And I have written down my reason for refusing, so that whoever wishes may understand it,' the message ended.

Nilima continued to gaze at the map. Rani's name appeared there as a little dot. She wanted to rub it out. For writing a victim's address on a map of possible criminals could turn that person's whole life into an object of investigation. She preserved the original table but decided to remove the account holders' names from the copy intended for public presentation.

Just then Anand returned from near the gate. In his hand was a letter from the local police concerning one of the five account holders. It said: 'Presence of the person at the current residential address could not be verified; attempts to contact the family are continuing.'

'Has somebody disappeared?' Anand asked.

'The letter doesn't say that,' Arunima answered. 'It says only that the police could not find the person at the residence. First obtain information from the family, the school or the place of work. If there is a case of disappearance, it will be registered separately.'

But the last sentence of the letter troubled Nilima. A member of the family had told the local police over the telephone that two days earlier a man claiming to represent the bank had come to the house and asked the account holder to meet him in the city. A written statement confirming this account was still awaited.

At that moment Rani was watching water boil for tea in her shop. Amresh was arranging biscuits in the jars. When somebody in the lane called him by name, he started. His mother looked at him. There was no map of Delhi in that small house in Darbhanga, but the fear of all the gaps on the map was present there, like the air.

In a corner of the map Nilima wrote: 'Find the people first. Find the owners afterwards.'

CHAPTER 7

The Unfamiliar Signature

In Surat that morning, the sound was not of looms but of trucks sounding their horns in confusion as they waited to load and unload goods. Aditi Rane opened her office window. Outside the warehouse gate, bundles of cloth were being taken down. She could not have named their value from their colours, but eight years of checking export accounts had taught her to recognise an unusual line in an invoice from a distance. That morning the line stood upon her desk: 'Consultancy and Market Expansion Services'.

'The goods went out seven days ago,' said Jiten, the company's accounts assistant. 'Why the service invoice was raised today, I cannot understand.'

Aditi laid out the original invoice, the warehouse dispatch receipt and the payment statement separately. 'An invoice being made today is not wrong in itself,' she said. 'The questions are what service was provided, who provided it and what proof there is.'

The family of the warehouse owner, Ramakant Poddar, had been exporting textiles for two generations. His father had once sold saris in the markets of Darbhanga before coming to Surat and setting up looms. Ramakant was still frightened of pages on a computer, but he had never stopped counting the bundles with his own hands. His firm, Sagarvastra Exports, had sent cotton cloth to a regular overseas customer. The dispatch receipt and freight particulars agreed. It was not the existence of the goods that was in doubt, but the service charge.

'If the cloth has actually gone, what is the difficulty here?' Ramakant asked.

'The firm that sends the cloth need not be the same as the firm that receives the consultancy fee,' Aditi replied. 'And if your signature is on the payment document, you have the right to ask questions.'

Ramakant wiped his spectacles and picked up a sheet. In blue ink, there was writing that looked like his name. He held the paper towards the window light. 'It looks like my handwriting, but see the date. That day I was in hospital. My daughter was being operated on.'

Aditi did not write the hospital story in her notebook. 'I am recording your recollection for the moment,' she said. 'We shall look at the evidence of your presence later. We cannot declare a forgery merely by looking at the handwriting.'

'To hear you speak, one might think you don't believe me.'

‘What you say matters. We must make it so strong that even a person who disagrees with you cannot brush it aside.’

Ramakant remained quiet for a while. Then a young man came in from the warehouse and set down a lunchbox sent by his daughter, Tanuja. Two grains of rice had stuck to the lid. Ramakant stared at this little thing as though the day at the hospital had returned to stand before him. Of his own accord, he offered to show Aditi the receipt from the day of the operation.

Aditi requested the documents in writing: the hospital receipt, the company's approval register, the consultancy agreement, and the particulars of the firm that had issued the invoice. These were four separate questions. She was in a hurry, but drawing four conclusions from a single sheet in her haste would have been a professional mistake.

The firm's name was Navkshitij Seva-Sampark. The invoice carried two addresses: an office in Surat and an address for correspondence in Patna. The description of services read ‘Customer Confidence Enhancement Programme’. The space where the overseas buyer of the cloth ought to have been named was blank. One edge of the round seal at the bottom was worn, hiding half the letters.

Jiten took an old envelope from his pocket. ‘That seal was on this envelope too. A man gave it to me and said I should get the papers signed quickly.’

‘His name?’

‘He said his name was Rajiv. But the watchman says he put down another name in the gate register.’

Before hearing the watchman's account, Aditi put the envelope aside. Employees' memories could influence one another. She did not tell Ramakant whom he should consider guilty either. She wanted each person to speak of what he had seen, in his own words.

At noon Aditi received a message from an old friend, Nilima Jha, who was assisting a financial investigation in Delhi. The two women had met during professional training, and still managed to discuss books twice a year. Nilima had written: ‘In a few states we are examining papers signed under the description of “services”. Have you come across any such general irregularity in your work?’

Aditi did not immediately send a picture of the invoice. She asked: ‘Can you send the case number and an authorised request? I cannot send confidential business papers like this.’

Nilima replied: ‘You are right. For now, just answer the question with yes or no.’

‘Yes. But no connection has been established.’

After writing those words, Aditi put down her phone. She was glad there was somebody in Delhi who did not mistake a suspicion for a conclusion.

In the evening Ramakant looked at the paper again. ‘My goods are on the ship. What is the use of opening up this invoice now?’

‘If the invoice is genuine, the matter will be settled,’ said Aditi. ‘If it was made without your permission, your company's name may be used in some other business. In either case, we must know the truth.’

‘And what about my customer's trust?’

‘When you conceal the truth, trust may seem safe at first. Later it breaks all at once.’

They opened the cupboard where the old warehouse papers were kept. Ramakant himself took out a thick file. It contained cloth samples, inspection receipts, and an invitation to an old event. The invitation requested decorative materials for a public meeting of Viraj Sahni's ‘Safe India Campaign’. The organiser was named as Navkshitij Seva-Sampark. One edge of the seal was worn in almost the same way.

Aditi did not put the two papers together as if they were one. Seals made by the same manufacturer could be used in different offices; printed names could recur too. She decided to seek confirmation of the source of each original paper, the date of the invitation, and the person who had issued it. But it would not do to dismiss the resemblance as mere coincidence either.

Just then the watchman, Mahesh, came inside. ‘Madam, the man who brought the envelope wasn't alone in the car.’

‘Who was with him?’

‘I didn't see the face. Someone was sitting in the back. But a newspaper was stuck to the rear window—a picture of the Safe India Campaign in Patna.’

‘Then it is all connected!’ Jiten exclaimed at once.

Aditi turned towards him. ‘Not all. For the moment, one newspaper page and two seals are connected. We are still a long way from identifying the people, the payment, and the orders.’

The warehouse closed. As Aditi went out, a craftsman passed on a bicycle, carrying a bundle of cloth on his shoulder. She thought of how the work of countless genuine craftsmen and a few misleading service invoices could find a place in the very same export ledger. To understand that injustice, one had first to see the real labour.

That night a formal letter arrived from Delhi. It requested Aditi to preserve certain records, not to declare that a crime had occurred. She acknowledged it. On the first page of her file she wrote: ‘The goods shipped by Sagarvastra are not presently under challenge; the authenticity of the consultancy charge is under examination.’

Just before she switched off her phone, a message came from Ramakant: ‘The old invitation is not signed by me. It bears the name of my late father. Father died three years before the date of that event.’

Aditi opened the screen again. For the first time it was not the seal that frightened her most, but the name that had continued to live upon the paper.

CHAPTER 8

Amresh's Accounts

In Darbhanga, Amresh tore three pages from the back of his school mathematics notebook. Once there had been multiplication tables on them. Now he would write down the dates on which the little colourful screen of his mobile phone had persuaded him to part with money, promised him money in return, and taken it away again.

Before opening the shop that morning, Rani Devi placed a glass of tea before him. 'Will you go to school now?'

'Yes, I will. Let me finish these accounts first.'

Rani laid a hand on her son's forehead. He was not feverish. They still had not learnt the name of the man who had threatened them in the lane the previous day. The police had taken down her statement and given instructions for staying in touch with the family. Such instructions, however, did not immediately drive the fear out of Amresh.

On the first page he wrote, 'First win'. It was a modest sum of eighteen hundred rupees. That day, outside the school, three friends had clapped him on the back. One had said, 'You have a sharp brain.' Amresh had remembered the remark many times afterwards. He had begun to imagine that the game was admiring his intelligence. In truth, the game displayed his victory; on the days of defeat there was nobody there to clap him on the back.

'How much is left now?' Rani asked.

'Let me write it all down first.'

He looked through old bank deposit messages, the details still available on the gambling page, and a few scattered messages. He did not possess a record of every bet. How many small amounts had been wagered a second time, how much had been withdrawn, how much he had borrowed from friends—it was all in confusion. He made four headings in the notebook: money paid out of his own hands, money received back, loans, and amounts for which he had no evidence.

Rani turned the sheet towards herself. 'Is this debt separate from what you have lost?'

'Some of the borrowed money went into the losses. If we add both, we shall count it twice,' said Amresh. He was surprised: a small point Nilima had made over the telephone was now proving useful in his own accounts.

Rani went on pouring tea into the glasses. ‘Write down the loans separately. And the names of those who are after you.’

‘Suppose I write a name and the man does something?’

‘Write down the threat too. But don't invent the face of a man you haven't seen.’

Amresh lowered his head. His mother had never said such a thing before. Her manner of speaking had changed since giving her statement at the bank. Even in the midst of her fear she was learning to separate evidence from guesswork.

At school, Gaurav stopped him in the corridor. It was to this very Gaurav that Amresh had once shown the screen announcing his winnings. Now a fresh advertisement was going round on Gaurav's phone. ‘Look at this. Deposit once and get half as much extra.’

Amresh glanced at the screen. ‘I've given it up.’

‘If you've given it up, what has that to do with me? I'm only showing it to you.’

There was no sense of guilt in Gaurav's voice, only a touch of envy. Amresh began to think: how many people had he himself shown the screen to? How often had he said this was the right time to win? For the first time he felt that, along with an account of what had happened to him, he ought to make an account of his influence on others.

That day the mathematics teacher, Devendra Jha, was explaining a problem on interest. Amresh did not shut his notebook. After class he went to the teacher of his own accord. ‘Sir, I have some accounts. I may have made a mistake.’

The teacher read the notebook. The names and figures did not make his face harden. ‘Are these the accounts of a game?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would you like me to keep this confidential, or shall we sit down with your mother and talk?’

‘Mother needs to understand. But nobody in the class must know.’

The teacher agreed. He explained that the money deposited in an account, the amount displayed as winnings, and the money actually returned into one's hands were three different things. Sometimes a win shown on a screen never became a withdrawal. When Amresh made his calculations again, his actual loss over three months came close to eighteen thousand rupees. He could find no records for some sums and left a question mark in those places in his notebook.

‘Don't fill in those question marks yet,’ said the teacher. ‘A false figure will not make the truth clear.’

On his way home Amresh noticed, for the first time, the advertising hoardings that he had earlier taken as encouragement to play. One showed a gleaming car; another, a young man holding a prize. He did not know whether any genuine winner had received the prize or whether it was an

actor posing for the picture. Until that day, the question had never seemed important to him.

When he reached the shop, Rani was serving tea to a customer. Amresh handed her the notebook. ‘I haven't got all the accounts. But this is what I can prove.’

Rani turned the pages slowly. At one place Amresh had drawn a red line round an old win. ‘Didn't you give me five hundred rupees that day?’ she asked.

‘Yes. I gave you those five hundred back, but afterwards I put a thousand into the game again.’

‘So the five hundred I thought you had earned, and used to buy flour, could not prevent your later loss.’

Amresh said nothing. Rani was not asking in order to blame him; she was trying to set the sequence of events right. For the first time the meaning of the loss was opening up between mother and son: the money had gone, trust had thinned, and the pressure around them had grown.

That evening Nilima telephoned. She asked how Rani's statement was proceeding, then requested permission to speak to Amresh. ‘Keep the notebook safe, just as you have written it,’ she said. ‘Not every line of your gaming history will be admissible evidence in court. But it will help you understand what happened to you.’

‘I used to tell other boys to play,’ Amresh said softly.

‘Write that down as well. Leaving it out for shame will help nobody.’

‘Will the police arrest me?’

‘I cannot give you a comforting answer that might be wrong without the investigation required by law. But you are a victim of these threats, and you have the right to be heard.’

After putting down the telephone, Amresh wrote to Gaurav for the first time: ‘Don't take the game I showed you as advice about winning. I am working out my losses.’ His thumb trembled when he sent it. Gaurav did not reply at once.

At night, Rani was locking the shop. Amresh's phone, which he had been trying to keep switched off from time to time, suddenly lit up. An advertisement appeared: ‘Amresh, here is your chance to recover what you have lost. A special offer for you.’

Rani looked at the phone. ‘How do they know your name?’

‘I opened an account with them, Ma. They could know it from that too.’

Rani grew a little calmer. Amresh looked again. Beneath the message was a reference to an old amount displayed as a win on that very day, an amount he had written in his notebook. It might also have been a coincidence of the kind found in ordinary advertising. He saved a copy of the screen with the time visible, then opened his notebook and wrote a fresh question: ‘Has this come from my old game, or is somebody looking at my accounts?’

Outside the shop the movement of people had died down. For the first time in months, Amresh did not open the game when a notification arrived. Yet another fear had awakened in him: the gambling page on which he had been called a customer knew him by name. And he did not know the name of its owner.

CHAPTER 9

Misuse of Aadhaar

Outside an old bank branch in Patna, those standing in the queue included people depositing cheques, pensioners who had come for their money, and two women getting wet under the same umbrella. Inspector Arunima Rao did not stop the police vehicle at the gate that day. She went inside with her official letter of authorisation. Shouting the name of a suspected criminal in a crowd of customers could ruin somebody's life before anything had been proved.

The branch manager, Jayant Sinha, received her in a separate room. On the desk stood old registers and a new computer; against the wall was a locked iron cupboard. Arunima asked, 'There are copies of identity documents in certain accounts, but different accounts of who actually had authority to operate them. What arrangements have you made to preserve the records?'

'Preservation has begun for some of the records,' said Jayant. 'Not every customer of this branch is under suspicion. The papers covered by the order have been kept separately.'

Arunima showed him a copy of the order. 'I am not taking away the general registers. I need certified copies of the records lawfully requested, and an entry showing how they have been preserved.'

There was a trace of weariness on the manager's face. 'A rumour has spread outside that merely submitting an identity document makes the bank declare a person a criminal. People are coming to close their accounts.'

'Give them a clear notice,' said Arunima. 'Opening an account, granting permission, having one's documents misused, and knowingly taking part in a crime are four different situations. Do not erase the distinctions without an investigation.'

Outside the room a woman stood clutching her passbook to her chest. Her name was Nanhaki Khatoon. A member of the branch staff sent her in. Her first words were, 'Please don't stop my daughter's scholarship, Madam.'

Arunima first asked, 'What has made you so afraid?'

'People in the village say that if a copy of your papers reaches somebody else, all your bank accounts will be closed. I work as a midwife. Some time ago a man told me it was a form for government assistance. I gave him my papers. Now people are talking of all sorts of money in my name.'

Nanhaki explained that her daughter had been ill when she handed over the documents. In the hope of getting assistance, she had signed. She could write her own name but had not been able to read all the words on the form. The man had hurried her. Now she wanted to prove that she had sought help for her daughter and had never intended to open an overseas business.

Jayant brought out a copy of the original application. Around her name and signature appeared two different dates. In one place there was what seemed to be an impression of Nanhaki's left thumb. 'That may be my thumbprint,' she said. 'But I never saw what was written on the paper after I signed it when it was blank.'

Arunima did not pronounce the thumbprint genuine or false on the spot. Formal examination of specimens, the order in which the document had been filled, and proof of which employees had been present would be necessary. 'Describe the man you saw,' she said. 'Keep what you heard from others separate.'

'He spoke very sweetly,' Nanhaki said in a low voice. 'That is what I remember. His clothes and height were like anybody else's. I gave him the papers because I trusted his face.'

Nobody spoke for a moment. A sweet voice was not enough to identify an offender; but the silence revealed how deeply a victim could blame herself.

As she was going out, Nanhaki showed Arunima her passbook. Against her daughter's name were the words 'Scholarship—Pending'. 'Will they stop it?'

'I have issued no such order,' Arunima replied. 'If the bank or any office causes a problem, ask for the reason in writing. That reason can be reviewed according to law.'

Nanhaki did not look happy, but she understood that at least nobody here had told her a definite lie.

In the afternoon, Sanjana Prasad, an employee who looked after the branch's old records, asked for permission to speak to Arunima. 'I once wrote an internal warning,' she said. 'I have kept a copy. But nobody has taken it seriously so far.'

'What was the warning about?'

'In a few forms the customers' photographs and signatures appeared ordinary, but another set of contact details pointed to the same organisation. I made no definite accusation. I only asked for another examination.'

'Where is the warning now?'

'In the branch records. It has an acknowledgement number too.'

Arunima asked Sanjana to submit the document through official channels. 'The safety of an employee who helps an investigation also

matters. But you must understand the legal duties involved before making customers' confidential papers public.'

Sanjana sat down, holding the edge of the chair. 'A journalist telephoned me. She said that if I told everything, it would help people. But I am afraid the bank will dismiss me.'

'Giving information publicly and lawfully giving evidence in an investigation are different things,' said Arunima. 'I shall arrange for your statement to be recorded. What you say to the journalist will be your decision, provided the customers' confidential information is protected.'

At that moment the branch manager's phone rang. He went outside. On his return he said, 'The head office wants to know whether the branch's regular payments will be stopped because of this inquiry.'

'There is no general order of that kind against ordinary customers,' Arunima replied. 'Any action will be confined to the specific accounts covered by lawful orders. Punishing everybody out of fear is no solution.'

Sanjana quietly slid a paper across the table. It was a copy supplied for verification, not for publication. It contained the dates and acknowledgement numbers of three applications. The applications were in the names of different customers, but at the bottom of one page was written the name Navkshitij Seva-Sampark.

The papers from Darbhanga and Surat came into Arunima's mind. But the appearance of the name did not make her rejoice. 'Where did this name come from?'

'From a proposal to provide assistance with opening accounts,' said Sanjana. 'It was the same on all three copies. My doubt was only this: on what authority was that assistance being provided?'

Arunima had a brief authorised message prepared for Nilima. It contained no customer's private identification number, only the organisation's name, the dates, and an indication that original records were available. The message ended: 'Same name suggests a preliminary connection; the controlling person and any offender remain unidentified.'

The afternoon light was slanting towards evening. Jayant Sinha had a plain notice put up on the board outside the branch: 'Obtain an acknowledgement for your complaint. Report misuse of documents. Action concerning accounts will follow the prescribed procedure.' He did not imagine that this little notice would settle every difficulty, but it placed a written answer before the rumours that had filled the day.

Before going home, Sanjana told Arunima, 'I can now say openly what I saw. But if half my statement gets printed, people will think the whole bank is criminal.'

'Then make it possible for the whole truth to be heard,' said Arunima. 'Half a truth is of greatest benefit to those who wish to hide the other half.'

Sanjana picked up her bag. At the gate she turned back once. 'We shall submit all the papers officially. But there is something I want to say in

public: when lakhs of rupees move in a poor person's name, that person may be the named owner of the account and yet no longer be the master of her own life. Somebody must answer for that.'

Arunima did not stop her. She asked only, 'Have you decided to make that statement in your own name?'

'Yes. Only as far as I have seen with my own eyes.'

As Arunima came out of the branch, her phone rang. It was a message from Anand in Delhi: 'The same organisation's name has appeared on an export document in Surat. Aditi Rane is checking its original source.'

Arunima sent back: 'A name by itself does not make an accused person. Verify the dates, the issuing authorities and the payments on all three documents separately.'

Then a second short message came from Sanjana: 'I have just found the acknowledgement of the old complaint. The officer who wrote "Further examination not required" on it was transferred out of this branch last week.'

Arunima stopped at the gate. A transfer order was not by itself proof of a conspiracy. But the decision to halt the examination and the date of the transfer now had to be studied as two separate pages of the same question. She wrote to Sanjana: 'Preserve that letter in the official records. I shall record your statement through the proper procedure.'

The people who had stood in the queue outside were gradually going home. Arunima did not yet know how many among them operated their own accounts, or how many had an unseen person doing business in their names. But an employee was now prepared to testify in her own name. It was the first line on the map of the investigation that began not with a bank document, but with somebody's conscience.

CHAPTER 10

The First Five-Per-Cent Letter

The first cold wind of the season had not yet reached Delhi, but the window of Revati Karn's rented room was shut. Outside, the metallic din from a bridge under construction drowned the ticking of the clock. Three things lay on her table: a printed invitation to a meeting in Patna, a publicly available statement concerning Surat's textile exports, and a small photograph of Rani Devi's shop in Darbhanga. In the photograph Rani was straining tea, not looking at the camera. Revati kept the picture among the papers so that, while counting the lines of money, she would not forget the faces of people.

It was past eleven at night. Her editor sent a short message: 'Give what you've found a definite headline. A newspaper cannot sell on question marks alone.' Revati did not reply. Twice in the previous year she had seen false accusations go into print. Once a name appeared, a correction never received as much space as the original charge on the front page.

She opened an old public expenditure statement of the Safe India Campaign. The publication date, figures and space for signatures were plainly visible. Under expenses were listed hall hire, lighting, transport, refreshments, 'cultural hospitality' and 'coordination support'. Beside the last heading stood the words 'fixed five per cent'. Five per cent of what, the document did not say. Her colleague Anoop laughed over the telephone. 'The whole business is in that five per cent.'

'You may announce the whole business when we know what the percentage was calculated on,' Revati said. 'The rent for the stage, the publicity bill, or all the money received? Those are three different things.'

'But people want a simple explanation.'

'Give people the wrong explanation and you give the real owner exactly the opportunity he needs.'

Anoop put the telephone down. His sarcasm stung her, but she did not want to mistake her caution for heroism and grow pleased with herself. It was also possible that, in the name of uncertainty, she was delaying questions that ought to have been asked at once.

In the early hours she travelled by Metro to the other end of the city. Karuna Jha met her outside a community library. Karuna had volunteered with the Safe India Campaign for two months. She carried an old cloth bag, and there was too little sleep beneath her eyes. 'Don't put my name

anywhere,' she said first. 'I haven't done anything wrong. My mother is alone in the village.'

'I won't publish your words without your permission. But whatever you tell me as a witness, I'll have to check against another source,' Revati replied.

Karuna opened a register of events held on several days. There had been genuine expenses for stage decorations, training sessions for young people and publicity. Her own signature appeared on two pages. 'We explained the harm caused by online gambling. Some of the boys really gave up the app. You cannot call everything done here a lie.'

'And the five per cent?'

'I saw that figure in an email from the event's accounts department. I asked why there was a fee for voluntary work. They told me it was payment to an outside adviser. Nobody said what advice had been given.'

'Do you still have that email?'

Karuna took her telephone from her bag and then stopped. 'There are other people's private numbers on this phone. If I send you all the pictures, their names will get passed around too.'

Revati opened her notebook on the table. 'Don't send anything today. First find out how the office gives permission and how personal details can be concealed. Then decide. I need only the date, the subject, and a written account of what you saw yourself.' For the first time Karuna looked at her properly. She had expected a journalist to snatch the papers away.

As they parted, Karuna asked quietly, 'If the meeting really was against gambling, and somebody gave it money from the wrong source, does the training those children received become a crime as well?'

'What the children learned does not become a crime,' Revati said. 'Who knew about the money, who made the decision, and where it came from must each be investigated separately.'

On her way back through Delhi, Revati remembered the photograph of Rani's shop. Rani had said only this that day: 'Let whoever examines my account ask me once.' The truth of a person's testimony began with the right to be asked a question.

That afternoon an envelope without a sender's name arrived at the office. On the outside were written the words 'Five Per Cent—The First Letter'. Inside was a printed copy, four pages long. The first page carried the names of two shell companies, the second 'management charges', the third an Indian partner organisation, and the fourth what looked like a signature. One corner of the paper appeared to have been cut deliberately; half the original signature was missing.

Revati felt a jolt. One of the names resembled a name on the public list of Viraj Sahni's advertising businesses. But the resemblance was in the name, not in any established legal identity of the company. She first looked for a

way to ask who had sent the copy. There was no return address. The name of the city on the envelope's postmark was blurred.

The moment Anoop saw it, he said, 'Front page! Two thousand crores in gambling, five per cent share! Doesn't that make a hundred crores?'

Revati laid down her pen. 'The two-thousand-crore figure was described as the board's own claim, not income verified by a bank. And this paper doesn't fully say which service charge the five per cent applies to. If we multiply those numbers and publish them, we'll be cheating our readers.'

Anoop fell silent. Then he asked quite sincerely, 'So what is the story?'

'A possible connection between a fee declared for a public event and a document from an unknown source. That's the story in its present form. The rest has to be proved.'

In the evening her editor, Sudip Bhatnagar, called her into his room. There were two cups of tea and a cheap award trophy on his desk. Turning the paper over, he said, 'Our advertising department has been discussing a publicity page for this group tomorrow. I'm not asking you to stop writing what you intend to write. But I thought you ought to know about that advertisement first.'

For a moment his frankness surprised her. 'Will the advertisement change the conclusions of the report?'

'It shouldn't. But not everyone in my organisation is equally firm about such things,' Sudip replied. 'Say only as much as you can say with certainty. The advertisement and the report will be on different pages. If that boundary is crossed, I'll let you know in writing.'

'And if my name is taken off the report?'

Sudip looked at the rim of his cup. 'Then for a few days we won't be able to look one another in the eye at our meetings.' It was not a noble promise. It was a smaller, more truthful fear.

When Revati returned to her desk she found the acknowledgement number for an official statement from Sanjana Prasad in Patna. It contained no personal details of account holders. It said only that certain applications mentioned the same outside support organisation and that its authority was being examined. Revati did not add Sanjana's name to her report. She needed the employee's consent first, and an understanding of the limits of official protection.

That night Revati prepared a short report. Its headline was 'Five Per Cent: On What Was the Fee Calculated?' It stated plainly that part of a printed public statement had been examined; that the anonymous envelope's copy had not been independently authenticated; and that questions had been sent to Viraj Sahni and the company concerned, without a reply so far. She kept one copy of her report safe and a separate copy for publication.

At dawn a short message arrived on her mobile from an unfamiliar international number. It was not a threat. It said only: 'The first page of the

five-per-cent letter you saw may be genuine, but the serial number on the third page has been changed. Don't reach a conclusion without the original. I am Meghna Sen, Hong Kong. An official channel is available for verified contact.'

Revati did not publish the message at once. She asked that the sender's identity be confirmed by an independent channel. Then she opened the window. Delhi's dust and the noise of building work came inside. For the first time she understood that the person who had sent the anonymous envelope might be trying not only to reveal the truth, but also to lead someone astray.

Meghna's second message contained a question that Revati put on the first page of her notebook: 'If the five per cent is a criminal fee, why was the first copy of its bill kept among the expenses of a public meeting?'

CHAPTER II

The Window in Hong Kong

Evening comes down over the sea in Hong Kong in a different manner from the evening in Delhi. In Delhi people quicken their steps in the streets; here, the glass buildings turn on their lights and leave the sea's own brightness behind. When Meghna Sen emerged from the Metro, an elderly woman across the street was selling hot tea in paper cups. Meghna bought one. The sound of small coins reminded her of her mother's sewing machine. In their house in Kolkata, how loud the sound of money seemed during the last three days of every month.

Her colleague Tara Lama was already at the office. Tara separated the files by year, using their coloured edges. She had been born in Nepal but had lived in Hong Kong for many years. It was Tara who had sent Meghna the news from Darbhanga: a woman knew nothing about the account operating in her name. 'Look at the face behind the figures while you read them,' Tara had said.

A chart lay on the desk. A company's administrative expenses had risen unusually in the last quarter. An amount described as 'publicity support' in one ledger had been called 'customer liaison services' in another. The two entries might be different explanations for the same work; they might not. Meghna wrote down the dates on both records. There was not yet enough evidence to record a conclusion.

Tara looked at the clock on the glass wall. 'The board's man may come again today. You won't stop asking questions, will you?' she asked.

'If I stop, the certificate I sign will be a lie,' Meghna said.

'And suppose they dismiss you before the certificate is published?'

Meghna did not laugh. 'Then at least the dates on which the questions were asked will survive.'

Tara opened her bag and took out a small red umbrella. 'Take this if the rain gets worse. I won't stay all night.' She left it beside Meghna's chair. Neither of them could have guessed how often Meghna would remember that ordinary object afterwards.

The daylight in Hong Kong had sunk into its towers of glass. In a room on the twenty-fourth floor, auditor Meghna Sen watched rain run down the closed window. She had been asked to examine the expenses of what appeared to be an ordinary business. But the names of the payments were peculiar: 'social engagement', 'cultural hospitality', 'outreach support'.

Against thousands of small transactions stood forty or fifty very large amounts moving in the opposite direction.

Above the lower floors the air-conditioning made an even sound, while beyond the curtains the city lights blurred into crooked patches. Meghna opened her calculator and immediately closed it. This was not a problem of addition and subtraction. If an expense for one company's publicity benefited another organisation, the contract ought to describe the actual service, the authorised signature, and the work accepted as completed. The file contained the first two things. The third was missing.

Eric Chen, a young office assistant, said, 'Madam, I haven't seen the customer list, but every payment has been entered in the regular tax records.' Meghna did not accuse him of doing anything wrong. 'A name appearing in the tax records and the true purpose of an expense being established are not the same thing. Tell me only what you saw yourself.'

Eric wrote the date and the file reference on a plain sheet of paper. Meghna thought how extraordinary it was that a great financial mystery might be hidden among such ordinary letters, written by a man whose present worry was keeping his job.

Long ago her Indian colleague Vivek Sood had told her, 'If an entry in an account looks exceptionally neat, look at the actual service behind it.' Following his advice, Meghna asked what work had really been carried out under a contract. Instead of answering, the manager advised her to take some leave.

Vivek's advice came from long before. They had met two years earlier at a public auditing conference in Kolkata. He was a careful man: he never left papers on a table when he got up, but in conversation would suddenly ask a personal question and put people at ease. 'Don't rush to decide whether something is incompetence or fraud,' he had said. 'A mistake can be corrected; for fraud, even I would need evidence.'

In one contract Meghna found two functions listed under 'cultural hospitality'. For the first there were photographs, a venue, and a public register showing the number of people who had attended. The second was named, but its date belonged to an event already cancelled. It could have been a clerical mistake in a registry. Yet why had the payment been made after the cancellation? That required an answer.

She sent the head of finance a written question. A little later the reply arrived: 'These documents are covered by commercial confidentiality; please direct questions through the board.' Meghna preserved a copy of her first question, then sent a second through the board. This was not politeness. It was preparation for what she might one day have to testify.

After that, her colleague disappeared from the office. Someone said she had gone on leave. But Meghna saw the glass on her desk, with half its tea left standing overnight until it had turned dark.

At first the empty chair that afternoon had seemed nothing unusual. Tara often went down to the cold storage room for old records, a cellar of sorts. But the evening attendance register did not give a proper time for her departure. Meghna asked a security guard only whether Tara had used her card to leave. He could not give a clear answer. 'The system was down for a while in the afternoon,' he said.

The red umbrella was no longer on Tara's desk; Tara had already left it in Meghna's room. Beside the glass lay a short list in Tara's handwriting: 'Cancelled function, second approval, old contract.' Meghna understood those three phrases. But the fourth line disturbed her: 'Please ask in person.'

Meghna telephoned Tara. The bell rang, but nobody answered. Tara's last message that day had said, 'I found a wrong date.' It did not say in which document. Before reporting Tara missing, Meghna decided to check the recommended channels for hospitals, authorised leave, and contact with the family.

In an old folder containing messages from Vivek, Meghna found this note: 'If anything happens to me, use Nilima Jha's name. Submit evidence through lawful channels, not to a private server.'

Meghna's pulse quickened when she looked at the date of Vivek's old message. It had reached her several months earlier, the way former colleagues occasionally warned one another about their work. She could not be sure whether the news that Vivek had been declared dead was already circulating then. That distinction was essential. An old message from a man did not prove he was alive today.

Meghna removed her spectacles and held them in her hand. The earlier Indian documents concerning Vivek's death were with her only as secondary copies. She would not put her feelings in place of a record. On a separate sheet she wrote: 'Verify original receipt date of message, sender's identity, and lawful preservation.'

At last she sent an inquiry to the appropriate office in India to verify Nilima Jha's official contact details. Meanwhile, her worry about whether Tara had reached home was growing heavier.

Meghna contacted the Indian investigating officer through two separate secure channels. She sent no confidential keys, instructions for breaking into a system, or customer passwords. She supplied only a certified copy of the contract, her audit observations, and a letter requesting preservation.

Even preparing that letter was not easy. Some original company records could not be sent abroad without permission from the competent authority. Meghna asked her legal adviser which certified copies could be requested through authorised channels and which customers' private details remained restricted. The adviser offered no immediate exemption; he wanted a written basis for every step.

The delay angered Meghna. Yet she knew that a genuine document sent by the wrong means could become useless in court. Her concern for Tara

and the investigation of the money were both pressing against the same need for caution.

The papers showed that the publicity expenditure of a digital business called 'Amber-9' was directed towards India. Pakistan and Bangladesh were not its intended active customer markets. This was not because of some universal technical rule but because of the company's own financial decision: the vast number of small wagers in India, the availability of Indian payment channels, and the habits of millions of people.

When Meghna saw the publicity map drawn exclusively for India, her suspicions took their first definite shape. The pages carried several Indian languages, but the publicity budget for other countries was blank. A private company was free to choose its customer base; that choice alone was not proof of a crime. But questions about Indian payment contracts and lawful authority to supply services were not so easily answered.

Meghna made four separate headings: 'Target Customers', 'Authorised Payment Partner', 'Actual Supplier of Gambling Content', and 'Advertising Agent'. Each heading demanded different documents. No single name appeared in all four. It might be a legitimate division of business; it might be a screen deliberately arranged. Only a comparison of the financial records with what had actually happened could settle the matter.

She looked again at Tara's final line: 'Ask in person.' Ask whom? An officer of the board, or a person whose name appeared nowhere in the accounts?

In her last letter Meghna wrote: 'The claim of two thousand crore rupees a month was raised at a board meeting. I cannot call it verified income. The subsidiary accounts have not been audited with approval.'

The purported presentation at the board meeting stated 'two thousand crore a month'. It did not say whether this meant the total money wagered, the repeated use of the same amount, all deposits made by customers, or the company's actual income. In red ink beside the words, Meghna wrote, 'Definition required.'

When sending her first limited observations to the Indian officer, she added an explicit warning against calling that estimate proven earnings. However enormous the numbers glowing on a mobile screen might seem between two countries, only a verified history of accounts could turn them into facts.

The night deepened. A woman from the cleaning staff came to Tara's desk and hesitated. 'Shall I take away this glass?' she asked. 'Not yet, without the owner's permission,' Meghna said. 'I must inform office security first.' The woman pushed her trolley onwards. The glass remained. Someone might wish to turn it into a story, but for the moment Meghna regarded it as nothing more than an ordinary glass that had been used.

On reading the last line of the letter, Nilima rose from her chair: 'Vivek Sood may be alive, but his life is in danger because of these papers.'

The red umbrella leaned against Meghna's chair. The rain had stopped; there was no longer any need for it. But neither could Meghna claim that Tara never went home without sending word. She asked Human Resources in writing about Tara's emergency contacts and prepared to lodge a formal complaint at the next opportunity.

A reply came from Delhi: the Indian authorities would examine the procedure for requesting certified records through the proper offices. There was also a short sentence from Nilima: 'Write what you know about Vivek; keep your guesses separate.' Meghna sat with a hand resting on the last line. She had never seen Vivek's dead body. For the first time she understood that this absence did not mean he was alive; it meant only that the matter had still to be investigated.

Tara's phone was still switched off. For the first time Meghna entered these words on her mobile: 'Colleague out of contact.' Tomorrow she might have to make a formal missing-person report. Until then she could no longer call the silence ordinary leave.

CHAPTER 12

The Last Glass of Tea

When Meghna Sen reached the office in the morning, the road outside the building was being washed. Water from the hose beside the guard post ran towards the drain. The city was forgetting yesterday's rain without difficulty. Meghna was afraid that yesterday's half-finished glass of tea would disappear just as easily.

When the lift opened on the twenty-fourth floor, a piece of shawl lay on Tara's chair, the one she sometimes wore across her shoulders while she worked. On the leave chart hanging on the glass behind the chair, no leave had been entered against Tara's name. Yet at ten the previous night a notice had appeared in the office team's shared messages: 'Tara Lama is on leave for personal reasons.' The notice had been sent from the manager's account, not by Tara herself.

Meghna first noted the date of the message, then went to see Mr Wong, the head of Human Resources. He had a copy of a newly approved leave application. It stated 'Personal reasons'. The space for a signature was empty.

'Who filled in this application?' Meghna asked.

'My assistant was informed orally,' Wong said.

'By whom?'

Wong hesitated. 'We shall have to find that out. But an employee has a right to privacy too.'

'Yes, of course. That is precisely why I am not asking about her private affairs. I only want to know whether she is safe.'

Wong bent the arm of his spectacles between his fingers. 'You are turning this into an unnecessary crisis.'

Meghna did not smile. 'Perhaps I am. Once I have verified contact with her, I shall gladly withdraw my concern. For now, I would rather be wrong than be reassured without checking.'

She was allowed access to the emergency-contact details Tara had authorised the office to retain. They could be used only for a matter of safety. In the presence of an authorised office representative, Meghna telephoned the sister whose number Tara had provided. Lhamo Lama first asked in an ordinary voice, 'Is she spending another night at work?'

'We have been unable to contact her. Have you spoken to her recently?'

There was silence at the other end for a few moments. 'Yesterday afternoon. She said she would listen to my daughter's song this evening. My

little girl is five. She is going to sing on stage at school for the first time today. Tara never misses these things.'

'Has she ever gone away suddenly and missed such an occasion?'

'She has, when work took her somewhere. But she always telephoned then. I cannot tie her down.' Even in her fear, Lhamo was trying to preserve her sister's freedom.

Meghna said, 'I don't want to frighten you. We shall put the facts in writing and inform the proper authority. Please continue trying to reach her yourself.'

Before putting down the telephone, Lhamo asked, 'Where is her red umbrella? Ask her. She had made some coloured leaves for my daughter and wanted to put them inside the umbrella cover.'

Meghna looked at the umbrella beside her chair. She wondered whether she ought to mention this small object. 'The umbrella is in my office,' she replied. 'Your sister is not here in front of me just now.'

At those last words Lhamo said softly, 'When she returns, tell her I'm not angry. I only want to hear from her.'

Until midday Meghna spoke with the building's security staff. The entry register showed when Tara had come to the office, but there was no record of her leaving. The system had, however, been interrupted during that period. It was therefore impossible to turn 'no departure recorded' into 'she did not leave the building'. A written preservation request was made to establish who held the lift recordings, how long they would be retained, and who was authorised to obtain them.

A security guard named Kwan said, 'I think I saw her going towards the south gate once—perhaps yesterday. But I cannot swear it was Tara. It was raining, and everyone had an umbrella.'

Meghna recorded his statement exactly as he had given it. She did not remove his 'perhaps'. That single word could matter both to someone's freedom and to the identification of a person accused of a crime.

After a written decision by office administration, the glass from Tara's desk was placed temporarily in the care of the cleaning department. Meghna did not assume that useful fingerprints remained on it; thousands of ordinary hands touch glass. If the police considered it relevant, they would have it examined through the proper procedure. What troubled Meghna was not the chemistry of the glass, but the time at which its unfinished tea had been left.

The moment she saw Meghna, Ama-Lee, who worked in the little canteen, asked, 'Did Tara's tea go cold yesterday?'

'Did you serve it to her?'

'Yes, at four. But another tea was prepared after that. I don't quite remember who took it.'

On the page of her notes Meghna added a fourth line: 'Two possible serving times in the canteen.' This did not establish when Tara had last

been seen. It showed only that Meghna had made the previous day's events too simple by trusting her own memory.

Eric Chen, who sat beside Tara, came in just then. He was carrying a small paper bag of flowers. 'I brought these for Ama-Lee,' he said. 'Has anybody found out about Tara?'

'No.'

'She asked me a question yesterday. I was frightened and didn't give her a complete answer.'

Meghna invited him to sit down. 'Keep to what you saw yourself.'

Eric lowered his eyes. 'Tara was doubtful about a payment made for a cancelled cultural function. She asked why the travel register for the outside guests supposedly attending that event gave a date on which the organisers themselves had said the flight was cancelled. I told her it was an old file and nobody's business any more. But a paper being old doesn't make her question wrong.'

'Did you see the travel register yourself?'

'Yes, a copy kept in the shared office. Not the original receipts.'

'Then write only that for now.'

Eric sat opposite Meghna and wrote his statement. His hand trembled. 'What if someone says Tara disappeared because of me?'

Meghna waited before answering. 'Your silence would worry me, but blame cannot be decided without evidence. Write down the limits of what you know. I must do the same.'

Towards evening Meghna and Lhamo formally contacted the local police. Tara was an adult and free to travel of her own will. Equally, the circumstances in which she could not be reached could not be dismissed. The officer recorded their statements, the last known contact, the employee's particulars, and the differences between the company's initial announcements. Nobody immediately declared it an abduction. The search began.

After giving their statements, Lhamo walked with Meghna along the waterfront. The city's lights made long lines in the water. 'My sister used to reconcile other people's accounts,' Lhamo said, 'but at home she never managed to add up all our money. She always remembered whose birthday was coming. She knew people better than ledgers.'

Meghna's throat tightened. For the first time she felt that the hardest part of an investigation was not explaining a suspicion. It was sitting beside someone who did not know where a loved person had gone.

That night a new entry appeared in the office's shared events register. It was an invitation to the 'Macau Hospitality Conference', where the finances of cultural events were to be reviewed. Tara Lama's name was already on the list, but the space confirming her participation was empty. The conference was two days away. None of this proved that Tara had gone there or intended to go.

Meghna had still not replied to Revati Karn's message. In the new information she mentioned only the date, the programme, and the publicly available invitation. Tara was a private individual; there was as yet no need to publish her name.

At the bottom of the Macau invitation stood a short line: 'The original explanation of event expenses will be presented in a special session.' Meghna considered requesting a certified copy. Then a second message arrived from the conference office: 'Meghna Sen's presence requested. Do not send questions in advance.'

She folded the paper slowly. It was an invitation offering hospitality, but the condition that she must not send questions beforehand made her uneasy. Why Tara had appeared on the list without confirming was not yet known. No link had been found between her disappearance and the conference. Nevertheless, for the first time Meghna felt she was no longer following only an irregularity in the accounts; some unknown person was trying to choose the place of her next meeting.

As she left, Lhamo did not take back the red umbrella. 'When Tara returns, she can collect it herself,' she said. Meghna put it in a cupboard. Outside it had begun to rain again. This time Meghna was frightened not by the rain, but by the silence of a person who named a meeting place and would not say why.

CHAPTER 13

A Document's Second Language

In a small government building in Delhi, there was an old map in one corner of Nilima Jha's desk on the fourth floor. The paper had turned yellow. The lines marking canals and roads were no longer very clear, but she was fond of the map. When she was a child, her father had told her, 'The land does not always remain as the map describes it. Someone ploughs a field across it, someone blocks a road.' She remembered his words today as she read the papers of a company across the sea.

At the top of the advertisement before her was a golden seal: 'International Entertainment Service Approved to European Standards.' Beneath it, in small print, were the name of a company in Malta, its registration number and a date. A version of the same name appeared as a 'partner' in the public expenditure statement obtained by Revati Karn. Nilima wrote one line separately: 'Matching names in both documents.' On the next line she wrote: 'Whether the two have the same legal identity is not yet known.'

Whenever she studied papers of this sort now, she thought of the small glass jar in Rani Devi's shop. A sum that was large for the family of a boy who had placed a five-hundred-rupee bet was no more than a negligible figure in the language of this advertisement. The disparity made Nilima angry. But anger could not serve as proof of registration.

Arunima Rao came in. She carried a thin cane-coloured file. 'Have you read this sentence?' she asked.

'The company is registered in Europe,' Nilima replied, 'and the advertisement makes it appear as though that gives it lawful authority to offer services throughout India.'

'How far apart are those two things?'

'As far apart as registering a house and having permission to enter somebody else's.'

Arunima did not smile. 'In court we need the registered category, the actual licence and the applicable law, not an analogy.'

Nilima turned the paper over. 'That is why we are meeting today.'

It was afternoon in Malta. Sofia Vella, a legal adviser, appeared on the screen of their secure video conference. Behind her, a white wall and blue sky could be seen through a window. On her desk stood three books and a

glass bottle of salt water. As the conversation about international business began, Sofia asked, 'What do you call this document?'

'A licence,' said Arunima. 'That is what the company's advertisement calls it.'

'And what do you call it yourself?'

'An advertising claim.'

'Exactly. Registration tells us that an entity exists. Permission to carry on financial or gaming activities involves a different process. A private commercial certificate is something else again. Using one word for all three may give rise to a suspicion of deception; but in every case we must examine the original register.'

Nilima displayed the bottom of the advertisement on the screen. 'Under this circular seal there is no government department's name. It names a private association.'

'I agree that the circle by itself does not indicate government permission,' Sofia said. 'But we do not yet know whether the company belongs to that association or has used its emblem without permission. Answering one question does not make the next question disappear.'

'And what of Indian customers?' Arunima asked.

'The competent authorities in India will determine which Indian rules apply. Registration in Malta does not set aside Indian regulation. I can show you the proper way to obtain certified copies of public records. For now, we are looking only at an ordinary page on a screen.'

Nilima made a note. A strange dissatisfaction stirred in her. She had wanted Sofia to say in one sentence: this paper is false. But truth often moved more slowly than the advertising of a criminal enterprise. An advertisement could be prepared in an evening; verification might require three offices, two countries and weeks of waiting.

At the end of the meeting, Sofia paused. 'I need the whole advertisement, not a cropped picture. There is a word in it—"universally recognised". In which language was it first written? If the translation enlarged its meaning, the original advertiser and the translator might bear different responsibilities.'

'The supplier's original language, or the advertising agency's?' Nilima asked.

'That itself is the question,' Sofia replied. 'A document's second language sometimes lives in its small print.'

After the call ended, Arunima stood by the window. The leaves of the laburnum trees in the government compound lay scattered on the earth. 'What is your first conclusion?' she asked Nilima.

'An Indian advertising group is presenting a foreign registration as if it conferred a right to operate in this country. I must find out who designed the advertisement, who approved it and who paid for it.'

'And if the actual service is quite different?'

'Then I shall not write down the name of a crime I have already decided upon. I shall write down what we find.'

Just then a message came from Revati. She had sent a printed page from a public advertisement. Five Indian languages appeared on it, but the stated hours for customer support coincided with the hours when Indian users were likely to gamble at night. Nilima considered this a possible sign of whom the service was targeting. It was not yet sufficient proof that people in other countries could not use the service.

That afternoon a junior analyst named Aarti came to her with an older advertisement. 'Madam, the version from six months ago did not carry the foreign company's name. It had only the emblem of the private association.'

'Are you certain of the date?'

'The page carries a publication time, but we do not yet have an independent copy of the website's history. I have kept the original record of how we obtained it separately.'

Nilima watched Aarti with approval. In that office, the greatest temptation for a young employee was to take credit for a great discovery. Aarti had forgone the credit and recorded her uncertainty instead. 'Put this difference in the chronology,' Nilima said. 'If the advertisement changed, we shall ask why. The change is not a crime by itself.'

In the evening Nilima's mother telephoned. 'Will you be late again today?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'Have you gone to have your spectacles changed?'

Nilima saw her reflection in the window. She had spent the whole day studying the papers of a European company; her mother was concerned about her eyes. Suddenly she felt tired. 'I'll go tomorrow,' she said.

Her mother laughed. 'I've been hearing that tomorrow for two months.'

As soon as she put down the telephone, a new letter arrived at the office's official address. It purported to come from a private 'International Gaming Certification Council'. The subject line read: 'Clarification concerning services targeted at India.' A picture of a golden certificate was attached, but not the original document, confirmation from the issuer or a statement of the limits of its authority. The letter politely requested that the disputed advertisement should not be published.

Arunima read the letter. 'All we have is a letter. We ought to respond, but to whom? First we must verify the sender.'

Nilima looked again at its words. Every phrase was courteous; there was no explicit threat. Yet the sentence that troubled her most was this: 'We trust that the service in India will be spared unnecessary questions.' Who had given this unknown council the right to decide which questions were unnecessary?

She marked the letter 'Received, unverified' and placed it in a closed file. The lights had come on outside. At one corner of the golden certificate was

a number that looked rather like the reference number beside 'five per cent' in Revati's Patna expenditure statement. Nilima did not compare them at once. Until she had originals of both documents, obtained independently, the resemblance was only a question.

CHAPTER 14

The Price of Support

Water had collected outside the auditorium in Patna. Inside, a cloth banner bearing the words 'Youth Awakening' hung above the stage, and ceiling fans stirred the papers below. When Revati Karn arrived, a rehearsal was in progress. One group of students sang a song against drug addiction; another performed a short play about avoiding cyber fraud. Listening to the song, Revati found no reason to believe that the entire purpose of the gathering was false.

Prachi Jha, who was serving lemon water at a table outside, said, 'Watch the programme first, then ask questions. You newspaper people begin looking for a crime before anything has even started.'

'I have come to see the accounts, not to look for a crime,' Revati replied.

Prachi coordinated the volunteers. She had no government-school job; she gave private lessons and ran a library for adolescent girls in her spare time. Her small team had decorated the stage with their own hands. 'If you want accounts, ask at the organisers' office. I made the posters,' she said.

'Then I'll ask you about the posters,' Revati said with a smile. 'Who paid for this banner?'

'Our contributions. Three hundred and forty-five rupees. I have the receipt.'

Revati examined it. The paper said precisely what Prachi had said. But she remembered a much larger sum entered against auditorium decoration in a public statement in Delhi. The larger sum might include lighting, sound and transport; the same heading did not necessarily mean payment for the same thing.

The first speaker was a local doctor. She spoke about families affected by gambling addiction without naming anyone. The next speaker explained how to resist fraudulent police threats delivered by mobile phone. Revati wondered how much courage it took victims like Shivshankar Mishra, seated at the back, to listen to such words. But what she imagined was not evidence.

Revati met the event secretary, Mahendra Pathak, on the veranda behind the stage. Three pens protruded from his shirt pocket; one bore a golden advertising emblem. 'Will you make the expenses public?' she asked.

'The annual accounts will be published,' Mahendra said.

'And a separate account for this event?'

'Some payments are handled by the head office in the metropolis. I know the local expenses.'

'What is the head office called?'

Mahendra gave her the name. It also appeared on a promotional sheet for the 'Safe India Campaign'. Revati wrote: 'Same name; institutional identity not yet verified.'

'Do you think I'm a criminal?' Mahendra asked suddenly.

'No. If I did, I wouldn't be asking questions. I would already have printed an accusation.'

Mahendra pulled up a chair and sat down. 'I have worked with children in this city for fifteen years. We sometimes receive money from sponsors. It isn't easy to turn it down. But I myself don't know which expenses the head office places under which headings. If I say so, people will destroy the reputation of my work.'

'You cannot protect a reputation by hiding documents,' Revati said. 'But it is also unjust to spoil a person's name without evidence. I shall take your written account.'

Prachi then came in with two adolescent girls. She carried an attendance register. She did not hand it to Revati; she showed it to the secretary. 'Look at this. Why is transport allowance being claimed in the names of people who did not come to work?'

Mahendra put on his spectacles. There were three names in the register: a school beside the first, a village beside the second, and 'volunteer' beside the third. 'The first girl was in hospital on the third day,' Prachi said. 'I went to her house.'

'The register could be wrong,' Mahendra said.

'Then correct it.'

Revati did not interrupt. She understood that the first evidence of an irregularity did not always begin with a desire to expose a great company. Sometimes it began with someone's surprise at seeing the name of a child she knew.

That afternoon Revati did not copy the personal names from the register into her notebook. Prachi permitted her to record the heading under which the discrepancy appeared and the date; the original register would remain with the organisers. Prachi's concern mattered, but whether money had been spent in an absent person's name, or whether a schedule prepared in advance had merely been printed, was a separate question.

Outside, a young tea seller named Nasim asked, 'Didi, you're a journalist. Is this gathering wrong?'

'What do you think of the children singing on the stage?' Revati asked him.

'It's good work. My sister borrows books from here too.'

'Then there is no reason to call their work wrong. But if someone shows false expenses in their name, that must be investigated.'

Nasim rinsed his earthen cup. 'Then write both things in the news.'

To Revati, his simple request sounded like a weighty editorial instruction.

Towards evening, the arrival of the chief guest was announced, but a recorded video message played instead. Viraj Sahni appeared on the screen. He praised the energy of young people and spoke about discipline and a society free of drugs. There was applause when he finished. Revati took a photograph. A video message was evidence of support, not evidence of an illegal payment. She deliberately underlined the distinction in her notebook.

After the ceremony Mahendra handed Revati a letter. 'This is our official reply. The programme was held, services were provided, the accounts are under examination. I know nothing about the alleged foreign payment.'

'I shall quote it in full,' Revati said.

Mahendra said bitterly, 'But your headline will only say foreign money.'

'Not this time.'

Waiting for a rickshaw by the road, Revati opened her phone. There was a message from Sudeep Bhatnagar, her editor in Delhi: 'Your proposed report must include a paragraph on the genuine public-service work of the event. The newspaper's advertising department has been involved with the subject, so our financial interest must also be disclosed.'

Revati read the message again. Her editor's caution reassured her, but it did not make the decision easier. Most people at the event could be working honestly, while somebody in a distant office might be inventing expenses in their name.

That night a new message arrived from Prachi. 'There is a name in our volunteers' list that seems to belong to a man who doesn't even live in this city. I know him. I shall tell you more after I check.'

Revati replied: 'Don't send his name without his permission. First find out whether this is an attendance list, a payment list or only a list of advance registrations.'

Two minutes later Prachi telephoned. Her voice was not as hard as it had been earlier. 'I see now that you didn't come to shut down our work,' she said. 'You came to ask the right questions.'

'Whose name did you find on the list?' Revati asked.

'An old classmate of mine. He died two years ago. But this list claims to have been made this year.'

Revati asked the rickshaw driver to stop. The report of the death rested on Prachi's memory; written confirmation, the person's full identity and the date on which the list had been made were all still missing. Even so, an odd question had arisen. If the list was old, who had added this year's date to it?

CHAPTER 15

The Wages of Silence

On the wall of a five-storey building in Delhi's old business district, the words 'True Accounts, Sound Business' were still written in faded letters. The firm that bore the name had merged with another company three years earlier. The third floor now housed tax-saving and insurance offices. But the security guard on the ground floor still remembered Vivek Sood.

'He didn't talk much,' the guard said, 'but he was always the first to arrive on time. So many people came and went. He was different.'

The man listening was Dhruv Narayan, a former colleague of Vivek's who now ran a small auditing office of his own. A notice had brought Dhruv to this building: he had received a letter about the safe transfer of certain old records belonging to the closed company. He had not asked the guard about Vivek. The name had come up on its own.

For years Dhruv had kept something buried in his mind. He remembered two different scenes from Vivek's last working day. In one, Vivek had laughed and said, 'I need a whole day off, just once.' In the other, that evening, Vivek's hands had trembled as he shut his desk drawer. Dhruv still did not know whether the scenes belonged to the same day or whether his memory had joined them together after what happened.

In the afternoon Dhruv sent a written request to meet Nilima. It reached her old office address. The request read: 'Personal recollections concerning former consultant Vivek Sood, and possible references in certain business papers. Request for a meeting with a formal record.'

As she read the letter, Nilima rested her finger on Vivek's name and thought. For six months, every report connected with that name had brought her both caution and pain. There was a question about identity on Vivek's death certificate, but still no reliable direct confirmation that he was alive. She informed Arunima Rao.

'I know Dhruv,' Nilima said. 'We met twice at auditing conferences.'

'Does he want to give evidence,' Arunima asked, 'or tell a story?'

'I don't know the difference yet in his case.'

'Then first record his account, and keep any claim of proof separate.'

They met in the public-hearing room of the government compound. Dhruv came in carrying a file tied in blue cloth. First he showed Nilima a document: a valid notice terminating the former company's services. Then he produced a personal diary.

'Is this your handwriting?' Nilima asked.

'Yes. But I didn't write everything on the day it happened. I added some lines later.'

'Which lines were added later?'

Dhruv showed them the marks at the corners of the pages, one by one. His answer surprised Nilima. Many people would not admit what their memories had added afterwards.

'In his last week, Vivek Sood was examining a service contract,' Dhruv said. 'One portion of the amount was described as "coordination". He told me he wanted receipts for the work actually done in return for that fee. I thought it was an ordinary auditing question.'

'What percentage?' Arunima asked.

Dhruv was silent. 'My mind says five per cent now. But I didn't write that figure in my diary at the time. Reading recent news may have altered what I remember.'

Nilima listened without breathing for a moment. It was an important answer, precisely because Dhruv was making the limits of his account clear.

'Then you will not testify to the percentage now,' Arunima said. 'You can testify that you saw a contract. Where is the original?'

'It should be in the former company's archives. I seem to remember that Vivek kept a copy separately.'

'In your letter you mentioned an offer made in return for silence,' Nilima said. 'What was that?'

Dhruv opened another page of the file. 'A few days after the news spread that Vivek had died in an accident, a representative of the old business came to see me. He said there was a balance payment due for closing down services on a completed project. I had already left the company. He offered me a sum of money if I made no claim concerning the old files.'

'What exactly did he say?'

'I'm not sure. I don't remember whether he called it "settlement of a dispute" or "final accounts". I understood it as an attempt to buy my silence.'

'Was there a paper?'

'There was. I didn't sign it. I took it home, but I moved house around that time and some papers went missing.'

Arunima asked, 'Did anyone threaten you?'

'No. It would be a lie to say so. The representative was polite. But the question that kept troubling me was how he knew about my house loan and my daughter's treatment.'

Dhruv wiped his face with his palm. His wife had been ill for a long time, and medicines cost money. At that time even a small falsehood in an audit could have brought great relief to his household. 'I did not take the money,' he said. 'But I didn't tell anyone about it either. What you are asking me today, I wanted to answer even then. I didn't have the courage.'

Nilima slid the glass of water towards him. 'A court can hear why you remained silent. But it is important now to be clear about the limits of what you know.'

Dhruv suddenly asked, 'Do you believe Vivek is dead?'

'There is a question of identity in the existing records,' Arunima replied. 'The inquiry is continuing. At present I can neither confirm that he is alive nor say that the report of his death is wholly true.'

Dhruv looked out of the window. 'Once he said to me, "Read half a page bearing your own signature, and you will find half the truth." I thought he was joking then. I have come today to tell you about that half-page.'

'Do you have it?' Nilima asked.

'Not all of it. I found half a sheet stuck to the back of an old photocopy. I don't know who cut the original.'

He opened the blue cloth and took out a yellowed sheet. Its upper corner had been torn away. On what remained was a short sentence in handwriting: 'Before looking at the amount on an invoice, look at the service. Payment for work at a time when the work could not have been done is itself a question.'

Nilima stopped as she looked at the page. The handwriting resembled Vivek's, but similar letters alone could not establish who had written it. She did not push the paper back towards Dhruv. She wanted to establish his ownership and willingness first.

'We would like to receive this paper through the proper legal procedure,' Arunima said. 'Please state in writing when and where you found it, whether you have seen the rest of the original, and to whom you have given copies.'

Dhruv took an old ticket from his wallet. 'I found it inside a book on the day I moved house. The ticket establishes the date, not the date on which the paper was written.'

'You have given me not one answer, but two cautions,' Nilima said quietly.

Dhruv rose. 'I don't want my family's name to appear in the newspapers.'

'Your request for protection will be recorded separately,' Arunima said. 'But I cannot promise an outcome now. The proper procedure will be followed as needed.'

When Dhruv had gone, Nilima entered two distinct things in the file: Dhruv's recollection and the possible physical existence of the sheet. Their reliability would be examined separately. She remembered that Meghna in Hong Kong had spoken of a discrepancy in a travel register. The same word appeared in both questions: 'time'. But a word in common was no proof of a shared conspiracy.

That evening Dhruv's telephone rang again. It was not Nilima; it was his own home. 'Have you bought the doctor's medicines?' his wife asked. In all the moving about the city that day, he had forgotten this small errand. He

turned towards the chemist's shop. In a life like his, the price of truth was not always a newspaper headline. Sometimes it was simply being able to look people in the eye when one returned home at night.

As the office was closing, Aarti told Nilima that an indistinct copy of Dhruv's sheet had been seen some months earlier with one of Vivek's old letters. But there had been another line on that earlier copy. They had not yet verified that both copies came from the same original.

'What is the additional line?' Nilima asked.

'I couldn't read it all. It seems to say only, "The price of the recipient's silence." The right-hand part of the page is cut off.'

Nilima did not switch off her computer. 'First the source, the date and the complete image,' she told Aarti. 'We shall not make a new accusation out of a guess at the words.'

Aarti turned a page in her notebook. 'One thing is certain: the copy I saw shows two more lines of writing than the sheet brought to us.'

For the first time Nilima wrote down a definite question to which she wanted an answer the next day: 'Who cut the page, and why?'

CHAPTER 16

The White Envelope

On that morning in Mumbai, the sea could not be seen. Between the dampness left by the rains and buildings with sealed glass windows, Aarav Malkani reached his office on the seventh floor at thirty-seven minutes past eight. The security guard downstairs greeted him as he did every day. Aarav returned the greeting, but kept a strangely tight grip on the bag in his left hand. It contained no confidential device belonging to the company, only an ordinary paper ledger. Its pages had kept him awake all night.

The ledger had belonged to his father, who ran a small wholesale cloth shop and wrote down the name and weight of the goods against every debt. Aarav was in the twelfth standard when his father died. A few years later he entered the world of financial consultancy and discovered how splendid the language of paper could become when crores were at stake. But he had never forgotten one of his father's old rules: before writing down the price of a thing, ask whether the thing exists.

That day he had seven invoices to examine. The services named on them were different: 'membership support', 'customer experience study', 'regional-language revision'. The amounts differed, as did the issuing organisations. Yet beside the date on every invoice appeared the same reference number of an old office. It could be a coincidence. Aarav altered nothing on his computer; he merely wrote the numbers down on a sheet of paper.

'You have come early today,' said his colleague Taruni Desai, stepping out from behind her desk.

'I have a file to finish.'

'The file was there yesterday too.'

Aarav tried to smile. 'Yesterday it would not let me sleep in peace.'

Taruni was new to the finance department, but she had a sharp eye for dates. Without being asked, she placed a copy of an invoice before Aarav. 'It says here that translation services were provided for three days. But a letter from the company named on it says the office was closed on those days. The people may have worked remotely. I have asked for evidence of that.'

'Any reply?'

'"An internal matter." That is not proof that a payment is due.'

Aarav heard no accusation in Taruni's voice, only straightforward discomfort. He had met many people who now regarded a question as an

offence, and many others who knew exactly what price to set upon not asking one. Taruni belonged to neither kind.

At ten o'clock the reception desk telephoned. 'Someone has come asking for you. He does not wish to give his name. He says he has a document to deliver by hand.'

'No one comes in without giving a name,' Aarav said. 'Let him leave the letter at reception.'

Five minutes later a white envelope lay on his desk. His full name was written on it, but in place of an address there was only the name of the building. No sender, no postal mark. There was a faint stain at one corner, as though someone had pressed it with a damp thumb.

Aarav put the envelope in a locked drawer. He said nothing to Taruni. Outside, the clouds over the sea were gathering. For the next two hours he had to listen to customers' complaints, and behind every complaint was a question never printed on the office's glossy screens: where had the money gone?

At noon Firoz Khan, an old employee in customer relations, came into Aarav's room. He carried a small box containing two parathas from home. 'My daughter asked me to give you some as well,' he said. 'You corrected the mistake in my appointment letter last time.'

Aarav took a paratha. Firoz asked, 'Has the payment for the new invoices still not been released?'

'They are being checked.'

'I am afraid that if there is a delay, the genuine small suppliers will not be paid either.'

Aarav realised then that stopping an improper payment and not stopping an innocent man's earnings were two ends of the same difficult decision. 'Keep aside the invoices for which the goods or services have been verified,' he told Firoz. 'Suspicion is no reason to stop everybody's payment.'

That afternoon Aarav opened his drawer and took out the envelope. There were two sheets inside. The first was a letter: 'Complete the prescribed procedure for destroying the remaining records of the old project. Thereafter there will be no obstruction to payment.' The words were polite, but the person giving the instruction was unnamed. The second sheet listed six files. Against one entry were the words 'Coordination—5 per cent'.

Aarav's mouth went dry. He had seen 'five per cent' in many legitimate contracts before—for commissions, services, arrangements. The request to destroy files might be part of a normal closing of accounts, or an attempt to remove evidence. The newness of the paper and the absence of a signature gave him little confidence in it.

Instead of photographing the envelope at once, he first recorded how it had arrived: the call from reception after ten, the unidentified bearer, the condition of the envelope. He then read the company's rules on retaining

records. He was no legal expert; he had to ask himself whether destroying papers without proper authorisation could be safe.

'Sir,' Taruni said, returning to his room, 'that reference number appeared in a payment schedule for the previous quarter. But the payer was different. I would not call it a match. The letters and numbers merely look alike.'

Aarav looked at the number on the second sheet. The third character in Taruni's schedule was rounded; on his sheet it was printed square. Alike from a distance, different close up. He remembered his father's ledger: never treat two customers with similar names as one when the weight of the goods is in question.

'Preserve that schedule,' Aarav said. 'Write down where the original came from. No customer's name should be released for now.'

'Can I trust you?' Taruni asked suddenly.

The question startled Aarav. 'Why?'

'Last week a senior person said you make decisions on the strength of your connections. Now you yourself are raising questions. People will ask me why I held the payments on your instructions.'

Aarav took his time answering. 'Trust the proper order of the records, not me. If you find I am wrong, put it in writing. My name will be on these papers too.'

That evening Aarav did not go home. Sitting in the office library, he prepared a formal letter asking for an independent examination of the doubtful invoices, a separate review of each disputed payment with reasons recorded, and the preservation of old account papers for the prescribed period. He knew that the letter might cost him his position in consultancy. But he was not certain that failing to write it would lessen his fear.

His wife Maya telephoned from home. 'Shall we wait for you at dinner tonight?'

'Don't wait. I'll be late.'

'You always speak of work. When will work speak to you about yourself?'

For once Aarav did not laugh. 'A paper came today. It woke up an old fear in me.'

'You did not learn to be frightened of paper from your father.'

Aarav listened to rain beating on the roof. 'What I learnt from him was to keep accounts. I could never tell him how often writing the truth can make people angry.'

'Write the truth,' Maya said softly. 'But do not neglect the rules meant to keep you safe.'

At nine that night he received the acknowledgement for his official communication. Two minutes later a message arrived from an unfamiliar number: 'The files could have been closed under the old rules. Now unnecessary people will start asking questions.'

Aarav gazed at the telephone for a long time. The message contained no direct threat of violence; it could still be the complaint of a dissatisfied client. But he felt it necessary to record separately the sequence of the anonymous envelope, his letter and this message.

He telephoned the security guard and formally asked that the record of the envelope's delivery be preserved. Only then did he rise to go home. He did not take the envelope with him; he had its receipt entered at the company's designated secure storage facility.

As he left the building, he remembered that one of the six files named in the white envelope was called 'Final Accounts'. The phrase resembled the words Dhruv Narayan had been trying to recall from Vivek Sood's old papers. It might become a question in the future. Aarav did not know Dhruv. In these two cities, no one had yet laid the two papers upon the same table.

CHAPTER 17

The False Face in Uniform

Whenever the school bell rang in Patna, Shivshankar Mishra remembered his working days. Even in retirement, he would start at the hour of the bell. That morning a vegetable seller was calling out on the unpaved road outside his house. Inside, his daughter Madhavi was putting rotis on two plates. There was no notice from any office, no uniform in sight, and yet Shivshankar was afraid of the sound of his mobile telephone.

'Babuji, give me the telephone today,' Madhavi said.

'Why? My private papers are on it.'

'To keep those papers safe. As soon as another number rings you turn the telephone off, then regret not having looked at its details.'

Shivshankar looked at his daughter. In his working life he had taught people to obey rules. Now that his daughter was laying down rules in his own home, he felt a small pang at having become useless.

Madhavi pulled up a chair and sat down. 'I want to understand your fear more than I want to understand the money you lost. You told me before about the false court they showed you. But what happened on the day you thought of calling out to me and did not?'

Shivshankar remembered the hour clearly. It was a winter's day. In the room shown on the telephone were blue curtains, an unfamiliar emblem in the background and a file placed at one end of a desk. One man was reciting sections of the law in a loud voice; another spoke more softly. The quieter man had said, 'If you want your family to be safe, complete the verification.'

'I asked them whether I could go to the police station,' Shivshankar said.

'What did they say?'

'They said going out would be treated as absconding. I locked my door from inside. They kept me seated before that screen all afternoon. Once, when I got up for water, they told me not to go out of the camera's view.'

Madhavi pushed aside the plate before her. 'You told me you had a high fever. I asked you to see a doctor.'

'Yes. I was afraid they would call you a criminal too if you saw what was happening. They kept mentioning the family.'

'You now know the place you saw was not a real court. But that day your own house became a prison for you.'

Shivshankar lowered his eyes. 'For forty years I taught children to tell the truth. I lied to my own child.'

'And now you are telling me the story. That is the beginning of bringing the lie to an end.'

Sharda came out of the kitchen. She had heard all this before, but she remembered differently the date of that day's meal and how the money had been taken. 'That amount of one lakh and eighty-three thousand rupees,' she said, 'did not go all at once. Even while thinking of your medicines and the money we owed for the house, I could not at first understand how many instalments had been taken.'

Shivshankar opened his passbook. The written statement he had already given the police contained the whole amount, but it seemed to present the payments as if they had been made at three separate times. Madhavi drew a pencil circle around each date. 'When you make your next statement, write this sequence of times separately. Tell them yourself where your memory was wrong.'

'Will the court summon me again?'

'If there are legal proceedings, a genuine notice will come. Do not hand the right to question you to a man wearing a uniform on a telephone screen.'

Just then somebody knocked on the door. A postman stood outside. Shivshankar drew back. Madhavi opened the door; the postman gave her the electricity bill and went away. Such a small incident deepened Shivshankar's shame: the fault lay elsewhere, but the fear had entered his body.

At noon a call came from Arunima Rao's office on an officially identified number. Madhavi first noted the caller's official identity and the appointed time, then handed the telephone to her father. Arunima came straight to the point. 'We need to check the bank details in your first complaint once more. If you wish, you can make your statement in the presence of your daughter and a lawyer. You need not deposit any money immediately.'

Shivshankar was silent for a few moments. 'I have a photograph of the uniform I saw on the screen. But it was I who believed that man was a real policeman. Isn't that a crime on my part?'

'Believing them because you were frightened is not in itself a crime,' Arunima said. 'But I shall not yet attach the name of a real police officer to the people shown in that image. The picture, the voice and the telephone contact must each be examined separately.'

Madhavi did not press her ear against the telephone. She listened to what her father said, but did not take his words out of his mouth. She understood that an elderly victim had the right to testify in his own words.

When Shivshankar reached the office he was given a written acknowledgement for the safekeeping of records. It stated that the family had submitted the messages and payment details in its possession for examination. Arunima made it clear that an acknowledgement did not

mean anyone had been proved guilty, nor was it a promise that the money would be returned.

Priyam, a junior investigator sitting opposite, laid out another complaint of a similar kind. 'In this case too there was a strip of the same colour on the screen,' he said. 'And after the voice came the same sentence: keep your family safe.'

'The same gang?' Shivshankar asked eagerly.

Arunima signalled to Priyam to answer. 'Many swindlers can use the same words to frighten people. We must first look separately at the date of each complaint, the actual contacts and the other payment details. A colour or a sentence cannot establish common ownership.'

Shivshankar was not disappointed by her caution. He felt a little reassured. He had begun to understand that a mistaken certainty could ruin the life of another innocent person.

Priyam placed a page of the second complaint before Arunima. The original complainant was a widow from another district. Under pressure from her family, she did not want her name made public. Arunima did not show the page to Shivshankar; she said only that another witness might come forward.

Before returning home, Shivshankar stood up to say one more thing. 'My daughter asked why I hadn't called her. I had no answer. Write this in your papers: the real effect of the people who spoke against my family over the telephone was that I lost the courage to ask my family for help.'

Arunima looked at him. 'That is an important part of your experience. You can write it in your own words, or read the statement and give your consent.'

For the first time Shivshankar read a whole paragraph before writing 'Agreed' on a piece of paper. His small victory that day was simply that his consent was his own.

Back at home Madhavi opened the old wedding-expenses notebook again. She did not erase the amount that had been deducted from the savings. On a new page she wrote, 'Hope of recovery—uncertain.' Beneath it she wrote, 'Babuji's testimony—complete.'

That night Priyam telephoned Arunima's office. 'Madam, the time given in the other complaint is different from the time on the teacher's telephone. But the caller also quoted to that complainant the number of an old complaint, one that appears in public records. How he came by the number is a new question.'

'Public information can be seen by many people,' Arunima replied. 'Matching numbers do not prove a common operation. But seek permission to examine the source of the papers used in both complaints. And do not circulate the victims' names unnecessarily.'

Priyam put down the telephone. On his desk were two different complaints, two different families in which people had been made afraid of

the voices of their own loved ones. That night Shivshankar did not silence his mobile telephone. Instead, he put a line beside it: 'Speak to your own people first.'

CHAPTER 18

Behind the Advertisement

An old printing press in Delhi had been turned into a new newsroom. Half the former owner's name was still visible on the iron gate outside. Inside, Kabir sat at his computer. Beside his desk hung a painting made by Pranay: a mask half white and half black, with an empty space where the face inside should have been. Pranay had once said, 'The face people put into an empty space is often larger than the truth.'

Kabir kept his reporter's notebook beneath the painting. That day he had three advertisements to examine. The first talked of cricket; the second offered a glittering screen of entertainment; the third promised 'an opportunity to recover your losses'. The three had appeared under different names, yet the same old visual design could be seen in two of them. The same colour, the same tune, the same manner of displaying shining numbers.

Kabir opened an archive of old promotions. Their dates were different. He saw that the image of a speaker who had delivered warnings against gambling had also been used in another advertisement. But reusing a picture did not by itself prove the speaker's consent or any financial connection. The first question was whether the image had been used with permission.

Pranay telephoned just then. 'Have you seen the invitation to tomorrow's exhibition?'

'Yes, I have. I'll be late at the office today.'

'Your word "late" has less to do with office hours than with fear of somebody else.'

Kabir laughed. 'I get frightened too.'

'Then tell me plainly this evening. I won't ask questions until you want to speak.'

Pranay painted, and Kabir read documents for news reports. They had been part of each other's lives for a couple of years, but very few of Kabir's colleagues knew about their relationship. Privacy was their choice; fear was not its only reason. Pranay had once said, 'I do not want to hide our relationship, but making it public need not be another paper in your professional file.' Kabir had kept those words in his memory.

Shaibal, Kabir's colleague, came in with a printed list. 'These are the public rates for such publicity. According to this, the advertising costs very

little. But the amount one business has shown as expenditure is much higher.'

'Are they the same thing?' Kabir asked.

'They look the same to me.'

'Looking alike and being the same contract are different matters. The duration, transmission, number of viewers and other services may vary. Where can we find the original expenditure statement?'

Shaibal looked a little annoyed. 'You turn every clue into a question.'

'If we don't ask such questions, a clue very quickly becomes an accusation.'

Kabir drew two columns in his notebook. The first said, 'Promotion seen'; the second, 'Payment not yet proved'. Soon an official reply came to his telephone from Arunima Rao. In answer to his questions she wrote that copies of public advertisements could be useful in an investigation, but private account details or confirmation that someone was a criminal could not be supplied without due legal process.

Kabir called Arunima. 'I sent you three advertising images. Can you say they were made for audiences in India?'

'The language and the broadcast times suggest that Indian viewers were the intended audience,' Arunima said. 'But that does not establish that access from Pakistan, Bangladesh or every other country in the world was completely blocked.'

'I'll change the headline of my story.'

'More important than the headline is preserving the differences between the original records,' Arunima replied. 'I need the source of the advertisement. You must verify things as a journalist; I need a chain of evidence that will stand up to legal scrutiny.'

Kabir accepted the point, but made his professional independence clear. 'You ask the questions and I obey orders—that cannot be the rule between us. Whether I publish something in the public interest will be an editorial decision.'

Arunima did not laugh. 'I agree with you about that boundary. But remember the victim's rights before publishing private information.'

In the afternoon Kabir watched a short video from an old gaming promotion again. The viewers in it spoke a mixture of Maithili, Bhojpuri and Hindi. The presenter promised that they would win at the game. Kabir switched off the screen. He thought of people like Amresh, who saw in five hundred rupees the easiest road to a thousand.

He wrote an opening line for his article: 'The expenditure behind promotions promising small stakes, and the people who actually benefit from them, require investigation.' He wrote the source and the date beneath it. He had not yet decided whether to publish.

There was a meeting in the editor's room at four. The editor, Sudip Bhatnagar, was busy on the telephone. When Kabir sat down, Sudip gave

him a letter. 'This advertiser says its image is being put into a news report without permission. I want its position in writing. We shall also disclose our own organisation's advertising interests.'

Kabir read the letter. The name of the protesting organisation did not match any of the three promotional names exactly. Once again a similarity of names was misleading. Sudip said, 'There is pressure on me. The organisation can withdraw its advertising. But I will not conceal that pressure from you.'

For the first time Kabir looked steadily into his editor's eyes. 'Do you want me to stop?'

'I want you not to hurry. Bring me the evidence. If I suppress a true story out of fear, you may write against me.'

As soon as Kabir left the meeting, a message from an unknown sender appeared on his telephone. It contained few words: 'If the picture becomes public, will the report become public too?' A blurred photograph was attached. It showed Kabir and Pranay holding hands outside an evening event.

Kabir's first response was not anger but astonishment. It had been raining that day, and the two of them had stood together beneath an umbrella. The event was public, but the photograph turned a moment of private life into something to be feared, without their permission.

He did not telephone Pranay immediately. He did not know who had sent the picture, how it had been obtained or who else already possessed it. Some people in society tried to shame others with such photographs; the mutual affection of two consenting adults was no evidence of a crime.

Five minutes later Pranay called him. 'Kabir, I've received the picture too.'

'Was there any threat with it?'

'One sentence: "Your picture is no longer yours." I did not reply.'

Kabir drew a deep breath. 'I don't want to give up my work as a journalist. But if this puts you in danger, I shall listen to you first.'

There was no harshness in Pranay's voice. 'I am not a prize for your journalism. I am part of your life. I have a right to make decisions too. I have the complete photograph safely with me. There is no need to send it to anybody.'

'I won't put the photograph in my report,' Kabir said. 'I'll find out how to make a formal complaint against its misuse.'

'And write this too: I object not to the photograph but to the threat made without my consent.'

That night Kabir prepared a separate record of the private incident. He wrote down when the message arrived, a limited description of the photograph and the words of the threat. He kept the picture apart from the editorial file for his news report. He understood that confusing his role as a

journalist with his position as a private victim could lead to dangerous decisions.

When Arunima received the information, she asked him directly, 'Have you any evidence linking your investigation into advertisements with the threat involving the personal photograph?'

'Not yet,' Kabir replied. 'They happened on the same day. It could be a coincidence.'

'Then the two incidents will be recorded separately. No unnecessary details of your relationship will be put in any record without the consent of you and Pranay.'

Kabir put down the telephone. Pranay's painting was still on his desk: the half-white, half-black mask. He understood now that criminals sometimes attacked not only a person's money but also the right to his own face.

At nine that night Sudip sent him a fresh note. 'The original publication of the first promotional video, whose source is public, predates the day of Revati's event in Patna. The second video came afterwards. We have not yet found a direct contract. Check the publication dates against each other.'

Kabir wrote the dates in his notebook. Then his eyes fell on a public invitation to an international entertainment exhibition in Macau. It contained a minor title for someone in the publicity department, a title that also appeared on the last page of the Indian promotional material. An identical title did not establish a connection, but it certainly gave him a reasonable question to put in a letter asking for clarification.

Late that night Pranay came to the door. For some time neither spoke. Pranay picked up the painting from the table and drew a fine pencil line across the empty part of the face.

'What is that?' Kabir asked.

'A door. Even the person behind a mask, if he has a home of his own, has the right to open it himself.'

Kabir turned his telephone face down. The fear of the message from outside did not vanish at once. But he was now certain of one thing: his investigation might oblige him to tell the world the truth he knew, but he need not surrender the rights over his own life to anyone.

CHAPTER 19

The Silence of a Luxurious Flight

A huge advertisement hung on the marble wall of the international departure lounge in Delhi. In it, a woman sent a golden star floating above her palm. Beneath her was written: Opportunity never waits. Nilima Jha glanced at her ticket below those words. Her flight was still three hours away, and the official letter authorising her to meet a witness also imposed a limit on time. Opportunity and permission were two things she had no wish to mistake for one another.

Until a few days earlier, she had thought the journey unnecessary. Samir Bose's statement could be taken over a secure communications link; an authorised copy of the guest list could be requested formally. But Meghna Sen's audit in Hong Kong, Vivek Sood's unusual photograph, and the name of a function in Macau had turned up in three separate records. Since the people and the documents would be available in the same city, Nilima wanted to put her questions in a clear order. The permission she carried did not cover private surveillance or an inquiry under an assumed name.

Inspector Arunima Rao read out the final list of travel papers over the telephone. 'You are not taking the original Indian investigation records with you. Certified copies, the number of the request for assistance, and your own notebook. Nothing more. And you must not touch anyone's equipment there without the permission of the local authorities.'

'And if the witness doesn't want to speak?' Nilima asked.

'Then that is his right. I am sending you precisely because you can leave a blank space in the record when there is no answer.'

There was no praise in Arunima's words; they were a warning. She knew Nilima well. Questions surrounding the identification of her former superior, Vivek Sood, as dead had hurt Nilima personally. Two years earlier, Vivek had told her, 'Trust and evidence are two different things. The first may break. The second, if properly preserved, can be examined again.'

Nilima turned her ticket over. She wrote to her assistant Anand, asking him to preserve a copy of the fresh notice received by Rani concerning her bank account, in accordance with the rules, and not to send it abroad. For the moment Rani needed to know one thing: the questions about her account were not over, but nobody would decide in haste whether she was guilty or a victim.

At the departure gate an employee called out her name. 'Madam, there is an offer to change your seating class. A place is vacant in the forward cabin.'

'I have not asked for any change.'

'There is a note about special hospitality against your name on my list.'

Nilima looked at her travel authorisation. The ticket approved by the government was for ordinary class. 'Please retain my original seat. And I should like a written record of where that offer came from.'

For a moment the employee looked uncomfortable. 'The name isn't clear here. Sometimes a company provides it as a customer courtesy.'

Nilima recorded the matter without making a scene. An offer whose sponsor had not been identified was no proof of criminal intentions. Still, she put the discrepancy between her booked passage and the proposed facility into her notes. The curtain of the forward cabin rose, showing softly lit seats with white covers. Nilima took her assigned place farther back.

Beside her sat a woman of about sixty. In her bag were two tiny shoes knitted from wool. As the aircraft took off, the woman gazed out of the window. Later she introduced herself as Prabha Ghosh, travelling from Kolkata to visit her daughter.

'Is this your first journey abroad?' Prabha asked.

'No. But this time the work is difficult.'

'People doing difficult work often forget to eat.' Prabha took a small packet of plain biscuits out of her bag. 'My daughter tells me they serve everything on the plane. All the same, I bring biscuits from home.'

Nilima declined politely, then accepted one biscuit at Prabha's insistence. She remembered the glass jars in Rani's shop. At two ends of the world there were biscuits of much the same shape: in one place they belonged to a ledger of debts, in another they provided a little comfort on a journey.

After some hours a man's laughter could be heard beyond the curtain. With it came a few English phrases: 'member support', 'marketing rights', 'special guest'. Nilima did not open her telephone or notebook and attempt to eavesdrop. A few business expressions spoken by strangers on a public aircraft established nothing. But they reminded her of seven invoices in her file, where sums had been entered under equally ordinary descriptions.

Before landing in Hong Kong, the sea shone on the aircraft's screen. Prabha put the little shoes back in her bag. 'Who is waiting for you at home?'

Nilima paused before answering. 'At present? A woman who is frightened of her own bank account. And a man who has a death certificate, though I have no final answer about him.'

Prabha looked at her. 'Then when you arrive, telephone that woman first. Somebody who is frightened needs to hear that you have arrived safely.'

In the arrivals hall at Hong Kong, Nilima received a message from the local liaison officer. The time arranged for the meeting in Macau and the witness's consent were to be confirmed again. Beside Samir Bose's name was a small note: 'Consent subject to conditions.'

It was those words, rather than the shining hotels, that held Nilima's attention. What were the conditions? Did the witness want his name withheld from the public? Or did he doubt that the people coming to hear him would leave him safe afterwards?

Through the window of the vehicle taking her across the border, she could see the sea. After dark the lights of the bridge stretched down into the water like long pillars. Nilima read a message from Meghna: 'The search for Tara Lama continues. Her name is on the public invitation, but her attendance is unconfirmed. Be careful when you reach Macau.'

She replied: 'I am with the local authorities. I will not circulate any assumptions about Tara.'

A separate message from Samir Bose arrived at half past nine that night. 'The hotel's conference list has changed. Some guests' names have been entered again. I have the earlier version. But first understand one thing: the photograph that reached India was not taken with my telephone.'

Nilima looked out of the window. Thousands of windows shone in the buildings across the water. A photograph might show the face of the person in it, but never the face of the person who had been looking through the camera.

Nilima asked, 'Did you see the person who took the picture?'

No answer came for a long time. At last Samir wrote: 'I will tell you what I saw. I will not take responsibility for what I did not see. We shall meet tomorrow.'

CHAPTER 20

The Face in the Glass

At night, the upper floors of the hotels in Macau and the service entrances below seemed to belong to two different worlds. Above, coloured lights changed upon the walls; below, in the narrow passage, the hands of employees carrying dishes smelt of oil and soap. Samir Bose came to work along this second route. He had no time to admire the marble at the main entrance, but he had been familiar with several names in the guest register for months.

He had come to Macau from a small town in Bengal ten years before. His first job had been wiping tables; later he was trained in guest services. Every month he sent money to his mother. 'Is it Diwali there every day?' she would ask. 'Ma, there are as many bills as there are lights,' Samir would reply. She laughed at his answer. He did not tell her that, after staying awake for eighteen hours at the hotel, even the light in his own little room seemed a burden.

That morning there was a printed guest list in his office drawer. It was an earlier version of the list for an event, subsequently revised. An authorised employee of the events department had given it to him. Samir had not taken it home. In accordance with the hotel's rules, he had kept it in the office and given notice that it should be preserved for inspection through the prescribed procedure.

Seven names on the white sheet bore small pencil marks. One was Viraj Sahni; others belonged to representatives of Indian businesses. Samir knew there was nothing criminal about dining at a conference, buying a watch, or watching a dance. Yet against one name in the old guest list stood the words, 'Entry approved, attendance undetermined.' They troubled him because another list for the same function said something quite different about that name.

In the afternoon the lights were being tested in the service room. A band was rehearsing at full volume. A singer named Suhasini remarked each time they repeated a passage, 'The tune is heard upstairs; its mistakes are heard downstairs.'

Samir asked his colleague An-Lin, 'Where has yesterday's list of names for the programme gone?'

An-Lin looked to the right, where a supervisor stood beyond the glass wall. 'The working list has changed. If you have a question, submit it in writing.'

'I have already done so.'

'Then don't ask again,' An-Lin said quietly. 'I need this job.'

Samir did not know whether that answer showed fear or merely the ordinary pressure of work. But at that moment he remembered his first arrival in a foreign country. He had been so poor that he had had to learn the difference between agreement and silence in order to keep his employment. Now he was trying to understand what his own silence was worth.

In the hotel's glass corridor, Vivek Sood's face came back to Samir's mind. Some weeks earlier Vivek had asked him only one question: 'Where is the merchandise kept against an invoice for service expenditure?' Samir had answered, 'If the invoice is for a service, there need be no merchandise.' Vivek had not laughed. 'Then I need an account of who received that service,' he had said.

Samir remembered Vivek as a man in plain-coloured clothes. He accepted no expensive gifts and did not speak loudly. Many guests at the hotel wished to conceal their names. Vivek, on the contrary, had made his identity clear, while keeping certain details of his travel arrangements confidential. Samir had found this unusual at the time.

A copy of the photograph that Nilima had received in India had also reached Samir's private telephone. Vivek's face was clear on the screen, but in the metal spoon lying on the table was the blurred reflection of someone else. Samir reread his own written statement about the photograph: 'I received it. I did not take it.' He had chosen those words himself, because he did not know who had taken the picture.

At two o'clock Joanna Lou, an authorised local liaison officer, arrived at the hotel. Samir had met her before, when jewellery had gone missing from a guest room and an ordinary complaint had been investigated. This time Joanna asked him not about the conference but about his written consent.

'Do you wish to meet the Indian investigators?'

'One of them. Nilima Jha. But I request that my full statement should not be made public.'

'That request will be recorded. No promise can override the law. But we shall make a separate record of the risks you face. If you do not wish to proceed, the meeting can be stopped here.'

For the first time Samir felt that saying 'no' of his own free will was also a right. In guest services he had spent his days giving others that right, but had never thought of exercising it for himself.

Just then a woman's voice came from the other side of the corridor. 'Give my papers back. I want to telephone home.' Samir immediately moved towards the door, but looked first at Joanna.

Joanna raised her hand. 'First find out whether she wants help. If necessary, call a local support worker.'

The young woman's name was Mira. At the hotel she was publicly described as an assistant for cultural programmes. Samir had noticed her several times: repeated night duties, an empty bag held tightly against her chest, and the way she kept glancing towards the doors among the crowds of conference guests. He had seen these things, but he had not concluded merely from what his eyes told him that she was being held against her will.

'Mira,' Samir asked, 'would you like to speak privately, either with me or with a support worker?'

At first the young woman said nothing. She looked all around her. Then she asked softly, 'If I speak, will my name stay out of it?'

'I shall not make you a false promise,' Joanna said. 'But there are ways to protect private information. We shall ask what you want first.'

Mira put her hand into her bag but took nothing out. 'I had a document. Now all I have is its empty cover.'

Samir understood that the sight of an empty passport cover could tell a harsher story than the name printed in the passport itself. He had many questions he wanted to ask, but Joanna signalled that, today, Mira's story must begin only if Mira herself wished it to.

That evening, outside the glass conference hall, Samir saw a familiar man. He was no distinguished guest, merely an ordinary events assistant, as far as anyone was told. But he had the new conference list in his pocket, and he was marking Samir's name on it in pencil.

'Why are you putting a mark against my name?' Samir asked.

The man looked sideways. 'There have been many corrections to the list this year. Attend to your work.'

'A correction is one thing. Removing a name is another.'

The man did not reply. In the glass his face became two faces, one in front and the other in the reflection. Samir suddenly remembered a similar glassy shine in the photograph of Vivek. He did not treat the likeness as evidence, but decided to include it in his written questions.

At eight that night Samir was waiting for confirmation of Nilima's arrival. The conference's cultural programme was about to begin. The band struck up its first tune. Mira was visible some distance away. Someone stood close to her, continually looking at her mobile telephone. Samir did not leave his place, for a wrong move might make the young woman less safe.

He sent Joanna a short message by a secure channel: 'Mira may be willing to receive assistance. Someone should be present at the separate assistance entrance.'

Joanna replied at once: 'No confrontation at the workplace. Confirm her consent. The support workers are present.'

Samir closed his desk drawer and took up the conference list. The question of whether Vivek's name was on that sheet had not gone away. But

another question now stood before him: would Mira be able to leave that night of her own free will?

PART TWO

The Wealth of Seven Seas

CHAPTER 21

The Dance Hall in Macau

By the time Nilima reached the hotel in Macau, she knew only three things for certain about Samir: he worked at the hotel, he had agreed to a meeting through a local official, and he did not claim to have taken the photograph. The Indian file also contained some earlier suppositions against his name. Nilima did not use them as the basis of her questions.

Joanna Lou met her outside the conference reception area. 'The authority to hear his statement is specified in your official request. No one will conduct a private search here. The witness is willing to show you the list, but custody of the original record must follow the local procedure.'

Nilima agreed. She remembered, at that moment, the shop in Darbhanga, the false courtroom backdrop in Patna, and a half-finished glass of tea in Hong Kong. Even in this glittering building at the other end of the world, the real questions were small ones: who had seen what, who had said what, and whose account had not yet been heard at all.

Under the chandeliers of the great hotel in Macau, Nilima heard the sums being wagered and thought of the five hundred rupees in the Darbhanga shop. The money changing hands at a single table here could support many families in Rani's village for a year. But Nilima had not come to gamble. At the request of the Indian authorities, and in the presence of local officers, she had permission to meet a witness.

His name was Samir Bose. He worked in guest services at the hotel. He kept looking about him.

'Did you take the photograph of Vivek?' Nilima asked.

'No. Vivek is in the photograph, but it was not taken with my telephone. The picture was sent to frighten me.'

'Then Vivek was here?'

'He was. Not to look for any secret treasure. He came to examine the accounts showing where money earned from gambling in India was being spent.'

Samir had a guest list. He handed the paper to the investigators with a formal record of its lawful receipt. The list included representatives of a pharmaceutical company, art dealers, tourists, and the head of an Indian consultancy. They were not all criminals. Certain names bore special marks, among them Viraj Sahni's.

'Not all the glitter you see in this hotel comes from gambling money,' Samir explained. 'But questions had been raised about a few expensive guest

rooms, gifts given without any clear reason, and invoices for services that might never have been provided. Vivek was following those questions.'

The music playing nearby stopped suddenly. A young woman, whom Samir called Mira, hurried towards him. Her face had gone pale. 'I was brought here with the promise of a job,' she said. 'Someone has taken all my papers. I want to go back.'

Samir took her out through another door, where a local support worker was waiting. Nilima understood that to call prostitution and trafficking one and the same thing would be to erase the victim's voice. Mira had spoken of coercion, threats, and documents being taken from her. No report could be written without establishing the question of her free consent.

Mira said, 'The man who kept watch over me once told me, "Money comes from India, and faces shine here."'

Nilima recorded that sentence not as proof but as something the young woman had heard someone say. A firm connection would require payment records. Samir said in a low voice, 'Some of those papers are in Malta. Others are with an organisation in Beijing. And Vivek ... he disappeared from here deliberately.'

The music began again, but to Nilima it no longer sounded the same. At first she had taken the song as part of the hotel's decoration; now, behind each rising note, she seemed to hear the tired feet of the service staff. Samir was still holding the receipt for the guest list. He showed Nilima not the original paper but a copy of the record of its lawful inspection.

'Did you make the marks on this list yourself?' Nilima asked.

'Some marks were already there in the office,' Samir replied. 'The note I wrote is on the line below. They are not in the same handwriting.'

Joanna recorded this distinction on a separate sheet. In his anxiety Samir had forgotten to mention it earlier. For a moment Nilima felt that his trustworthiness had grown through this small admission: he had dared to show a weakness in his own document.

'What does the mark against Viraj Sahni's name mean?'

'I don't know. At the time of the event there were instructions for special arrangements for some guests. The employee who made the mark against the name should answer that question.'

Nilima wrote in her notebook, without using a coloured pen: 'List available. Writer of mark unknown.' The line had less sparkle than the hotel's chandeliers, but it was of greater use to an investigation.

Golden invitations lay on the conference reception desk. Inside was a reference to a closed session headed 'Business Cooperation'. Nilima did not see Tara's name on the list. She was worried about the missing colleague, but Samir had not mentioned Tara in his statement, and there was no basis for placing her in Macau.

Two hours later, Ana Fernandes, a local support worker, told Nilima only that Mira was now in a safe environment and that attempts were being

made to meet her immediate needs. Mira wanted more time before deciding whether to give a formal statement. Nilima did not press for an immediate interview.

'I should like to thank her,' Nilima said.

Ana smiled. 'What she needs is not thanks but choices. If she wishes, she will meet you again. If she does not, her story will not be made public without her permission.'

As Nilima left, she saw her own face in the glass of the dance hall. She had a man declared dead, an unverified photograph, a guest list, and a sentence overheard by a victim. They were four different things. Before they could become evidence of a larger conspiracy, each required its own independent verification.

That night Joanna, with Samir's permission, sent a brief supplementary note. The older guest list had two separate expenditure headings, 'Special Hospitality' and 'Member Consultation'. In the newer copy both had been brought together under 'Event Support'. Changing words did not prove money laundering, but it raised questions about who had made the change and why.

Nilima wrote to Meghna: 'Do these three headings appear in your audit? Keep the original documents safe. We should compare them only after obtaining the written sources.'

Meghna's reply came very late. 'Yes, one of the headings does. But in my old schedule it has different recipients in two countries. And the signature beneath one expenditure sheet needs to be checked against Sofia Vella's registration records in Malta.'

Nilima could not bring herself to write a reply. Outside her window the lights of the dance hall were still burning. Samir had opened one door, she realised, but beyond it stood another door made of papers from Malta. Beijing had so far been mentioned only by name; its role still awaited evidence.

At that moment another message arrived from Ana: 'Mira is willing to speak again on one condition. First examine the empty cover of her passport. The name of the person who held the document does not appear in Mira's employment agreement.'

Nilima set the telephone down. The tea beside her bed had gone cold. She did not sleep again that night.

CHAPTER 22

The Empty Passport Cover

In the safe house in Macau, dawn arrived not out of the darkness but out of the rattling of an old fan. Mira had spent three nights there. On the first two she had lain on her bed looking at the ceiling. On the third she had fallen asleep, but when she woke in the morning she became aware of the weight of her own body, as though after a long time her feet were once more resting on the ground beneath her.

Outside the window a bus stopped. Its door opened, people got in, and it went on its way. The sight of something so ordinary made Mira want to cry. At the hotel, the arrival times of guests had mattered more than the bus timetable. Here the bus did not ask anyone's name.

Ana Fernandes came in carrying two cups of tea. She worked for a local support organisation; it was not her task to take statements on behalf of an investigating officer. 'Did you sleep last night?' she asked.

'For a little while.'

'We spoke about looking at the papers today. If you don't feel like it, we can look at them tomorrow.'

Mira picked up the blue bag beside her bed. It contained a silk handkerchief, one earring from a cheap pair, and a thin wooden box. Someone had returned the outer cover of her passport in that box, without the pages inside it. Where the gold lettering had been there were only marks left by glue.

'When they gave me this, they said I wouldn't need a passport,' Mira said. 'I thought the checks had been done at the airport, and that it was now the employer's responsibility. Later I understood that this wasn't responsibility for me. It was a way of keeping me bound.'

Ana was about to photograph the cover, but stopped her hand. 'May I?'

Mira nodded. Ana did not claim that she was making a copy of an official document or gathering formal evidence. In her support notes she merely recorded the colour of the empty cover, the glue inside it, and the four letters written in one corner. Mira noticed that, as Ana wrote, she asked again, 'Have I got that right?'

'One letter is wrong,' Mira said. 'You've written M. It is N.'

Ana corrected it. It was the first time in that place that Mira had been allowed even so small a correction.

She remembered her village near Sitamarhi. Her father had injured himself in the fields six months before. Her mother and two sisters washed utensils, studied, and shared their little jokes on the same veranda. One day a neighbour had shown her a job advertisement: cultural events abroad, reception work, food and accommodation provided. Mira knew the songs of Mithila and had even made announcements from the stage at school functions. In the light of her experience, the offer had not seemed impossible.

Seeing her name on the appointment letter, she had felt for the first time that a closed door in her life had opened. But after she reached Macau, the working hours were changed. Instead of reception duties, there was pressure to attend private functions for guests, restrictions on contact with the outside world, and demands that she surrender her passport for 'safekeeping'. She had agreed to some tasks and not to others. When she refused, she was threatened with dismissal and with the debt incurred for her journey.

'Not every night was the same for me,' Mira said. 'On some nights I wanted to sing of my own accord. On other nights I wanted to go home. If someone says I did everything here of my own free will, that would be a lie. If someone says I never had a will of my own, that would be a lie too.'

Ana wrote down the sentence exactly as Mira had spoken it. Mira looked at her. 'Will you tell Nilima this?'

'If you wish, you can tell her in the presence of an interpreter. The facts needed to arrange assistance are one thing. The whole story of your life is not anybody's property to be kept in a file.'

On the other side of the room stood a small machine for weaving thread. Mira watched another young woman sitting nearby. The young woman did not want to introduce herself, and Mira did not ask. Sometimes a silence shared between two people is a way of respecting their identities.

Joanna Low came in at noon with an interpreter. Mira was told that, if she wished, she could make a formal complaint about the taking of her documents; the local support service would separately explain the legal procedures that might follow. 'Will my name reach India?' Mira asked.

'Your identity may be required in some official proceedings,' Joanna explained. 'We shall tell you in writing what the limits of confidentiality are at each stage. We won't give you a false promise of complete secrecy.'

Mira opened her blue bag. There was a sheet of paper inside, folded three times. It was a photocopy of the first offer she had received when she was hired. It was not the original: a picture taken on a mobile phone had been printed out. One company's name was on it, but she had been told to hand her passport to someone with another name.

'I didn't understand what these two names meant,' she said. 'The man who took the papers met me on the day I travelled. The appointment letter didn't name him as an officer of the company.'

Joanna wrote, 'According to her account, a different person.' On the next line she added, 'Identity and authority yet to be verified.' Mira asked, 'Will writing all that help you find him?'

'I can't say. But if we write down the wrong name, someone who did nothing may be blamed. It is better to proceed carefully.'

Nilima did not come to the safe house that evening. Joanna sent her a limited update: Mira was considering her options for assistance and protection, and the two different names in her employment documents required checking. No private details of her statement were shared without her consent.

Mira could have telephoned home at once if she had wanted to. But she did not do so for three days. She was afraid her mother would begin by asking, 'What about your job?' And all the silence of two years would return in that one word.

On the fourth evening Mira decided to call. Ana showed her how to use the secure contact facilities at the office, but did not tell her what to say or to whom. It took a long time for someone to answer. At last her sister's voice came through. 'Didi, where have you been all this time?'

'I'm far away,' Mira replied. 'But today I'm safe. I haven't forgotten the way home.'

Her sister suddenly began to cry. Mira did not. She was afraid that if she started, she would not be able to say another word. She asked, 'Is Mother having her tea?'

'Yes. She's sitting on the veranda now.'

Before Mira there seemed to open, not the room in Macau, but the veranda of her own home. Across that small bridge of a telephone call she reached home, for the first time, without asking an employer's permission.

When the call ended, Ana asked, 'Was there something you wished to say about the other young woman?'

Mira closed the bag. There had been a young woman at the hotel who had called herself Sujata, though Mira did not know whether that was her real name. She wore an unusual bracelet with a red thread tied inside it. Sujata had not been seen since the previous week.

'I want to see my sister. But I can't leave that girl behind either,' Mira said. 'Could your support centre find out whether she is safe? We needn't make her name public.'

Ana did not immediately ask for a telephone number. 'If she wants assistance here, we shall try to make contact in a way that respects her consent and safety. You are free to change your mind about taking part in that effort.'

Mira picked up the empty passport cover and examined it. Half of one letter in the corner had been rubbed away. She understood that a piece of paper does not always tell the whole truth. Sometimes it tells us only that the truth has been taken out of someone's hands.

The bus stopped again at the gate outside. This time Mira did not look towards the window. On a fresh sheet of paper she wrote in her own hand, 'I want an attempt made to find Sujata, but her safety must come first.' Beneath it she signed her name of her own free will.

CHAPTER 23

The Relationship Between Two Men

The morning light in Brussels was not white but a faint grey. Standing at her office window, Elise Vander looked out at the city's old buildings. Below, a man hurried along the road holding a small child's hand; it was almost time for the school bell. On Elise's desk lay a query from India: were the sponsorship of an art exhibition and the cost of advertising a game connected by the same contract? The question had come from the journalist Kabir, though it had reached her through Revati Karn.

Elise examined only the publicly available details of the event that she had at hand. According to them, one of the exhibition's sponsors was a European arts organisation and the other a private publicity group. This proved no offence. Then she noticed an odd discrepancy. The outstanding expenditure was described as 'visual rights', whereas the arts organisation's published report called it 'stage decoration'.

Elise wrote in her notebook, 'Names still to be matched. Original contract required.' Instead of sending a photograph of that line, she emailed a plain question to India. She knew nothing about the journalist's private life.

In Delhi, Pranay was waiting for the paint on one of his pictures to dry. The door of the house stood half open, and a milk van had stopped outside. Kabir had been awake all night, but not because he was writing a report. A second threat had arrived on his telephone. The first photograph had been sharpened and sent again, with the words, 'Will you turn the one you call your love into a news story?'

Pranay did not take the phone. He sat down in front of Kabir and merely asked, 'Has it come to me as well?'

'Yes.'

'Have they written my name?'

'No. But people could recognise you.'

'Then the problem isn't my name. It's a right I have never given anyone.'

Kabir wanted to smash the screen of his telephone. More than the danger to his own work, it enraged him that somebody had made Pranay's face into a weapon against him. But he saw Pranay's hands trembling and said nothing.

They had first met at a public book exhibition in Delhi. Kabir was reporting on a controversial book, and Pranay had come to draw

illustrations for books. They had disagreed that day. 'Why is the picture so unclear?' Kabir had asked. 'A newspaper wants everything named at once,' Pranay had replied. 'A picture takes its own time.'

Friendship had grown out of that disagreement. Each had found in the other a chance to change his mind. Love came much later and very slowly: long bus journeys, rainy evenings, sitting awake through the night when one of them was ill, and an understanding that there would be two separate desks in their small room. Love in Kabir's life was not an instrument for revealing a mystery. It was companionship chosen over the years.

'I'll make a complaint to the police,' Kabir said.

'On one condition,' Pranay replied. 'No statement in my name without showing it to me. And no photograph of me at an editorial meeting.'

'All right.'

'And your story?'

Kabir could find no answer. Pranay picked up a pencil and added a line to the unfinished picture. 'If you want the truth, I'm with you. But don't treat me as the price of that truth, to be paid by your office or by a criminal.'

For the first time Kabir looked into his own mind. In the name of keeping Pranay safe, he had wanted to keep him away from editorial decisions. At other times he had wanted to rely on Pranay's courage in order to protect his own journalistic work. Neither was fair.

At noon Kabir went to the police station to give an account of what had happened. He needed to have the dates on which the private threats had arrived, the visible details of the sender, and the words displayed on his telephone entered in the complaint. To prevent the officers from circulating copies of the private photograph unnecessarily, Pranay put down in writing the separate limits of his consent. They both kept copies of the acknowledgement of the complaint.

One employee said quietly, 'People will make up all sorts of stories when they see a photograph of two men.'

'What people say doesn't define an offence,' Kabir replied. 'Investigate the threat and the attempt to circulate it without consent.'

The employee could not take his words back, but he read the complaint again. Pranay felt an unexpected relief: he had not had to relate the history of his love to defend his relationship. The question of his rights was clear enough on its own.

In the afternoon Revati telephoned. Elise's short reply had reached her from Brussels. Kabir read the email and told Pranay, 'One item of expenditure for the art event has been entered under a different heading. We can't call it corruption on that basis.'

Pranay laughed. 'Just as well. If a change of colour in an artist's bill proved a crime, half the art world would be in prison.'

Kabir could not laugh. Elise's question had brought another difficulty. In its public reply, the organiser said that two different services had been

entered under a single heading. That might be true. But the newspaper's advertiser also claimed to have paid a private service with the same name for image rights.

Kabir wrote three separate questions in his notebook: Whose image rights? Who received the payment? Who controlled the broadcast? He accused nobody.

That evening the proprietor of the newspaper office, Sudip Bhatnagar, called Kabir in. 'I'm under pressure over the possibility of losing advertisements,' he said. 'But the questions being raised about your private life will be kept separate from our editorial policy. I don't want to see the photograph. Whether your story is published will depend on the documents.'

Kabir asked, 'How do you know Pranay's name?'

Sudip was silent for a moment. 'You said someone was being threatened over his privacy. My assistant asked his name out of improper curiosity. I've stopped it. Nobody in this office will make your relationship into a news story.'

Kabir did not know whether the answer was enough. But for the first time he understood the danger of ordinary curiosity inside his own office. A blackmailer is hardly needed if society's curiosity will do his work for nothing.

At eight that night Pranay reached his art exhibition. Kabir came too. It was raining outside. The two stood under the same umbrella, just as they had in the photograph used to threaten them. Pranay held out his hand. Kabir hesitated for a moment and then took it. This time he did not look around for a camera.

In the exhibition crowd an elderly woman asked Pranay about one of his pictures. 'Why is there a little door inside this empty face?'

'Because there is a home inside a face too,' Pranay answered. 'Others may look at it as much as they please, but the person who lives there decides who comes in.'

At that moment Kabir's telephone vibrated. A third message had come from the unknown sender. This time there was no picture. Only one line: 'Open the advertising contract of Neelpath Communication Services and Pranay's photograph will be opened first.'

The name 'Neelpath Communication Services' had not appeared plainly in the three public advertisements Kabir had already examined. It might refer to a real contract, or it might be a misleading name deliberately supplied by the person making the threat. He showed the message to Pranay at once, but sent no copy of the photograph to anyone.

'What shall we do now?' Pranay asked.

'Add this message separately to the complaint. And check the public records to see whether a company by that name exists. We won't invent the identity of these people on the strength of this alone.'

Pranay did not let go of Kabir's hand. The rain outside had stopped. Far away in Brussels, Elise was closing her office, unaware that the answer to her ordinary question had travelled as far as the door of two people's home in India.

CHAPTER 24

Two Women's Acceptance

In the evening light in Arizona, the rocks of the mountains looked not red but copper-coloured. From the window of Isha's room she could see the lights of cars travelling along a distant road. She had shut down her computer, yet two times written on a sheet of paper on her desk remained before her eyes: 14:06 and 14:23. Seventeen minutes lay between them.

Isha was an independent specialist in the security of digital records. At the formal request of an Indian authority, she was assisting with a limited examination of the integrity of certain technical material. She was not authorised to inspect the original device. She had received a chain-of-custody receipt and a record of the times associated with a previously authorised copy. The legal limits of her work were clearly stated in her contract.

The receipt said that the device had been sealed at six minutes past two in the afternoon. The session log for the copy, however, recorded the last alteration at twenty-three minutes past two. Isha could not yet tell whether both times had come from the same device clock. A time zone, the device's internal clock, a delay in making the copy, or an error in recording the time could explain the difference.

In her computer notebook she wrote, 'Time discrepancy observed; tampering not established.' Then she stopped work altogether. She was in Arizona, but her mind lived in Delhi.

In Delhi, Sara had been up for some time. Three women sat on a wooden bench outside her office, each holding a different set of papers. Sara worked with a legal-aid group. Her days were filled with names, applications, hearing dates and the smell of fear; but to her each woman's story was separate.

The first woman had a complaint about the circulation of images, the second about threats connected with employment, and the third about the use of an identity document. Sara did not ask any of them whether their families knew everything. Her first questions were, 'Are you safe? And what help do you want from me now?'

Isha telephoned in the afternoon. It was night in Arizona. Sara looked tired on the screen.

'Have you eaten?' Isha asked.

'Two rotis. And you?'

'I still have tonight's dinner to eat here.'

They both laughed. Once the difference in time had seemed charming: evening in one city while the other was waking. After years, it had become an empty chair in the house. Sara wanted Isha to spend a few days in Delhi; Isha, caught between her work and family responsibilities, could not fix a date.

'Why do you sound so quiet?' Sara asked.

'The times don't agree in a record I'm working on.'

'I won't ask about your work. Tell me only what you are allowed to tell me.'

Isha fell silent for a moment. In Sara's words she recognised the kind of love that becomes hardest during separation: the discipline of keeping one's curiosity in check.

The two women had met at a public lecture in Delhi. Isha had spoken about digital privacy and Sara about the limits of a victim's consent in court proceedings. During the questions, Sara had asked, 'If technical evidence reveals someone's private life, how can we verify it without harming that person's dignity?'

Isha had replied, 'Technology gives us no right to look unnecessarily at what is not needed for an investigation.' When the lecture ended, they had argued about that answer again. The argument had continued for months: sometimes in a room, sometimes on the telephone, and sometimes in silence.

Once Sara's family had raised the question of marriage. For a long time she had put off answering. In the end she had told her mother, 'I am in love with a woman.' Her mother had been quiet at first and then asked, 'Does she understand what makes you happy?' Sara had said, 'Sometimes she understands what makes me unhappy as well.' All the difficulties of Sara's life had not been settled that day, but the words she had spoken in her own name belonged to her.

Isha had shared the truth with her family little by little. Her father had asked, 'When you change countries, does your home change too?' Isha had answered, 'Homes change; the need for our own people does not.' Her father had not agreed at once. But months later he had asked after Sara during a telephone call. To Isha that small change had meant a great deal.

That night Sara told Isha, 'A young woman came to my office yesterday. She was afraid that if she submitted a private photograph with her complaint, every employee would see it. I explained that only those who needed access would have it, and that she had the right to ask questions.'

'Didn't you give her your own example?'

'No. My life isn't a tool for treating hers.'

Isha smiled. 'That's why your work is harder than mine.'

'No. The difficulties are only different.'

After ending the call, Isha looked again at the comparison of times in the secure copy used for her official work. The receipt she had been given described the sealing time as local Indian time. In the table from the other source the name of the time zone was blank, and there was no mention of whether the device clock had been checked. She could easily have concluded that the evidence had been altered. But she knew that such an accusation could destroy the life of an innocent employee.

She repeated to herself the limits of the examination she had been asked to conduct: not the original device, but an authorised copy; the integrity of the copy, yes, but not independent eyewitness knowledge of everything that had happened during the seizure. Isha put the question of the two times in an official letter, together with the possible innocent explanations.

The next morning her colleague Lata Desai came into the office in Arizona. Lata was already preparing a response to a request from the Indian authority concerning an external technical-services contract. Isha did not show her any papers from the private case. She asked only a general technical question: 'How reliable is a comparison when the source time isn't recorded in a system?'

Lata replied, 'Don't explain a difference if you don't know the basis of the clocks. Say that the two entries differ. Ask for an inquiry into why they differ.'

Isha changed the language of her note. Instead of 'possible irregularity' she wrote, 'time reference not established'. The right words do not always hold back an investigation; they can prevent it from taking the wrong direction.

In Delhi, Sara was sitting in the small courtyard behind her office. A simple photograph arrived on her phone from Isha: distant red mountains beneath the Arizona sky. There were no work papers and no confidential details. Sara replied with a picture of a jamun tree in Delhi. Beneath that tree, two years before, they had first said openly that they wanted a future together.

'You remembered the tree?' Isha wrote.

'I haven't forgotten the tree. It's the dates I forget.'

'Remembering dates is my job.'

'Then make sure your clock is right too.'

There was humour in their messages, but Isha suddenly remembered the two times on her desk. A wrong date in love might be forgiven; a wrong clock in judicial evidence might change an innocent person's liberty or a guilty person's accountability.

She finalised her official request: the original time on the Indian seizure receipt; the time reference of an independent room camera, if one was available; verification of the clock in the system used to make the copy; the official record of any breaking of the seal; and comparison of the integrity

hashes obtained from the original device. She asked for no private pictures. Nobody's sexual or family identity was necessary to answer this question.

A few hours later an acknowledgement arrived. It said that the time discrepancy had been accepted as a matter for examination. A short note accompanied it: the entry at 14:23 might be read not as 'last alteration' but as 'last synchronisation'. The decision was deferred until the original system record and the signed time-zone details were received.

Isha rose from her chair. Night had gathered beyond the window. The distant red mountains now looked black. There was a message from Sara on her mobile: 'Keep some time for yourself tonight.'

Isha typed back, 'I will. But first I've sent a seventeen-minute question to the proper place.'

She did not yet know whether anyone had interfered during that interval, or whether two different clocks had simply disagreed with one another. The one thing she knew was that sometimes the bravest sentence in defence of the truth is: 'It has not yet been proved.'

CHAPTER 25

The Seal of Malta

The afternoon sun fell on the old stone buildings near Malta's harbour in such a way that even the rooms beyond their windows had corners full of light. When Sofia Vella opened her office door, she was met by the smell of paper and old sandalwood furniture. Three envelopes lay on the desk. Each bore the same golden emblem, but the papers inside belonged to three different people and conferred three different kinds of authority. Knowing such differences was her daily work. Today, explaining one might destroy someone's reputation.

Her assistant Enzo set down a glass of water and said, 'That Indian advertisement has come up again. They keep asking on the telephone when you will tell the press that the seal is a forgery.'

Sofia closed the file. 'Whether the seal is forged and whether its meaning has been falsely represented are two different questions. Tell them I am not a party to their publicity campaign. I examine what documents mean.'

After Enzo had gone, she remembered her mother's voice. Her mother used to keep the accounts at the fish market. Once, two customers had brought bags tied with identical red cords. Her mother had refused to hand one bag to the other customer without opening it first. Sofia was a child then; to her, the cord had seemed the important thing. Her mother had said, 'The colour is the same. What is inside need not be.' Many years after finishing her legal studies, Sofia still carried the sentence with her.

Nilima Jha had arrived from India. The fatigue of a sleepless night at the hotel in Macau showed in her eyes, but before opening her notebook she asked, 'Must the names of everyone mentioned in these papers be made public?'

'No,' Sofia replied. 'Only what is needed for verification. The procedure for requesting assistance from a foreign office is not the same as the procedure for making a public report.'

Nilima looked out towards the sea. In the distance a boat's sail filled with wind. She remembered the empty passport cover left in Mira's hands in Macau. For one person an office seal could promise employment abroad; for another, a seal of the same kind could take away the right to return home. But she had no right to turn those two experiences into a single accusation.

A local translator laid out two versions of a document. The original English heading said 'membership'; the promotional copy used in India

called it 'government approval'. Sofia drew a vertical line between the words with her pencil. 'This is a question of translation. Who commissioned the translation and who approved it must be established separately. If an office's name has been used without permission, that too requires an answer.'

There were five minutes before the secure meeting with Arunima Rao. Before switching off her phone, Nilima read a message from Rani Devi: 'Amresh took out his old schoolbooks today. He wrote down the shop accounts as well. You must have a great deal of work, but don't forget to eat.' Nilima smiled for a moment. Amid the alleged crores of rupees, Rani's little account was still something definite.

Three legally authenticated copies of original records were arranged on a small glass table. Sofia noted the date on which each copy had been issued and the limits of what its certification established. Before finishing her examination, she told her assistant, 'The original records must remain safe. Don't try to print everything together on one sheet and send it off.'

There was a smell of salt in the breeze at Malta's old harbour. The legal adviser Sofia Vella was showing three seals on her papers. One belonged to a company's registration, another to the signing of a partnership, and the third to the approval of a private consultancy body.

'Three seals put together do not make a government licence,' Sofia said. 'A company being registered here does not mean it has permission to run gambling in India. You must state exactly what your evidence does, and does not, establish.'

Arunima had joined the authorised meeting from Delhi. An advertisement claiming 'European recognition' for an organisation associated with Viraj Sahni was put before her. Sofia read it line by line. What the advertisement described as government recognition was, in fact, membership of a private body.

'This may amount to evidence of deception,' Arunima said, 'but in court I shall need the original advertising material and a record of how it was distributed.'

Sofia opened a sealed envelope. At the organisation's annual meeting there had been a proposal to designate India a 'special consumer territory'. People in other countries were not to be offered the service if doing so increased the risk associated with payments.

'So the mystery of the boundary was written down at this table?' Nilima asked.

'At least it is this company's decision. But it is one organisation's paper, not a principle that applies to every website.'

Before the meeting ended, Sofia showed them another letter. It proposed a payment to an Indian trust under a 'Special Circumstances Assistance Fund'. Viraj Sahni was the chairman of the trust. The proposed purposes were 'youth awareness, rapid public outreach, cultural events'.

'This organisation may also do lawful public-benefit work,' Sofia said. 'If there is an allegation that the funds were used for a criminal purpose, that requires separate, solid evidence.'

Nilima placed the paper before her and wondered where the victims' voices could be heard when 'service' and 'assistance' had become the most useful words in the language of an alleged crime.

After the meeting, Sofia collected her files. Nilima remained where she was. 'You make such fine distinctions,' she said, 'and an advertisement sells the whole thing in one sentence.'

'An advertisement is meant to inspire confidence,' Sofia replied. 'The law asks in whose statement, and on whose authority, that confidence is sought. But I am a legal adviser, not a judge. The final right to call someone a fraudster does not belong to my office.'

Enzo came in with an envelope. It contained no newspaper cutting but a reply to a public verification request sent to the company registrar. The first company was still registered. The second partnership agreement claimed to have been made with a representative of the first. The third private council had permitted use of its emblem in publicity, subject to limited conditions. All three facts could be true at once. But they did not establish the all-purpose 'licence' for India that the advertisement had made out of them.

'The trust proposal uses the word "approved",' Nilima said. 'Does that mean the money was paid?'

Sofia showed her the next page. 'This records discussion by a committee and agreement in principle. There is no payment receipt, no bank advice recording a transfer, and no entry in the recipient's accounts. It is easy enough to find out who wrote a proposal. Where the money went is still a question.'

Nilima drew three empty boxes beside a question in her notebook: proposal, approval, payment. She left each box empty where there was no evidence to fill it.

Sofia read the organisation's name printed in small letters on the back. The application for Special Circumstances Assistance had been made in the name of the Indian trust, but the contact address belonged to a private consultancy office. That did not establish wrongdoing: a trust could appoint a representative office. Yet the purpose of the grant and the items of expenditure were not described in the same way in the original email submitting the application. She asked for that original, not a cropped image of it.

Outside, a young woman was walking along the shore with her mother. The mother walked slowly, and the daughter adjusted her pace to match. Nilima thought that an inquiry, too, sometimes had to move at the pace of its weakest piece of evidence; if one hurried, the truth might be left behind. She smiled at the comparison, then wrote no moral lesson in her notebook.

As Sofia was preparing to close her office that evening, a reply came to an old request for records. The line for the name of the person who had submitted the trust application had not been completely filled in. There was only the stamp of a service office and, below it, two initials: 'N. S.' The registered sender was Viraj Sahni's trust, but no written authorisation for the stamped office had been attached.

Sofia sent Arunima a brief note through official channels: 'Proposal verified; payment unverified; authority of the person submitting the application unresolved.'

That night a message from Aditi Rane arrived on Nilima's phone. The heading 'customer confidence enhancement' had appeared in an export file in Surat. Nilima first typed, 'Issued by whom?' Then she deleted it. Without a registration number and the original agreement, two expressions that sounded alike meant nothing. She wrote instead, 'Please send the name in its original form, the date of issue, and whatever you are authorised to share.'

On her way back to the hotel, Sofia stopped outside an old letterbox. The name of a business office pasted on the door looked familiar. It was not one of the companies in her case; mail for many new enterprises arrived there. Yet the street number was the one she had found written three times in her records.

Behind the three seals, a single address was beginning to emerge. The question was not why an address should be shared. It was whose letters arrived there, under which names, and whether any of those people knew that their names were being used in advertisements in India.

CHAPTER 26

The Company in Three Layers

In an old lane of Malta's capital, sea air reached past the whitewashed walls, though in the little offices the movement of paper was greater than that of air. When Sofia Vella reached building number eight, she found seven company names on the letterboxes on the ground floor. The sunlight had faded the lettering of some; the new names shone brightly. She did not take a photograph with her phone. She had first to meet the building manager and explain why she wished to ask questions.

Maria, the elderly caretaker, knew her from earlier visits and invited her inside. 'I've been here thirty-seven years,' Maria said. 'There used to be two lawyers. Now a new name goes up almost every other week. But having a lot of names isn't a crime, is it?'

'No,' Sofia replied. 'Small companies often share an office for registration and mail. I'm not asking you for a confidential list of clients. I've only come to understand how the publicly listed offices are arranged.'

Maria seated her in the waiting room. On the wall hung an old picture of a ship, its sail looking half torn. The date written below the picture was earlier than Sofia's birth. She did not think it extraordinary that new companies should register in such an old building. What was extraordinary was the claim that publicity for three different businesses had been issued from here, describing the place in India as 'the sole authorised European centre'.

In the afternoon Sofia returned to her office and opened three files. The first concerned the registration of an entertainment-services company; the second, an agreement with a consultancy that provided it with services; the third, a letter advising on possible assistance to a trust. The same street address appeared at the top of all three documents. But the director of the registered company, the person signing the agreement and the contact person for the assistance application were all different. The papers provided a map of partial business connections, not of ownership.

Her junior colleague Luca brought her a colourful drawing: three circles joined by red arrows. Sofia studied it and asked, 'What does this red arrow mean?'

'A connection.'

'What kind? A shared address, a service agreement or ownership?'

Luca hesitated. 'I'd put all three together.'

'Then the reader will see whichever possibility seems most alarming. Take the arrows out. Write the nature of each connection beside it. Where the owner's name is not in the public record, leave the space blank.'

He erased the red arrows. The page looked less exciting now, but a little more truthful. Sofia wanted a defence lawyer, when the evidence reached court, to have no reason to laugh at the drawing.

At the same hour the afternoon sun was falling on a warehouse in Surat. Aditi Rane sat opposite Ramakant Poddar with an old agreement belonging to Sagarvastra Exports in her hand. Ramakant was visibly uneasy. 'I pay wages to eighty people,' he said. 'If a foreign customer holds up my goods over one service bill, what will happen to eighty families?'

'I haven't sent any accusation to your customer,' Aditi replied. 'At this preliminary stage we have to keep the bill for real goods, the transport receipts and the questionable service bill separate.'

Ramakant telephoned his daughter Tanuja. 'Are you taking your medicine on time?' he asked, lowering his voice. After ending the call he picked up a blue pen. He remembered his father selling cloth in the market at Darbhanga and knowing the household of every customer. Now he did not even know the faces of his customers abroad. The lines on an invoice travelled faster than his goods.

Aditi turned the pages of the company's approval register. A fee for consulting services had already been authorised, but the full legal name of the foreign entity in that agreement differed by one letter from the name in the Indian payment copy. It might have been a printing error, so she asked for a certified copy of the original agreement. Her assistant Jiten asked, 'Could two different names belong to the same company?'

'Perhaps,' Aditi said. 'Or perhaps to two. One letter can alter an identity. Let us find the company's official registration number first.'

The telephone rang in Sofia's office in Malta. Aditi introduced herself and gave the number of her lawful request. Because of the difference in office hours between the countries, she had already sent her questions in writing. Before answering, Sofia asked, 'What kind of records are you authorised to examine? Confidential papers of a private company in one country cannot simply be handed to a private investigator in another.'

Aditi answered without hesitation. 'At present I only want to compare public registrations and business names. Any protected original material will go through the appropriate authority and the formal channel.'

Sofia gave her the publicly recorded date of registration of the first company. The consultancy that served it had a separate registration. The application made by a third party remained under examination. When Aditi mentioned the 'customer confidence enhancement programme' on an old invoice, Sofia recognised the phrase in her notes. A similar English description appeared under the proposed purposes in the trust's request for

assistance. But identical descriptions did not prove that they referred to the same payment.

'Who is shown as the recipient of the service on your invoice?' Sofia asked.

Aditi read out the line. 'Sagarvastra Exports. But the foreign customer's name has been left blank.'

'And who signed to acknowledge that the service was delivered?'

'That is what I'm investigating. The owner disputes the time recorded for his approval.'

Sofia put down her pencil. 'Then record this too: whether the goods are real and whether the service is real are separate questions. If the cloth was shipped, don't make the cloth business disappear on paper.'

After the call, Aditi told Jiten, 'Whether payment should be stopped until the original foreign document arrives is not for me to decide on my own. We need a written decision from the competent officer. I have no authority to delay honest workers' wages either.'

That evening the power failed briefly in Surat. The sound of the looms stopped. A candle was lit on a seventy-year-old chest of drawers in Ramakant's warehouse. Jiten brought out a receipt from early morning. 'Madam, look at this. Last year's event bill has the same words—customer confidence. But the recipient is shown here as Patna.'

Aditi examined the date. It was the day of an earlier public gathering, not the day of the cloth export. 'These may be two different services,' she said. 'Let us see the original agreement for the event first.'

That night Sofia finished the third page of her small company map. Someone looking at a blurred name might decide that all the companies were shadows of one owner. Sofia was supposed to record a hypothesis, not a conviction. She divided her table into columns: registration, director, contact address, declared service, category of evidence and unverified connection.

When the public details of the third company arrived, Sofia noticed something unexpected. Its registered name was different from the one printed on the Indian invoice, but the latter appeared under the heading 'former trading name'. The change of name had taken place two days before the date of Sagarvastra's service invoice. Changing a company name could be entirely lawful. Why the change had occurred so close to that invoice remained a separate question.

Sofia sent Aditi a short legal note: 'History of former trading name verified; common ownership not established; examine the invoice date and the date on which the service was performed separately.'

Aditi read the message and called Jiten. 'Bring me the warehouse dispatch register. We must look at the day the goods actually left for the ship, not merely the date on the invoice.'

'The goods did leave,' Jiten said. 'There's a receipt as well.'

'Who wrote the receipt? Did anyone actually see the driver of the vehicle named in the papers?'

Jiten gave no answer. The answer to that question lay not on the warehouse floor but in the memories of the men who had worked the night shift.

CHAPTER 27

The Shadow of False Exports

It was that hour of early morning in the cloth warehouse in Surat when the noise of the fans was louder than the looms. Goods vehicles stood at the gate of Ramakant Poddar's firm, Sagarvastra Exports. On one vehicle the dried rainwater had left pale rings of mud. Aditi Rane entered with her notebook. Today she had come not to investigate a 'company' but to follow the journey of a consignment.

Jiten placed the night-shift register, the receipt for counted bales and the outside transport document on the table. All three showed different weights. The first included the weight of the cloth bales; the second recorded the weight after packing; the third gave the total weight of the vehicle. Different figures did not in themselves strike her as unnatural. The difficulty was that there was no written explanation of how they related to one another.

'Look at this,' Jiten said. 'The outside document says forty bales. Our count says thirty-nine.'

'When did you count them?'

'Ten minutes before the vehicle left.'

'Which vehicle? Two came through the gate that night.'

Jiten narrowed his eyes at the register. A time had been entered against the first vehicle; the space beside the second was empty. 'Shankar Paswan was on the night shift,' he said. 'He may have seen when the vehicle went out.'

Shankar was an experienced warehouse worker. He had been born in a village in Madhubani and had come to Surat as a young man. His mother was old now, and every month on a fixed day he sent money for his daughter's school fees. To Shankar, exports meant not foreign currency but the money for food and water that he could send home on that day.

At that moment Shankar was drinking tea on the rear veranda of the warehouse. Aditi did not send for him; she went herself. 'Tell me in your own words what you witnessed, without pressure,' she said. 'Not the answer I want, but what you saw.'

Shankar's hands trembled. 'The first vehicle came at night, and we loaded it. The second came very late. I didn't see all the goods. I was scolded because the time hadn't been entered.'

'Who scolded you?'

'Not the watchman. A man from outside. I don't know his name. He said he would fill the blank space in the register later.'

'Did you see him fill it in?' Aditi asked.

'No.'

'Then for the present I shall record only that he said it. Not that he was the person who filled in the register.'

Shankar drew a deep breath. 'I'm only afraid the owner will think I stole something.'

'No accusation will be made against you without evidence,' Aditi said. 'But I won't promise you protection that is beyond my authority either.'

Meanwhile a foreign customer had telephoned Ramakant in his office. The customer said the cloth was of good quality and wanted the next consignment on time. Ramakant turned to a colleague. 'You see? The goods really went. Now put an end to all this talk of false shipments.'

Aditi did not stop him. 'We are finding proper evidence for your goods,' she said. 'But the entry for the second vehicle in the warehouse does not match the identity of the consignment recorded in the shipping papers. It is possible that two vehicles delivered goods together. It is possible the register is incomplete. We must examine the matter before calling it a lie.'

Ramakant's voice hardened. 'And what about the signature of my dead father on an invoice issued in my name? Did you call that false at once?'

'At first I called it a discrepancy. Your father's date of death conflicts with the date on the letter. We still have to ask who issued the original and who used it.'

Ramakant rose from his chair. 'You may go on finding differences between pieces of paper. My daughter's household expenses are paid from this business.'

Instead of replying, Aditi noticed a note in Tanuja's handwriting inside a drawer: 'Babuji, eat on time.' She understood then that there was more than wounded reputation behind Ramakant's anger; there was anxiety for his family. A little later he sat down again. 'I don't want my father's name involved in a lie.'

'Neither do I,' Aditi said quietly.

In Delhi, Nilima was examining a limited set of bank documents. The money for Sagarvastra's goods, a proposed invoice from Navkshitij Seva-Sampark, and the history of the old trading name in Malta lay in separate folders before her. Putting things on one table did not make them part of a single crime. She wrote to Arunima: 'We need separate evidence of authority to issue the foreign service agreement and of the actual movement of the goods.'

Arunima replied, 'Preserve the originals. Take the workers' statements without fear or prompting. Make no public allegation.'

Jiten brought a worn old page, thin as a leaf by the river. It belonged to the maintenance register kept at the warehouse gate. Two vehicle

movements had been recorded for that night, but part of the second registration number had been rubbed away. Whether someone had erased it deliberately or the rain had washed the ink away was difficult to determine.

Shankar held the page close to his eyes. 'I didn't write that number,' he said.

'Who can confirm that?' Aditi asked.

'When I was on the night shift, the register was kept outside. It rained that night. Someone could have written in it, and water could have fallen on it too. The little camera at the warehouse was out of order then. There's a repair bill.'

Aditi asked for the repair bill. The date on which the camera had been out of service matched the blank time in the warehouse register. A signed original of the bill that had been sent by email had not yet been found. She attached an acknowledgement to the copy of the page and made a written request that the original be sealed and preserved.

In the afternoon Shankar pulled a school-fee receipt from the torn cover on the back of his mobile phone. With it was a poem his daughter had written that month: 'Come home, Baba.' He did not show the poem to Aditi. One question kept returning to him: if he spoke the truth, what would happen to his job? And if he kept quiet, might some innocent person be blamed? He arranged to meet Aditi a second time.

That evening, as a boy was setting up a handcart outside the warehouse, he called out to Shankar. 'Uncle, there's a letter for you.'

The name on the envelope was correct, the address incomplete. There was no company seal inside. A single printed line said: 'If you remember the vehicles that came at night, I shall remember the address of your family's home.' Below it was the name of his village in Madhubani.

Shankar crushed the envelope in his fist. The boy said, 'A man gave it to me. I saw his face, but I didn't ask his name.'

Shankar telephoned home. The first time it rang unanswered. On the second call his mother picked up. 'Everything is all right,' she said. 'Your daughter has gone to school.'

Shankar's throat went dry. He did not tell his mother about the letter. He ended the call, sent the boy home, and set off for Aditi's office. On the road he stopped when he saw a police vehicle, but he knew no one inside it. He did not know how real the hidden danger was. The fear produced by the letter, however, was real enough.

Aditi had locked her desk drawer and was leaving when Shankar appeared at the gate. He was holding a crumpled sheet of paper. 'I'm ready to give my statement,' he said, 'but first I want you to hear about my safety.'

Aditi took him inside and told the guard to admit no one without permission. She was not a police officer; she decided to contact the competent authority at once for lawful assistance and information about witness protection. She did not snatch the envelope from Shankar. She first

obtained his consent, then recorded the circumstances in which he had received it.

The village written on the paper was indeed Shankar's village. But the name could also be found in employment registers, old letters and many public documents. The source of the threat was not established. Aditi gave him water. 'I'm not treating this letter lightly,' she said. 'But I won't say who sent it without an investigation.'

For the first time Shankar agreed to have a date fixed for his formal statement. Outside, the looms were still making their steady noise. Aditi was about to see him out when Mahesh, the watchman, came in carrying another copy of the old gate register.

'Madam,' Mahesh said softly, 'three vehicles came that night, not one. The first page mentions two. I'd written down the third in a separate notebook. It seems it's time to ask who tore the page out of that notebook.'

CHAPTER 28

The Blue Stamp

In Mumbai, the dampness of the sea climbed as high as the seventh floor of the building. A fine white line of salt had gathered on the closed window of Aarav Malkani's office. Seven invoices for services lay spread across his desk. In the right-hand corner of the sheet on top was a small, round blue stamp. Until the evening before last, Aarav had not noticed it. Now he had the feeling that someone was watching him from the corner of the paper.

'You saw the same mark in three files, and you couldn't sleep all night?' Taruni Desai asked. She had brought him his office tea. She set the cup on a separate saucer so that the papers beneath it would not get wet.

'Not three,' Aarav said. 'Four. But it might simply be a printer's mark. I don't want to turn a suspicion of my own into proof of a crime.'

Taruni examined the corner of the fourth invoice. Within the blue circle were two very fine lines: one curved upwards, the other stopped halfway. At first glance it looked like an old stamp of which only half the impression had been left on the paper.

'Did they mark the bundles of goods in your father's shop?' Taruni asked.

Aarav laughed unexpectedly. 'He had a great set of brass weights. On some goods he wouldn't write the shop's name. He would merely draw an upright blue line. He used to tell me that if I wanted to know what a mark meant, I must ask the person who put it there, not look for the answer in the last line of a document.'

'Then who put this stamp here?'

'I don't know.'

The truth was that Aarav was remembering his former colleague, Anurag Bedi. Five years earlier they had worked at the same financial advisory firm. Anurag concerned himself with the small charges; Aarav looked at a client's total expenditure. One day Anurag had said, 'There are two ways of counting money. One tells you how much came in. The other asks who got what share of it.' At the time Aarav had taken this for ordinary office talk.

The previous night, Anurag's old name had appeared on Aarav's telephone, but the voice had sounded like that of a stranger. 'Have you seen the blue stamp?' was all it said, and then the call ended. Aarav had not even managed to ask, 'Who is this?' He had written down the time of the call in his notebook.

At the morning meeting, Devika Pathak, the company's compliance head, was present. She asked to examine the original sequence in which the invoices had been received, not photographs of them. The fourth invoice was for language-related services in India, the fifth for a customer-satisfaction survey, and the sixth for testing advertisements. Some originals had arrived by post; others had come through a client's shared portal.

'I will not write that all these invoices were issued by one criminal merely because they bear this round mark,' Devika said. 'But I will put down two questions: whose seal is it, and who had the authority to issue the bills?'

Taruni brought out older invoices from the same organisations that had never been in dispute. Some had no blue stamp. In the corner of one old invoice was a red mark of the same size, but in that case it meant approval after an internal company review. Aarav's excitement diminished for a moment. He saw that to give marks of the same shape the same meaning was rather like declaring that two pieces of cloth came from the same house because they happened to be the same colour.

Yet one difference remained. On the four blue-stamped invoices, the dates of service and the dates of approval did not follow the same pattern. On the third, the recorded completion of the service preceded the approval; on the fourth, the name of an employee appeared against a period in which that person had already left the company. These might be errors, or they might be false entries. Statements from the employees and original service records would be needed to find out.

'Which office is Anurag Bedi working in now?' Devika asked.

'He moved away from his last known address. I don't have his private number, only the old office number. A call came from that number yesterday, but I don't know whether it was really him or someone using his name.'

Devika asked for written authorisation to preserve the call details. 'Are you frightened?'

'Not that I'll lose my life,' Aarav said slowly. 'I'm afraid because I once approved an invoice for goods or services I had never seen with my own eyes. Now I can no longer understand what my signature meant.'

'Your responsibility at the time you signed will be examined separately,' Devika said. 'If there was an error, it must be recorded. But don't let the fear of admitting a mistake turn an uncertain fact into a certainty.'

Devika opened a fresh page in the file. A formal order had arrived to withhold service charges from one client's account, while payments to another client continued without dispute. 'If we stop every payment together, the salaries of legitimate employees and the cost of services actually provided may be held up too,' she said. 'So write down the grounds for a decision precisely where the doubt arises. Giving an unjust order out of fear is also an injustice.'

Aarav said nothing. His signature was not only on contracts but on the papers that paid the monthly wages of dozens of families. A new anxiety came over him: in the effort to defend himself, he must not destroy someone else's livelihood.

'There is your approval on one of the bills with the blue mark,' Taruni said, 'but you had laid down three conditions for verification. Did the client answer them?'

Aarav searched through the older pages. Against one condition stood 'Completed'; against another, 'Pending'; against the third, a blank space. Aarav had not signed beside the blank. He raised his head without speaking. 'Someone wrote down final approval without waiting for the answer,' he said at last.

'First look at the original record,' Devika said at once. 'Don't rely on an altered copy. We also need the history of who made this reproduction.'

Aarav went home in the afternoon. His wife, Maya, had served lunch. Their daughter's drawing book lay on the table. At the edge of a sea she had drawn three men holding one another's hands. Aarav looked at the picture and asked, 'Are all three from the same family?'

'Your daughter says they are three people who have lost their way,' Maya replied. 'They are holding on to one another so that none of them has to find his way home alone.'

Aarav did not close the book. Even at his age he was still turning the pages of his father's account books; his daughter was making paths with colours. Each was keeping an account of lost things in a different way.

After lunch an official message arrived from Aditi Rane in Surat. She asked about a round mark in the corner of a copy of a disputed service invoice concerning Sagarvastra Exports. Aditi was unwilling to declare any resemblance without a certified copy of the original invoice. Aarav replied, giving the limits of the dates he could verify: 'We have observed a similar blue mark on four invoices in our office. The procedure by which it was applied is under examination. Please verify the original source of your copy.'

When he returned to the office that evening, Taruni spoke in a flustered voice. 'Sir, another call came in Anurag's name. Reception answered this time. The caller said, "Tell Aarav Malkani to look for the blue stamp at the front of the bill, not the back."'

Aarav examined the stamp once more. Above the blue circle, on the face of the paper, were two tiny marks in Roman letters, almost invisible. He did not enlarge a photograph of the page; he held the original up to the light. Such letters might be no more than an ordinary part of the printing.

'What have you found?' Taruni asked.

Aarav did not answer. For the first time in his life he was afraid that someone knew each of his next steps before he himself took it.

At closing time the security guard brought in a small postal packet. Inside was a blue stamp printed on a separate piece of paper, with a sentence

written by hand on the back: 'Anurag is alive, but he cannot speak under his own name.' There was no sender's address.

Aarav did not accept the sentence as true. Anyone could have made such a claim. He had a receipt entry made for the letter, gave instructions for the original paper to be preserved, and informed Devika. But when he opened his father's ledger beside his desk, his eyes stopped on an old page. There was no name against the goods, only an unfinished blue mark.

CHAPTER 29

The Limits of the Market

By midday in Delhi, there was hardly any shade left outside the government building. Arunima Rao had placed two documents on her desk. The first was a copy of an Amber-9 advertisement circulated in India; the second was a limited extract, lawfully obtained, from a foreign technical-services agreement. The word 'India' appeared at the head of both. It did not mean the same thing in each.

'A journalist friend tells me nobody in Pakistan, Bangladesh or Nepal can play this game,' Nilima said. 'What will you make of that claim?'

'A question, not a conclusion,' Arunima replied. 'If the advertisement is designed for Indian rupees, Indian languages and local promotional channels, we may be able to establish its intended customers. But that doesn't prove a complete ban on people in every other country.'

In Arunima's papers appeared the words 'primary commercial territory', followed by a question mark in red pencil. The country names were arranged in a table. It was not clear whether the list of supposedly 'closed' markets merely recorded where campaign money had not been spent, or whether it was an instruction to deny access in practice.

At the meeting with Nilima were Revati Karn and Farha Ansari, a consumer-rights researcher. Farha had not yet been directly involved in the investigation. Her work was to examine the public language of advertisements. 'When an advertisement says "especially for you",' she said, 'it often doesn't mean "for nobody else". The language of marketing and the language of access restrictions are different.'

Revati opened her notebook. 'But millions of small deposits—that much is true, surely?'

'How many people? Over what period? Separate figures for deposits and repeat deposits?' Nilima asked. 'Repeating "millions" without verification doesn't make it news. Millions may have been targeted, but the number of verified users is another matter.'

Revati frowned. 'Readers will grow impatient.'

'Just as Amresh's mother did,' Nilima said. 'But she didn't need an imaginary figure. Her loss of five hundred rupees was real.'

That afternoon Arunima was awaiting clarification from a technology company in Beijing, through an authorised international liaison officer in Delhi. The contact was Lin Yu. In earlier correspondence, Lin had been

described as responsible only for testing how a service appeared on screen. Identifying a client's ultimate beneficiary was not within her duties.

'The foreign supplier may well have provided language and support services for the Indian market,' the liaison officer said. 'But the original agreement showing when the Malta-registered company, the Mumbai intermediary and the Beijing engineer reached an understanding is still being translated.'

'Preserve the legal definitions in the agreement, not merely the order of the words,' Arunima said. 'Where it says "client", don't translate it as "owner".'

Farha went to the window. School had just finished across the road. The children were carrying lunch boxes and little bags that looked as though they had come from their own verandas. She gazed at an advertisement showing a cricket bat, a smiling young man and a number in the thousands. The conditions were printed below in tiny letters.

'In a society that gives people no time to read the small print,' Farha said, 'the cheat gets all the large letters to himself.'

'But not everyone who prints a poster is a criminal,' Revati replied. 'The press owner, the artist and the translator earn their living too. The question is who knew how their work would be used.'

Arunima wrote down that observation in her investigation notes. An inquiry into crime could not become an excuse for shutting down people's trades. For the present, the task was to determine who knew about the unlawful gambling, who might have provided a service after being deceived, and who had knowingly facilitated it.

There was a small interruption during the meeting. Farha received a message from home. Her mother had returned from a hospital examination, but they were two hundred rupees short of the five hundred set aside for medicine. Farha put away her phone. Her private worry seemed to have nothing to do with the meeting, but Nilima noticed the change in her face.

'You can go, if you need to,' Nilima said.

'No,' Farha replied. 'Today I'm beginning to understand what five hundred rupees means. Here the figures are written in lakhs and crores. At home the question is whether there will be enough for one strip of medicine.'

Revati read over her old notes. She had written that the Indian market was endless. Now she crossed out 'endless'. Such words expressed a merchant's enthusiasm, not the lives of citizens.

Just then Arunima's assistant brought in a printed complaint about the engineer. The applicant called the foreign service worker a criminal simply because the company's name appeared behind the screen of an Indian website. Arunima placed the complaint in a separate register. 'Find the basis

of the claim against this person. Printing someone's name doesn't make that person a criminal.'

In the evening Nilima received a message from Amresh. 'Didi, the advertisement for the game I lost money on has appeared on my phone again. It has a different name today. I didn't open it.' Nilima watched the screen for a moment. She preserved the original timestamp. She did not ask Amresh to open the advertisement to test it. His studies, the safety of his home, his hard-won victory over himself—none of these was to be an instrument of the investigation.

The Delhi sky had turned grey. Revati was getting up to return to her office when Farha handed her an old promotional brochure. On its advertising page were the names of four Indian cities, but there was no mention of Pakistan, Nepal or Bangladesh.

'This is an old campaign list,' Farha explained. 'It may show whom they were targeting at the time. Whether the service reached other countries is a separate question.'

'If it was targeting the Indian market, then the safety of our country is the main issue,' Revati said. 'Do you both agree?'

'Protecting Indian citizens from financial harm is essential,' Arunima replied. 'But the first step towards a solution is not to blame someone because of their nationality. There may be an Indian intermediary, a legitimate foreign service provider and an unknown criminal operator. Evidence must tell us which of their actions crossed the line into crime.'

At eight that night a limited letter arrived from the overseas liaison office. It acknowledged receipt of Lin Yu's test report, but legal approval to release the complete material was still pending. One sentence in the approved summary stood out: 'Proposals for other markets deferred; study of Indian repeat-deposit behaviour to be completed separately.'

Nilima read the line again. 'That comes close to saying "Indian frequency is sufficient". But what does "frequency" mean here—the number of deposits, responses to the advertisements, or simply how often the game was opened?'

'We'll ask Lin Yu,' Arunima said. 'Did she compile these figures or merely examine them? Who approved the decision? And on that date was it still a social game, or had wagering already been added?'

Revati looked at the two women. There was one sentence before them, yet it could carry three different meanings. She wrote a headline for her report: 'Papers Reveal Campaign Run in India's Name; Limits on Access Still in Question.'

Before publication, Revati struck out half of that headline as well. The word 'run' implied a certainty for which the evidence was incomplete. Her new headline read: 'Inquiry into Proposal Centred on India.'

At that moment the liaison officer telephoned again. 'Lin Yu has agreed to speak at the appointed time tomorrow. But she has one condition: her sentences must be heard in full.'

'Agreed,' Arunima said. 'Half a sentence has already changed too many lives here.'

CHAPTER 30

Beijing's Closed List

In Beijing, an engineer named Lin Yu worked for a computer-services company. Her responsibility was not to conduct gambling. She tested how the app displayed different languages, how user support was arranged, and how data about groups of customers were presented. She did not know who really owned the company behind her firm's client.

When she found a sample screen built with her code in an advertisement for Amber-9, Lin Yu was astonished. The original had been designed for a social game; real-money wagering had been added later. She had written to her manager expressing her concern. The reply was an order: 'Do not ask questions about the client's business.'

At Meghna's request, the Indian investigators spoke to Lin Yu through an international legal procedure. She made one thing clear at the outset. 'It is unacceptable to accuse me of being part of a crime simply because I live in China. I shall tell you what I know, and no more.'

'Your nationality is of no concern to us,' Arunima said. 'We need the agreement, the dates of the changes, and the chain of approvals.'

Lin provided a test report. It contained figures on the behaviour of Indian customers: repeated deposits of small amounts, the temptation to win back losses, promotions late at night, and repeated displays of images of winnings. She also showed an internal company note deferring a proposal to open new markets outside India. Its reason was: 'Indian frequency sufficient.'

'These are millions of small sufferings added together,' Nilima said.

'I did not see people's faces in the code,' Lin replied. 'Now I can see that there is a family behind every row of numbers.'

After the meeting Lin wrote a letter: 'Some people are saying that Beijing operates the entire network. My documents show the role of a supplier. Look for other evidence if you wish to establish ownership and criminal control.'

Nilima appreciated that restraint. If an investigation, while condemning a crime, became a game of making accusations itself, the truth would never prevail.

Even after writing the letter, Lin Yu did not shut down her computer. On her office wall was a picture of the steps of an old library wet with rain. Her father had painted it. He had taught mathematics at a school, and after

writing a number on the board he would ask his students, 'Who are the people behind this number?' As a child Lin had laughed at the question. Now the memory of that laughter filled her eyes with tears.

Her colleague Zhao Wen came into the room carrying two cups of tea. 'Are you reading the pages of that old test report again?'

'Not the pages. The dates,' Lin said.

Zhao set his cup on the desk. 'A date is a dangerous thing. It never changes, but people keep changing its meaning.'

Lin opened a closed folder. The earliest demonstration of the social game had used only imaginary points. A child could compete with friends, but at that stage there was no means of depositing real money. A later change request used the words 'payment-related extension'. The request referred to a review by a separate division of the technical-services company, but one page of the attachment was missing from the archive to which Lin had access.

'Did you approve that change yourself?' Zhao asked.

'No. I tested the translated help pages. But my name appears on the list for the overall testing, and people may take that to mean I created the entire product.'

'Then have your name removed.'

'From an old record? Why should I? I'll take responsibility for what I did. And I'll deny, under my own name, what I did not do.'

Zhao was quiet for a long time. At last he said, 'The hardest thing here is not signing a piece of paper. It is writing down the limits of your signature.'

That evening Lin telephoned her mother. 'Still at the office so late? Have you eaten?' her mother asked. Lin said yes, although her lunch box remained unopened. Her mother began talking about the garden in their old village. A little mango tree had borne its first fruit that year. Lin did not wish to interrupt. Among all the great financial documents she had read, this small piece of news from her mother seemed so harmless that she listened without asking a question.

The following morning Hua Chen, a representative of the legal department, came to see her. 'We have received the foreign investigators' list of questions. In answering, we shall have to observe the restrictions concerning the company's confidential agreements and users' private information. Your personal statement must be kept separate from the company's official response.'

'I understand,' Lin said. 'But I will not keep silent about the harm shown by the figures I examined.'

Hua opened her papers. 'What do you mean by the figures you examined?'

Lin showed her a table. The first column recorded game sessions opened by users; the second, the frequency of payment deposits; the third, responses to repeated offers. Each column counted something different, and some

rows represented the same user more than once. 'Add all these figures together,' Lin said, 'and you will seem to have an immense number of people. But they are not all different people. The same person's night is appearing in the table again and again.'

'So you are going to tell the world that Indians play a great deal?' Hua asked.

'No. That would not be a conclusion we could apply to everyone. This sample covers a limited group of customers and a defined period. It would be wrong to judge the habits of a whole country from this page.'

Hua's voice softened at Lin's answer. 'You are defending your science, not the company.'

'If science is made into a lie, one day even the company's truth will cease to mean anything,' Lin replied.

At that time in Delhi, Nilima was going through a register of complaints received by banks. In a complaint from the mother of a teenage boy, she read that he had sent money again and again, believing that what he lost today he would win back tomorrow. Small receipts for the payments were enclosed. Nilima remembered a line from Lin's table: a single person's night appearing in several rows. But she did not link the boy's receipts to the anonymous figures in the foreign test. She had neither the authority nor grounds for such a match. She could still see the human resemblance.

Arunima telephoned. 'We haven't received Lin Yu's complete report yet. Only a time for questions and answers under the proper legal procedure has been fixed.'

'I want to ask her not only who ordered wagering to be added,' Nilima said. 'I also want to know which warning was read, and who ignored it.'

'We need separate evidence both that the warning existed and that the person concerned knew of it,' Arunima reminded her.

At the appointed time, Lin, Hua and an official liaison representative joined the meeting. In Delhi sat Arunima, Nilima and a colleague from the legal department. Lin began by explaining the limits of her responsibility once again. Arunima did not interrupt.

The first question was, 'What is the date of the original social-game demonstration?' Lin gave the time entered in the testing register. The second was, 'When did the proposal to add real wagering arrive?' She gave a time from the available chain of approvals, but warned that the date of the proposal, the date of testing, and the date it became available to the customer might all be different.

Lin was silent for a little while at the third question. Arunima asked, 'The note deferring markets outside India says "Indian frequency sufficient". What did "frequency" mean?'

'Some employees used it for deposit-related events,' Lin replied. 'Others used it for the number of times a game was opened. The original table keeps

these apart. The writer's name is in a departmental record; formal permission to disclose that record is still pending.'

'Does this document establish that users in Pakistan or Bangladesh could never gain access?' Arunima asked.

'I have seen no evidence of such a universal prohibition,' Lin replied. 'This is a document about the client's marketing territory. Actual access must be investigated by a different body.'

Nilima watched her. Thousands of miles away from Delhi, the engineer was stating quite plainly the limits of her knowledge. It was this restraint that made her a possible witness in the story, rather than its criminal.

Just before the meeting ended, Lin asked a question of her own. 'When you read complaints from victims in India, how many of them are able to state their true losses clearly?'

'Many write only part of the story because they are ashamed,' Nilima answered. 'Some forget to take withdrawals into account; others mistake repeated deposits for a single loss. They need safety and respect if they are to put down an accurate account.'

'Then my next calculation will not be only about money,' Lin said. 'I want to make sure that claims do not count one person's experience again and again, and that nobody's real hurt is left out of the figures.'

The connection ended. The screen went black. Lin opened a photograph of her mother's garden on her desk. The morning sunlight was falling on the leaves of the tree.

Just then she found an attachment in the old testing register headed 'Comparison of Return Deposits'. The movement of the same sum had been recorded several times. Beside a red question mark someone had written, 'How much would the total increase if a repayment were counted as new income?'

Lin kept her eyes on the paper. There was no guilty person's name here. But it seemed possible that the same money was being counted over and over. She would need the next page to know the answer, and that page was not in her possession.

CHAPTER 31

The House Within the Numbers

In Beijing the morning sunlight had reached only the edge of the window. On Lin Yu's desk stood a glass of water left from the night, and on her computer screen was the third page of a table. A question left unanswered on the second page still glowed in red: if the same sum went out and came back as another deposit, how many times had it been counted?

At the international question-and-answer meeting the previous day, Lin had made it clear that the number of users and the number of payment transactions were not the same thing. Today she was seeing the difference for herself. The first line of the test register showed a payment of five hundred rupees against an anonymous user identifier. Then came a few small withdrawals, another deposit, and an entry described as a bonus. The broad column of total activity changed four times, but there was no independent information about the source of the first sum.

Zhao Wen sat opposite her and asked, 'Then the same money may have been counted repeatedly in that enormous monthly figure?'

'It may have been. Write "may",' Lin said. 'At present I am examining a sample. I do not have the actual withdrawals from every account or the identities of the account holders. Without those two things, I cannot even calculate the losses.'

Zhao wrote the words in his notebook. Then he asked, 'Why are you so careful about this question?'

Lin did not answer. She was thinking of the mango tree her mother had spoken about the previous evening. If one tree blossomed five times, nobody would call it five trees. She did not put this simple comparison into her professional note; the document did not call for an example from farming. But she could see the tree before her eyes.

At the same hour in Darbhanga, Amresh sat with his old school mathematics notebook open. His mother, Rani Devi, was making little packets of savoury mixture for the shop. Three slips of paper lay on the table, each for a sum he had to repay: money borrowed from a friend, money taken from his mother's cupboard without asking, and a receipt for a digital payment.

'If I add these three together, does that mean I had lost even before I thought I was winning?' Amresh asked.

Pulling the thread tight around a packet, Rani said, 'First see whether there are three slips or three debts. Could one of them be a repayment of the same loan?'

Amresh tore a page from the notebook and divided it into four sections: household money, loans from friends, deposits into the gambling account, and money received back. For the first time he admitted that, in the previous month, after repaying a friend with his mother's money he had borrowed from that very friend again. The two receipts bore different dates, but the loss belonged to the same sequence.

Rani lifted her eyes to the fourth section. 'What is this money received back?'

'The game screen said I had won. But less than half that amount reached the account. Then I deposited that too.' Amresh's voice broke. 'When I was counting my losses, I had added the same winnings twice.'

Rani's hands grew still. She knew only that her son had once been good at his studies and that later the screen of his phone had robbed him of sleep. Now, between two lines on a sheet of paper, she saw him once more as a student of mathematics. This time mathematics was making him ashamed.

'If I scold you, will these receipts change?' Rani asked.

Amresh lowered his head.

'They won't. So write the truth. Where you cannot make the figures agree, leave a blank. I can look at an empty space and think about it too.'

In the afternoon Nilima received a message from Rani: Amresh was writing down his financial losses with guidance from a support group, and no customer's identity was to be made public. Nilima telephoned her. 'Before this account is used in legal proceedings, both of you will be told who will see it and which portions are necessary. I shall not give anyone his private story merely to make a good narrative.'

'My son isn't only a boy who gambled,' Rani said. 'He goes to school, opens the shop in the morning and reminds me to take my medicine at night. Where is there room for that on the paper you are preparing?'

Nilima could not answer at once. In the investigation file, the boy's school and his mother's medicines belonged under different headings, not on the pages of financial evidence. 'What you are saying matters to me,' she replied. 'But we also need arrangements to protect his name in the court records.'

Rain began outside. Rani listened to the drops striking the tin roof of the shop. Nilima wrote in her notes: 'One person, many deposits; money used again must be distinguished in the calculation of loss; the individual's consent is necessary.' She added no screenshot to the file that had not been asked for.

In Beijing, Lin's colleague Hua Chen brought her a draft of the official response. It said, 'The figures used indicate gross activity, not verified business income.' Lin accepted that sentence. The next said, 'All repeat

deposits are separate from the original funds.' Lin struck that line out in red ink.

'On what grounds are you deleting it?' Hua asked.

'On the grounds that we have no basis for saying it. To prove that sentence we would need verification of the original source of the payment and of the withdrawals. The figures available to my service department do not give those details in full.'

Hua turned the page. 'Then the question you are raising could change the size of the claim made in public.'

'If a claim grows smaller for want of proof, that too is a service to the truth,' Lin said.

At that moment a list of old office attachments arrived on Zhao's phone. There were two versions of a document called 'Comparison of Return Deposits'. The first contained an additional line: 'Adjustment proposed.' In the second, the line was missing. It was unclear which page had been made first or whose signature had authorised the removal of the adjustment.

Lin recorded where the copies were held, when they had been received and the limits of the approvals attached to them. She felt an urge to look for a name, but the page held only a departmental code, not a person's identity. The missing line did not contain an amount of money. It recorded a decision about making an adjustment.

By evening in Darbhanga, Amresh closed his notebook. He had made no new deposit that day. Even without opening the game, however, his hand kept going towards his phone. Rani noticed his restlessness. She gave him the weighing scales to make another packet of savoury mixture. Amresh placed fifty grams in one pan and the weight in the other. His hand was trembling.

'Are they balanced?' Rani asked.

'Not yet. There's a little less on this side.'

'Then keep looking until they are.'

Amresh kept his eyes on the scales. He understood that not every account in life could be brought into balance. But it was better to sit for a while before a blank line than to accept a wrong total as the truth.

At that moment the last page of the second version reached Lin's desk in Beijing. In the place reserved for a signature there was only an approval number, dated after the first calculation. At least this much became clear to her: the question of changing the calculation had been placed before somebody. Who had changed it, and why, remained the next question.

CHAPTER 32

The Trade in Signals

When the wind changed behind Hong Kong harbour, fine lines of rain appeared on the glass of Meghna Sen's office. The red umbrella was dry that morning, but Tara Lama's chair was still empty. Meghna was not looking at the chair; nevertheless, its emptiness seemed to enter every document she read.

A new bundle of records contained bills for three services: 'customer relations', 'event support' and 'campaign consultancy'. They had been submitted by three separate organisations. The sums had gone out on the specified dates, and a few days later portions of the money had come back from other organisations under the heading 'adjustment'. Such adjustments were possible in ordinary business too. But for one bill, the space meant for proof that the work had been done contained a blank page; a second bill then recorded expenditure for the same work.

Eric Chen placed two coloured pencils before Meghna. 'Blue for actual payments, red for questions. Do you remember your old method?'

Meghna picked up the pencils. 'Tara remembered it too. She never marked anything in red without a reason.'

Eric's face fell. 'Any news from her family?'

'The official process of looking for her is continuing. We must not make statements about things we don't know,' Meghna said, and added, 'But I cannot contain the pain of all these silent days in a notebook.'

They examined the first bill. Its payment-authorisation letter was in the correct form. Under an old contract, the company due to receive payment on the second bill might legitimately have supplied the service. The description on the third was vague. The internal sequence in the ledger was in order, but there was no evidence that established what had actually happened in the business. In her conclusion Meghna wrote, 'Independent confirmation required between bills submitted and services actually rendered.'

'Some people will say you read so many pages only to arrive at that?' Eric remarked.

'Tell them that is all we know for certain. A person who does not understand the value of uncertainty will not understand the value of truth either.'

That day Meghna was given permission to examine a copy of a letter lawfully submitted by Aarav Malkani in Mumbai. It referred to an internal office mark called the 'blue stamp'. Meghna did not immediately attach anybody's name to it. The page showed a sequence of service approvals, but not the complete original contract. She treated the mark as a question about a possible connection, not as an identification of the owner of a foreign payment.

A new clue appeared between two lines. An individual was listed as an 'advisory investor' in the annual report of the Hong Kong organisation. The same spelling of the name appeared in another company's registration, but the space for the year of birth contained only an initial. Meghna did not take this to prove that both entries referred to the same person. She kept the two documents apart and prepared a lawful request for original evidence of identity.

'Do you think the person you're looking for will be a criminal?' Eric asked.

'I'm not looking for a person. I'm looking for the true meaning of a payment,' Meghna replied. 'If a criminal's name emerges, that name will need evidence of its own in court. Today my question is whether the service was actually provided.'

That afternoon Meghna's sister telephoned from Kolkata. 'Mother has been looking for her spectacles all day. Send that old photograph you sent earlier. She's wearing them in it.'

Meghna burst into laughter, the first time in many days. 'Seeing spectacles in a photograph won't help her find the real pair.'

'Mother says you're an expert at looking through records. You should be able to find them from the photograph too.'

Meghna suddenly realised how much comfort there was in this little joke from home. She was about to open the photograph on her phone when the office doorkeeper came in. He carried an envelope without a sender's name.

'Someone left it here,' he said. 'I don't know who it was.'

Meghna did not open it at once. First she had the time of receipt, the doorkeeper's account and the external condition of the envelope recorded. Inside was a printed sheet: 'Excessive questioning may bring business relationships to an end. Stop worrying about Tara Lama.'

Meghna's palms turned cold. The sheet gave no indication whether Tara was alive. There was no evidence of who had written it either. Yet the name of her missing colleague had plainly been turned into an instrument of pressure.

She informed her legal adviser and the local authorities about the envelope. Eric asked, 'Does this mean someone in the company knows about the threat?'

'No,' Meghna said sharply. 'The doorkeeper doesn't know who left it. Many people may know the subject of the audit. Do not turn our fear into the identity of a criminal.'

A formal meeting about the records continued until evening. The adviser said it would not be proper to send details of certain private accounts directly to a foreign authority. Meghna agreed. She proposed to send only the verified contracts, audit findings and a list of documents required, through the authorised channel. The delay was hardest on Tara Lama's family. Every day they asked the same question over the telephone.

During the last shift of the night, Meghna reopened the table of returning funds. At first the total she saw had seemed like a definite amount of business. But when she examined the sections separately, she found that a withdrawal was entered as a deposit at another organisation, while a third department called it a service expense. Even now she could not conclude that the total of those three entries was three times the amount of genuinely new money: the boundaries of the accounts, currency conversion and the services actually provided each needed separate verification. What was clear was that there was a powerful reason to investigate why one flow of money was being given several meanings.

Meghna wrote three questions on a page: 'Who approved the payment? Who received the service? What was the lawful basis for the money that came back?' She left an empty space beneath the third question.

Eric picked up a small register at the edge of the desk and showed it to her. 'I've seen this contract reference number before, in an overseas investment-advisory letter.'

'From which country?'

'Arizona. But I don't have the whole letter, only the index page.'

Meghna neither took a photograph nor made a copy on a personal device. She recorded the page sequence of the original register and instructed that an authorised copy be requested. The appearance of Arizona's name did not in itself prove that a company there had committed any crime. But a new line of inquiry had opened between the identity of the unseen investor and the technical-service contract.

Her sister called again from home. 'Mother's spectacles have turned up. They were in the box kept behind the photograph.'

Meghna went to the window. The rain had almost stopped. 'That's very good,' she said. 'But here I still don't know whose house contains the box I'm looking for.'

As she put down the phone, Tara's old red umbrella slipped against the side of a drawer. Meghna stood it upright. The heading on the next page of documents was an ordinary service contract from Arizona. Beside it was a brief description of a foreign investor that arrested Meghna's attention. The name was incomplete; only the question was complete.

CHAPTER 33

The Desert Contract

The morning sun in Arizona fell so clearly on the wall of the house that even the dust motes were visible. Lata Desai opened the outside door and watered a small plant. There was little hope of rain. The previous week a neighbour's child had asked her, 'How do plants live here without rain?' Lata had replied, 'If you stop watering one, the effect won't show at once. But the plant keeps an account of it within itself.'

When she reached the office, she found a question of much the same kind. The company's service department was reviewing an old contract. Its purpose was ordinary enough: to make a customer's digital material available securely, keep records of service availability and respond to compliance-related complaints. Thousands of businesses carried out this work quite lawfully. But a new letter from an Indian authority had raised questions about one particular customer's use of the service.

The chief officer, Daniel Morgan, said, 'Lata, read the service contract. We have not automatically assumed responsibility for regulating every promotional page put out by the customer.'

'We haven't,' Lata said. 'But now that a lawful preservation request has arrived, we have to consider our responsibility to retain the relevant records for the prescribed period. That is a question for our organisation, separate from the accusations against the customer.'

Daniel closed the file. 'Must we stand before a court whenever our server's name turns up in a dispute overseas?'

'Not because of the name,' Lata replied. 'Because of the limits of the order, the contract and the facts that are within our control.'

There were three different documents on Lata's desk. The first was the agreement for the general technical services supplied to the customer. The second was a service receipt recording certain periods of formal usage. The third was a preservation request received from India through lawful channels. It sought to preserve particular records, not disclose the entire register of customers.

'I haven't seen all the content on the Indian gambling site from here,' Lata said. 'These documents don't entitle me to say who owns the company. But I must make certain that the time records available to us are preserved.'

The company's legal representative, Maria Torres, examined the papers. 'Preservation and disclosure will be separate decisions. No unauthorised

person is to receive private details. We shall wait for a judicial order or another valid legal basis.'

Lata agreed. She disliked the thought that delay in a proper investigation might allow wrongdoing to profit, but impatience was no remedy if it meant handing out everyone's private information.

At noon a limited inquiry arrived from Hong Kong. Meghna Sen's name was already familiar from correspondence identifying her as a financial auditor. The inquiry concerned a service-contract reference number that had also appeared in an overseas investment-advisory record. Instead of supplying information immediately, Lata decided first to verify the authenticity of the request. The same number did not, by itself, establish common ownership of two organisations.

'Who uses this number?' asked Ethan, the new assistant.

'Different departments sometimes keep their own sequences,' Lata said. 'If two numbers on paper were enough, half the world would become one company. We must see whether the complete contracts, dates, parties and services actually rendered agree.'

Ethan tried to laugh, but the telephone's persistent ringing stopped him. An official communication had arrived from the Indian office bearing Arunima Rao's name. The request for limited confirmation of documents had been sent again. Lata decided to acknowledge receipt through the proper channel without publicly naming the customer.

Before going home in the evening, Lata called her father. At their house in Gujarat he had been talking with her elder brother about dividing the land of an old orchard. 'Over there, machines must do all the work,' her father said.

'Machines tell us the time, Bapa,' Lata said, laughing. 'But to understand whose work was done at that time, we need people's testimony and the documents.'

Her father was quiet for a moment. 'Do you still ask so many questions?'

'Yes. And now I know that if I write down an answer without asking questions, somebody else may have to pay the price.'

After putting down the phone, Lata crossed the long veranda to the records-preservation department. A senior employee named Ketak was already there. They discussed the time-bound preservation of the company's archived records. Lata said firmly, 'The necessary preservation period, the officer giving approval, and the integrity of the original records must all appear in the same written order. No informal copies.'

Ketak looked at her over his spectacles. 'What if the customer says tomorrow that all this was an ordinary service?'

'Then we shall preserve the customer's reply too,' Lata said. 'The purpose of an investigation is not merely to prove an accusation. If an accusation is wrong, the evidence of that must survive as well.'

She returned to her desk, and a short message arrived through the internal mail. Its subject was unremarkable: 'Notice Concerning Records Review'. It said that certain old service registers were due for routine renewal the following week. Lata checked whether any related records fell within the scope of the preservation request. She needed a definite answer to that question.

Ethan came into the room. 'May I ask something? What happens if the time comes for old material to be deleted automatically?'

'For records subject to lawful preservation, there is a procedure to examine and suspend the automatic policy as necessary,' Lata replied. 'It would also be wrong to retain unrelated people's details indefinitely. The decision must be limited to what is required.'

It took time to obtain confirmation from the proper department. The office was beginning to empty. Lata was still sitting there, trying to finish her work, when another message arrived. It bore a sender's name, but the sender's internal authorisation did not match the authority claimed. The message was worded like an order: 'The specified records are unnecessary. Consider the review closed and delete them. There is no need to inform anyone else.'

Lata read it once, then again. It was not a valid order cancelling preservation. She did not yet know whether somebody had misused another person's name or an authorised officer had actually given an improper instruction. She took no action on it. She recorded the time of receipt and the place where the original message was stored, then requested formal verification from the legal representative.

'Have you altered any records?' Maria Torres asked on the telephone.

'No. I have only requested reconfirmation of the preservation decision.'

'Good. Now we have to establish where this message came from. We cannot decide on the strength of a name alone.'

Outside the office the day was ending. Long shadows of the Arizona mountains lay across the glass wall. As Lata prepared to go home, she thought of looking again at her plant. Just then another message came to her phone, from an unknown number, containing one short sentence: 'If you save the records, remember that your home address is saved too.'

Lata stopped in her tracks. The words were unmistakably threatening; the sender was unknown. She did not immediately attribute them to the customer, a colleague or a foreign criminal. She decided to take basic precautions for her safety, preserve the message and inform the appropriate authorities.

When she got home, the soil around the plant was dry. Lata watered it. The plant did not become green all at once. Its leaves looked much the same until nightfall. Lata understood that the results of preservation in time were not immediately visible. But if nothing were preserved, there might be nothing left to see later.

CHAPTER 34

Arizona at Night

Lata Desai, who examined computer systems in Arizona, was of Indian origin. Her company had secured a contract to provide digital services through a European intermediary. Payments arrived on time, and the tax papers were in order. But a complaint alleged that some of the advertising and account-related information for an Indian gambling site passed through the services her company supplied.

Lata went through the papers with her superior. At first, all she could say was which organisation had signed the contract, when the services had been provided, and what records could be preserved under a lawful request. The single fact that the computers were in Arizona did not justify saying that the entire crime was being run from Arizona.

Arunima sent her an official preservation request. Lata arranged for the relevant records not to be destroyed. She refused a proposal to send Indian victims' private details through an open channel. Proper legal procedure was necessary.

At half past midnight, Lata received a telephone call. A stranger said, 'Delete the files you have been holding back. There will be a handsome reward.'

Instead of answering, Lata ended the call and wrote down the time of the threat. She did not wake her daughter. Beyond the window lay the darkness of the desert; in the distance, the lights of trucks moved along the highway.

The next day, she found a notice in the records stating that the platform's distribution of advertisements was approved by a private organisation in Delhi. The contact named for this organisation was, once again, Viraj Sahni. Lata wondered why accounts spread across six cities of the world should end up on a single desk in India.

Meanwhile, a letter of instruction arrived in Delhi. Viraj Sahni's trust was to organise a 'National Digital Security Conference' in Patna the following week. The guest list included a minister, teachers, students, businessmen and a new organisation called Janchetna Manch. Revati Karn had never heard its name before.

After seeing a copy of the invitation to Patna, Lata tried to finish her work for the day. The clock by the window showed half past six, but the security guard stopped her on her way out. 'An officer from the security

department is waiting to speak to you about the telephone call you reported.' Lata looked at the clock again. Home was not just across the road but beyond a large stretch of open ground. She had to telephone her daughter Nikita from here.

'Nikita, I'll be late today,' she said.

'You say that every day,' her daughter replied. After a little while she asked, 'Are you frightened?'

Lata opened her mouth to give the answer she had prepared. It would have been easy to say, 'I'm being careful.' But her seventeen-year-old daughter could hear the difference between the two. 'Yes, I am a little frightened. But I'm doing what is needed to keep you safe. Don't answer calls from strangers. And if you notice anything unusual, tell me or the trusted person we have agreed upon.'

Nikita agreed, but she had one more question. 'Do the people you are protecting know who you are?'

'No,' said Lata. 'Some of them don't even know who is saving their papers.'

The security officer recorded the time of the telephone message and the time of the email received at the office separately. No person's name was entered as a conclusion. Lata insisted that the original record of the threat be preserved lawfully, but that the ordinary private conduct of other employees should not needlessly become the subject of an investigation.

Daniel Morgan was waiting in his office. Before him lay a prepared statement about the company's reputation. 'Can we say in this that our services are innocent of wrongdoing?'

'You can say exactly what the investigation has verified so far,' Lata replied. 'Innocence or guilt is a judicial question. But I can verify that the records have not been destroyed.'

Daniel pushed his chair back. 'Our directors want the company's name removed from this story.'

'Then the company has an opportunity to clarify the matter with authentic information. It has no right to remove its name by altering the records.'

Maria Torres joined the meeting. She raised a fine distinction: the information said that a private organisation in Delhi had approved the distribution of advertisements, but what kind of approval was it? Approval of the artwork in an advertisement, selection of countries for the market, or approval of the rules governing paid promotion?

Lata showed them a short entry in the old service register. It said 'Promotional Material Review', but the company did not have the document establishing the authority behind it. The date, time and identity of the service customer were preserved in separate records. 'If all they did was check the language in a picture, it would be misleading to call that permission to operate a gambling business,' she said.

'And if it was approval of the customer's payment page?' asked Daniel.

'Even then, we would have to examine the approving person's authority, knowledge and purpose.'

Viraj Sahni's name appeared on the computer screen as the contact connected with the Delhi organisation. Daniel read it and said, 'Well, I have my answer.'

'You have a question,' Lata corrected him. 'We still have to verify the name entered in that register, the person's authorised role, and the instructions actually given.'

A light wind rose over the desert that night. When Lata reached home, Nikita was roasting corn in the kitchen. Both of them made the mistake of adding salt twice. Nikita burst out laughing, and Lata laughed with her. After so many days of strain, the laughter came without warning.

Over their meal Nikita asked, 'Papa says big companies never think about people's lives. Is that true?'

'A company is made on paper, but people live inside it,' said Lata. 'Some do their duty and some avoid it. Yet writing down every duty does not mean it will be performed.'

When they had finished eating, Lata put her personal telephone in a drawer. She had not brought any sensitive office records home. In Nikita's notebook she saw two different maps of stars. Her daughter was preparing for the following week's science exhibition. The stars were at different distances on the paper, but a single line joining them made an imaginary figure.

'Are these stars really close to one another?' Lata asked.

'No,' Nikita answered. 'They only look close because we're viewing them from the Earth.'

Lata put an arm around her daughter. In both the pattern of stars and a set of account records, the observer's angle could change the apparent result, though the distance between the stars remained what it was.

The following morning, a formal reply arrived at the office from the customer's side. It said that the Delhi contact dealt only with translating advertisements and giving general advice about local regulations. The supporting attachments were said to contain two pages; the copy received contained only one.

'This is an incomplete copy,' said Maria. 'We'll ask for the remaining page. We cannot call it a lie on this evidence alone.'

Lata examined the registered copy. The number of the missing page matched the page referred to in the unauthorised instruction to delete files the previous day. For the first time, the resemblance seemed to her potentially important. But whose doing it was remained unknown.

Limited information reached Arunima in Delhi through the official channel: preservation of the technical records was continuing; the role in approving advertisements had yet to be verified; the invitation to the Patna

programme had been preserved as a separate document. Arunima asked whether the invitation had been proven to be connected with the advertisement dispute. The answer was: 'The identical contact name requires further investigation.'

Revati Karn's name was on the invitation's list of journalists. She had meanwhile been invited to ask questions in Brussels about the funding of civic organisations. The timing of events in Patna and Brussels formed a coincidence, not proof of a criminal link. On the last line of her report, Lata wrote a question: 'Who prepared the missing page of the Delhi review authorisation, and who accepted it?'

Nikita's rehearsal for the science exhibition was that evening. Lata managed to arrive on time. Showing her star map on the stage, her daughter said, 'Points which appear to lie in one line do not all occupy the same place.' Lata applauded from the back of the hall. Her telephone was silent, but the number of the missing page had begun turning over in her mind again.

CHAPTER 35

The Fear Behind the Music

The first music of the morning in Macau came not from the dance hall but from the municipal cleaning truck. Samir Bose was passing along the rear corridor of the hotel when he saw an elderly cleaner stuffing yesterday's flower arrangements into a plastic bag. The flowers whose prices had astonished the hotel guests the night before were rubbish today. Samir asked, 'Would you like to take some of these home?'

The woman shook her head. 'There's room for flowers at home. But they'll buy more of these again, while the workers who spent the whole night arranging them are still waiting for their wages.'

Samir gave no answer. In the hotel management schedule with which he worked, the purchase of flowers and the payment of workers belonged to two different departments. The splendour of a single occasion could conceal the silence of the other department.

Joanna Lou had given him a time for a formal meeting. Mira wanted a safe search to be made for another young woman she knew as Sujata. Ana Fernandes, the local support worker, had made it clear that Mira's consent could not stand in for Sujata's. Mira could be present, but if the other woman did not wish to speak, that decision had to be respected.

Samir did not attempt to carry away any of the hotel's old registers. He told the investigating officer which department held an authorised copy of the guest arrangements. The relevant authority issued an order preserving the original list. Samir kept only his personal notes with him.

Mira sat beside the window of the safe house. Her sister at home had told her on the telephone that their mother now put out an empty cup of tea for her every evening. It was the kind of memory Mira wished to escape. She turned to Ana. 'Don't put my search for Sujata down as a good deed I've done for her. I left her behind here. I want to know whether she can make decisions for herself now.'

'Don't take responsibility for what happened to her upon yourself,' said Ana. 'Those responsible would be the people who trafficked and threatened her, not you.'

Mira closed her wooden box. 'Then write down the names of the people I saw taking away documents. But record separately what I saw and what I only heard from someone else.'

Joanna listened to the descriptions of two people. Mira distinguished the job recruiter from the person who assigned shifts at the hotel. One explained the terms of appointment letters; the other allotted the night's work. Mira did not know whether they belonged to the same gang.

Meanwhile, Samir obtained permission to inspect an authorised copy of a register. The guest list named four organisers; the service workers were listed in another file. That separate file bore the name of an old transport company, 'Samudrarekha Transport Service'. Beside the name, a changed date had been written in red ink.

'Did this company bring Sujata here?' Joanna asked.

'I cannot say,' replied Samir. 'This is a bill for transport connected with hotel events. Whether staff travel was included must be checked against the original human-resources register.'

Samir's unanswered question made Mira impatient. 'For two years I've looked at paper after paper, and every time someone says, Ask another department. Must it be the same again?'

Joanna looked at her for a moment. 'This time the questions have been put on record in writing, and the responsibility of the organisations that must answer them is recorded too. But I won't lie to you and say that Sujata will be found tomorrow.'

Mira looked out of the window. Across the street two young men were laughing as they took photographs. They knew nothing about her. For the first time she felt relieved by that fact. Not every stranger's glance was a suspicious one.

In the evening, preparations were under way at the hotel for a private musical event. Samir was given the key to a back room as part of the arrangements. There were musical instruments and clothes inside; papers from an earlier event lay on top of an old cupboard. He understood the limits of his responsibilities: he had no authority to conduct a private search. He did not open the cupboard. He merely noticed that the organiser's name had changed, while the transport company's mark was the old one.

Reshma Gurung came to bring him tea. Samir had known her for some time. 'You've been reading registers for days,' she said. 'Have you ever looked at the kitchen register?'

'The kitchen's?'

'Yes. When an employee is sent to another hotel, the number of meals goes down. But sometimes the number of meals doesn't go down even though an employee disappears.'

A question formed in Samir's mind, but he did not ask her to make her name public. 'You can tell an appropriate support worker about this of your own free will. Nobody can compel you.'

Reshma was silent for a while. 'I'll tell them what I saw myself. But my younger brother works here too. What about his job?'

'I can't promise his safety,' said Samir. 'You'll need independent assistance and legal advice for that.'

That night Ana received Reshma's statement through a secure channel. Reshma asked that her identity be kept restricted during the initial stage. She said she had seen Sujata one evening of the previous month, wearing a bracelet tied with red thread, which Mira remembered. But the same bracelet did not necessarily mean the same person; Reshma could not confirm the woman's identity through a photograph or any direct identification.

When Mira was given this information, she said nothing for a long time. At last she asked, 'Was she able to walk? Of her own will?'

'Reshma doesn't have the answer to that question,' said Ana.

Mira pressed the fingers of her two hands together. This time the pain came not from ignorance but from having to accept it. She understood that in the haste to find Sujata, catching hold of the wrong person would itself be an injustice.

The hotel event began. An old melody drifted out with the music. Reshma recognised it: Mira had once sung it. The register for a previous programme contained the name of a song, but where the performer's name should have been, someone had written 'Guest Performance'. Reshma drew this discrepancy to the attention of the authorised officer. The issue was not who owned the song, but who had appeared on the stage.

Joanna told Samir, 'The transport company whose name keeps appearing may well have a legitimate contract. But if the dates in Reshma's statement and the kitchen register agree, we'll have a direction in which to search for the missing worker.'

'And if they don't agree?' asked Samir.

'Then we'll stop going in the wrong direction. That's an important result of an investigation too.'

That night Mira telephoned her sister. This time she gave no half-answer about her work. 'I'm preparing to come back to the village. But there's a young woman here, and I've asked for help in finding out whether she is safe.'

Her sister said, 'When you come back, you'll teach me songs again.'

For the first time, Mira hummed the opening line of a song. Her voice trembled halfway through but did not break. Meanwhile, a formal copy of the transport bill reached Joanna's office. The date on its page was one day earlier than the date in Reshma's statement, and the old company's name had been added afterwards by hand. Who had written it remained unknown.

CHAPTER 36

The White Donation Box

In Brussels, the faint sound of rain fell upon the glass awning. Before her office opened, Elise Vander went to a small public library. Volunteers there helped people fill out immigration forms; some brought medicine for the elderly. The accounts Elise was examining belonged to an organisation whose name also contained the word 'assistance'. She did not think it right to begin an investigation by treating the word itself as guilty.

On the library wall hung a drawing made by hand: a child was putting a coin into a white donation box. Beneath his name the artist had written, 'Giving money is easy; knowing where it ends up is difficult.' Elise read the sentence but did not photograph it. She had copies of enormous accounts; she wanted to leave the meaning of the little picture outside her paperwork.

At the office, the accountant Nadia Verstraeten brought her three folders. The first contained expenses for actual public programmes, the second the conditions attached to grants from donor organisations, and the third a payment register headed 'Special Circumstances Assistance'. The dates and currencies in the three registers differed; adding their figures directly would be misleading.

'I understand your concern about this third file,' said Nadia. 'But we must protect the first two folders from the shadow of a crime. This organisation has given real assistance to homeless families. Food, blankets and medical services were provided in exchange for some of those cheques.'

'Then write down the verification of that work,' said Elise. 'What is correct in the records should be reported as correct too.'

Elise opened an entry headed 'Assistance to Families Affected by Riots'. The purpose of the approved grant was public, but the payment agreement had a programme code in the place where the service recipient's name might have been. The code was not itself wrong; it simply did not immediately establish who the actual beneficiary was.

'If the relief programme took place in a district of India, shall we ask the civic organisation there for the details?' Nadia asked.

'Yes, but through the proper channel. First examine the reporting requirements in the agreement. Don't make private beneficiaries' names public without need.'

One programme description contained entries for a stage, sound equipment and a cultural event. Elise remembered the documents for the

youth-awareness programme in Patna. Similar headings did not mean identical organisers; she wrote down the dates of the two expenses and recorded the limits of any comparison.

At noon Elise was summoned to inspect the preparations in the auditorium. It was to host an international discussion on consumer safety. The chairman of the organising association, Marten de Croons, came towards her. 'You've raised questions in your report again? If somebody casts doubt on donors at the start of the conference, all charitable work will get a bad name.'

'Charitable work won't get a bad name,' Elise replied. 'Payments made without verification will. If the expenses are proper, the papers will protect the organisation.'

'You don't understand. One unverified allegation will frighten every donor in our country.'

'That is why I won't publish an unverified accusation. But I won't stop recording questions either.'

Marten closed the file in his hand. 'Don't bring your private political opinions here.'

'My political opinions are nowhere in the report. It examines the purpose of the expenditure and the services actually provided. You may submit a written reply if you wish.'

Marten's face remained stern, but he agreed to send a letter. As Elise came out of the meeting, students were holding a peaceful demonstration on climate issues in the street. Some were playing drums and some carried placards. Elise told a friend, 'When people take to the streets to ask questions, I cannot treat that as proof of a financial conspiracy. If there is proof, it will lie in particular payments and particular acts.'

Revati Karn telephoned in the evening. She was discussing with her editor in Delhi whether to attend the Brussels conference. 'What can be written on the basis of the records you have?'

Elise answered, 'For some expenditure entries, direct confirmation that the services were delivered is still unavailable. That much can be written. My papers do not yet justify saying that anyone paid for violence in India.'

'And the legitimate non-governmental organisations?'

'Make their actual work clear in your report. If there is a question about the expenses of one programme, don't write that the whole organisation is criminal.'

Revati was quiet for a while. 'I've received information from Patna that a dead person's name appears on a list of volunteers. But the original death record and the date of the entry still have to be checked.'

'Then keep the two questions separate,' Elise said. 'A payment register here does not by itself prove that a person was present there.'

Revati gave a small sigh. 'Sometimes I feel that asking question after question destroys the story. But printing a false answer can destroy a person's life.'

'Then make the questions your story, not the accusations,' Elise replied.

When the conversation ended, Elise took Nadia with her to examine the old incoming-mail register. A former officer had requested reports on 'Special Circumstances Assistance' twice during the year. The first time, the answer had consisted only of photographs of the programme. The second time, it had contained a certificate concerning a payment recipient, but no date for the associated programme. A photograph could be one piece of evidence; whether the people shown in it had consented to the use of their images was a separate question.

Nadia took the original letter from an old file. A designation, not an individual's name, appeared where the signature should have been. Officeholders in this organisation had changed from time to time, so the designation alone could not establish who had held the office earlier. Elise asked for the present officer to supply records of responsibility.

There was a table on the last page. The first column said 'Relief', the second 'Contact', and the third 'Cultural Presentation'. Under the third column was an entry for 'Guest Arrangements'. Elise wondered whether these were separate expenses for three approved programmes or the same service recorded under three headings. There were grounds for the question, but not yet an answer.

On a separate sheet she wrote three clear headings: 'Verified Service', 'Evidence Awaited', and 'Explanation Requested'. Under the first she placed receipts for food that had actually been distributed; under the second, incomplete evidence for relief work; and under the third, the questionable classification of guest arrangements.

Nadia looked at the table. 'Dividing it this way has made the overall accusation much smaller.'

'I shall write only as much as is true,' Elise said. 'If something bigger emerges later, it will require new evidence.'

On her way home that night, Elise passed the library. The drawing of the white donation box was still visible. Drops of rain lay on the outer glass as before. She remembered a lesson from her schooldays: when somebody made a donation, the account should record not only the money but also the purpose for which it was used.

As she entered her home, a written reply from Marten arrived on her phone. It emphasised that the programmes had indeed taken place and promised an explanation of the incomplete expenditure entries the following week. Elise preserved the reply in its entirety. But an attachment contained the guest list for the coming Brussels conference. After the entry for Viraj Sahni's presentation were the words 'Public Assistance Partnership'.

Elise sent Revati a copy of the list as an ordinary public programme document, not as a private financial record. Revati replied, 'I'll attend. I'll ask my questions in public. But before printing a name, I'll read the whole of the evidence.'

Elise put down the phone. The ticking of a clock could be heard in the room. The white tablecloths for the auditorium were being readied for the following day; in the expense register beneath them, one line was still unclear: 'Local Support: India'. There were no supporting papers identifying the recipient, date or use of that entry. The next day, Elise would make her first lawful request for clarification.

CHAPTER 37

The Public Awareness Forum

Morning dew still clung to the courtyard of an old school in Patna. White lines of lime had been drawn here and there to mark where bamboo platforms would be placed for the evening meeting. Prachi Jha took two strips of cloth from her bag. On the first she had written, 'Beware of Digital Fraud'; on the second, 'A Gambling Loss Is a Loss to the Family.' The cloth was cheap, but the letters were clear. Prachi had told her pupils that after the meeting the banners would hang in the school library.

Mahendra Pathak arrived late. Two young men came with him, showing pictures of the event on their phones. 'The programme has a new name this time—the Public Awareness Forum,' Mahendra told Prachi. 'Support has come from outside. Important people are coming.'

'Why was the name changed?' Prachi asked.

'What difference does the name make? The purpose is the same—to protect young people from fraud.'

Prachi kept the cloth in her hands. She was less troubled by the name than by the manner in which it had been changed. For the earlier Youth Awakening programme, she had asked her village theatre group to help without payment. In the new invitation the performers had become 'social influencers', and an unfamiliar number stood beside each participant's name.

By noon Revati Karn had arrived too, with a small bag over her shoulder. Mahendra smiled at the sight of her but did not take her straight to the office as he had done before. 'We're delighted that you will attend the conference,' he said.

'I haven't come to admire the conference,' Revati replied. 'I have come to understand its accounts. I want to see this forum's registration papers, the list of its present office-bearers and the source of the money spent on advertising.'

Mahendra opened a folder. It contained printed rules, a rent receipt and a bill for printing photographs. Where there should have been registration papers, there was only an acknowledgement of an application. Revati looked at the date. The application had been filed a week after publicity had begun under the forum's name. That was not unlawful in itself, but nothing in the file supported the claim in the publicity that this was an 'organisation active for ten years'.

'Which organisation carried out those ten years of work?' Revati asked.

Mahendra's smile faded. 'The people concerned worked under another name earlier.'

'Then give me that name, a record of the work done at the time, and the official relationship between it and this new forum—in writing.'

'You turn everything into paperwork.'

'If the money is accounted for on paper, questions about it will be on paper too.'

During this exchange Prachi told them about a small incident involving her own group. The previous week they had given umbrellas and exercise books to five pupils at a rural school. A photograph of the distribution had appeared on the forum's new promotional page, but its caption said, 'Relief Provided to Five Hundred Families.' Prachi's group had carried out no such distribution.

'Is the photograph yours?' Revati asked.

'One of my pupils took it. We gave permission for it to appear on the library page. They cut the picture out of its context and attached another claim to it. If this is how publicity works, people will begin to think that even the honest work we did was a lie.'

Revati showed no haste to write her story. Without handling the photograph, she asked Prachi to preserve the original image, the permission to publish it and the date of the page. Nobody yet knew who ran that page.

In the veranda behind the school, an elderly teacher, Rameshwar Jha, was drinking tea. Revati asked him, 'Are you associated with the forum?'

'I was in favour of lending them a room at the school,' he said. 'Children need to be protected from addiction to gambling. I know nothing of the forum's registration, foreign donations or politics. Please don't turn me into a criminal merely because the school's name is involved.'

'No,' Revati said. 'I shall describe only the part you actually played.'

Mahendra's telephone rang continually. During two calls he discussed the sound arrangements for the meeting. In the third he lowered his voice. 'Send the original video,' he said, 'not just the cut portion.' Revati heard the words, but could not tell who was at the other end.

By evening preliminary material concerning the forum had reached Arunima Rao's office. She was in charge of the principal financial investigation, not the police officer authorised to grant permission for a local meeting. Through the local police she received public advertisements for the forum, particulars of the venue and reports of possible threats. She made two separate folders: financial documents in one and complaints concerning public safety in the other.

'Both folders bear the same name in the end,' her assistant Nikhil said. 'Shall I put everything into one file?'

'A common name doesn't make two questions the same,' Arunima replied. 'One is an inquiry into payments; the other concerns public safety.

They require different grounds and different officers. So far no financial list proves that violence has been planned.'

Arunima also heard how Prachi's photograph had been used. She understood that genuine social service and the misuse of its name could exist on the very same platform. That did not make the matter simpler; it made it harder.

That night Revati sat in a cheap hotel in Patna and sorted her material. Her flight to Brussels was at dawn. She sent Elise Vander a short message: 'There are similarities between the name of a local forum in Patna and a name in your donations register. No direct documentary link has yet been proved.' Elise replied: 'Do not forget that distinction in the conference hall either.'

Revati's editor called. 'I want a big headline. Foreign money, an Indian meeting, gambling—people will read that story.'

'I have three sets of incomplete accounts,' Revati said. 'Not one complete conspiracy.'

'Incomplete accounts don't make a headline.'

'Then the headline can wait. A name printed wrongly can follow a person for life.'

After hanging up, Revati remembered something her father used to say: the first duty of news was not to arrive before everyone else, but to leave room for truth wherever it arrived. On the last page of her notebook she wrote, 'The forum's publicity claim has proved false; there is no evidence of a violent purpose.'

At ten that night Prachi telephoned. 'I've received two messages,' she said, her voice trembling. 'In the eastern neighbourhood they are saying people from the western neighbourhood will attack tomorrow's event. In the western neighbourhood they are saying exactly the opposite. Both messages are being sent in the forum's name.'

Revati asked her to send them. Both had the same red border, but the words differed. The first bore no signature; the second displayed the Public Awareness Forum's emblem. Screenshots alone could not establish their origin. She asked Prachi to preserve the original messages and give them to the local police, and to tell the schoolchildren not to forward the rumours.

Revati opened the window. Across the road two men were buying tea from the same kettle at a late-night stall. Nobody had yet managed to make enemies of them. But two sentences prepared on a telephone screen could push each into a separate fear of the other. Revati was still wondering whether to go to Brussels or remain in Patna when a message arrived from Arunima: 'Ask your questions at the public meeting. Here we have begun checking the original messages and their times.'

Revati looked at her ticket again. The plane would leave at dawn. Patna would remain awake meanwhile.

CHAPTER 38

The White Hall in Brussels

At dawn in Brussels the clock was four and a half hours behind Patna, yet to Revati it felt like the same night. After leaving the plane she met Elise Vander in person for the first time. Elise carried a small paper bag. It held no flowers, only the conference programme and two cups of hot tea.

'You have had very little sleep,' Elise said.

'Patna has had none,' Revati replied.

Elise gave her a cup. 'What you say here may be heard in Delhi a few minutes later. But a voice that travels so far without the strength of documents behind it may grow weaker, not stronger.'

Revati showed her the images of the rumours circulating in Patna. Elise read them carefully but would not assign a political meaning to the messages without a translator's help. 'My subject is expenditure on relief. The investigation into incitement to violence is proceeding separately in your country. We must not put the assumptions of that investigation on this table.'

In the outer corridor of the hall, Elise's colleague Nadia Verstraeten was arranging the donor organisation's public reports. The glossy pictures on the thick paper showed a dazzling city. Nadia's folder also contained receipts for food actually distributed and records of medical help given to homeless families. She asked Revati to report that real work too when she raised her questions.

'Why should I write against the evidence in my own report?' Revati said.

Nadia smiled. 'Because people generally bring us nothing but suspicions. Receipts for honest work seem to get in their way.'

Inside the hall the words 'Consumer Protection and Digital Trust' were on the wall. Small flags of different countries stood behind the seats, and the interpreters' booths were enclosed in glass. 'Is Viraj Sahni attending this conference in person?' Revati asked.

'He has been given a slot to speak remotely,' an organiser replied. 'Questions will be limited.'

Elise looked at Nadia beside her. The organisation was holding a discussion on public accountability, yet it had allowed very little time for difficult questions to its invited sponsor. The contradiction was not a crime, but it was certainly uncomfortable.

Behind the stage Marten de Croons examined Revati's press identification. 'Some of your questions already sound like the language of hostile publicity,' he said.

'Coming with questions is not the same as arriving with a verdict,' Revati replied. 'I have also seen the documents concerning your organisation's verified relief work.'

'Then praise that work as well.'

'Certainly, to the extent that it is verified. But for payments that have not been explained, we need answers rather than praise.'

The names of the sponsors began changing on the screen in front. Revati wrote three headings in her notebook: 'What the Document Claims', 'What Supports the Claim' and 'What We Do Not Know'. She left the most space beneath the third.

An international meeting on consumer protection was being held in Brussels. There were cameras, flowers and white tablecloths in the glass-walled hall. During one session Viraj Sahni spoke over a video link. 'We all want young people to be freed from illegal online gambling,' he declared.

The audience applauded. An interpreter smiled. But Revati was watching the name of the sponsoring organisation scrolling beneath his speech. The same organisation's signature appeared on the letter from Malta.

Revati asked her question in public, as a journalist. 'Documents have emerged suggesting a connection between grants made by your trust and expenditure on gambling promotion. Will you agree to an independent examination of that connection?'

Viraj's expression did not change. 'Produce your evidence. We shall answer every allegation according to law.'

Revati said, 'The documents are being sent to the competent authority. For now I merely want to know whether you will publish a transparent account of your expenditure.'

Viraj's connection went dead. The organiser announced a technical problem. Some people in the hall were embarrassed; others accused Revati of creating a spectacle. She took no notice. A public question could not take the place of evidence, she knew, but it could make public room for evidence to be heard.

After the conference a young woman approached Revati. Her name was Elise Vander. She examined financial reports for a European social organisation and had noticed an important distinction. The conference accounts showed expenditure under a programme called 'Assistance to Riot-Affected Families', but she had found no verified relief activity under that name in the work she had inspected.

'Where did the money actually go?' Revati asked.

'The freedom to hold political opinions in your country, the right to participate in a lawful protest, and payments made to hire people for violence are three different things,' Elise said. 'All I can say is that the

purpose of certain payments has not been confirmed. If violence was planned, the evidence of that plan must be sought in India.'

That same night a report reached Arunima from Patna. Incendiary messages, apparently intended to set two communities against each other, were circulating before the meeting. The name 'Public Awareness Forum' appeared as their source.

Revati had documents; Arunima had very little time.

The news coming from Patna did not consist of just one message. Two incomplete voice messages from Prachi reached Revati's phone, followed by a local reporter's video. One person claimed that permission for the meeting had been withdrawn; another said that it remained in force. Revati published neither version. She asked for confirmation from the authorities.

The programme in the hall went on. One speaker described the experiences of elderly people in Europe who had been cheated online. His subdued voice over the microphone reminded Revati of Shivshankar Mishra. She did not know whether the victims in the two countries had suffered at the hands of the same criminals. But the pain of being too ashamed to ask for help was much the same across borders.

Elise took her outside. 'Viraj demanded evidence in answer to your question. Can you produce that evidence now?'

'Some documents have been sent to the authorities. Journalism and judicial proceedings are not the same thing,' Revati said. 'But it is reasonable to ask him for a written response to his public promise of transparency.'

'I shall seek two answers from my organisation,' Elise said. 'Proof that the relief services were received, and the name of the person who approved the payments. Unless those two questions can be answered separately, confusion will remain.'

They found Nadia in a room behind the conference hall. The payment register for 'Assistance to Riot-Affected Families' contained three dates. In Elise's authorised copy the first was the date the grant was approved, the second the date of the bank's payment entry, and the third the date the local report was sent. In Revati's earlier notes one of the dates had been entered under the wrong heading. She crossed it out and corrected it at once.

'What difference would that one mistake have made?' Nadia asked.

'If it appeared that payment came first, it would make a story about a crime. If approval came first, a lawful process might also explain it,' Revati said. 'Your question is small; the consequence is not.'

Elise looked again at the payment reference connecting the sponsoring organisation to its Indian local partner. The receipt named the place where the service was to be provided but not the identity of the beneficiary. They needed the local organisation's contact letter. Without a receipt confirming delivery, there was no basis for deciding that the money had been misused for violence.

Meanwhile, through official channels, Revati received only this much information from Arunima Rao: steps had begun in Patna to preserve the original copies of the two contradictory messages spreading fear, and local officers were examining the lawful right to hold the meeting separately from questions of public safety. Revati wanted to take the next flight home. But the official copy confirming the corrected date in Elise's file had yet to arrive. To leave without it would mean that half her work in Brussels was unfinished.

Outside the hall Elise and Revati arranged to meet again in two hours. Revati thanked the interpreter, who had carefully preserved the meaning of the difficult statements made during the conference. 'Did the connection fail because of your question,' the interpreter asked, 'or was it poor already?'

Revati looked at the white glass of the hall, where reflections of people inside mingled with people on the street. 'Today I have learned only that the voice stopped. I shall ask the organisers how it stopped,' she said.

At that moment Prachi's voice came through again. 'Didi, two people in the neighbourhood were getting ready for a fight. We are looking for the original video behind the false story. If you think you must name me in your report, please tell me first.'

'It is more important to hear what you have to say than to print your name,' Revati replied. 'I shall not turn it into a public accusation yet.'

Outside, the rain had stopped. Revati's phone displayed flights back to Patna. The white tablecloths in the hall were still perfectly clean; beneath them, one line of expenditure was still waiting for proof.

CHAPTER 39

The First Lie Exposed

When morning came to Patna, the paan shop at the crossroads opened with its shutter only halfway up for the first time. The shopkeeper asked the man next to him, 'Should we believe the message that came last night?' Instead of answering, the other man showed him his phone. In the same city, people were seeing different fears at the same hour.

In Arunima Rao's temporary investigation room, two officers were sorting information about local fire-safety arrangements and permission for the public meeting into separate piles. Security outside the venue was the responsibility of the local police. Arunima's financial investigation touched these events only where questions of suspicious payments or documents arose. She had no authority to go beyond that limit and cancel anyone's public meeting.

Nikhil handed her a printed sheet. 'The messages sent to the two neighbourhoods look alike. We don't know which page carried the picture first.'

'It is important to know which was first,' Arunima said. 'But without the original messages, do not turn an assumption into a finding.'

'People have begun naming one another. Are we to wait for evidence while that is happening?'

'Not where public safety is concerned. Measures to keep the peace must begin at once. But evidence is needed to declare someone guilty. Both things can be done together.'

It was agreed with the local station officer that medical facilities, exits and traffic arrangements at the venue would be maintained as for any ordinary public event, while specific complaints about threats would be handled separately. No entire neighbourhood or group of lawful demonstrators would be put under suspicion.

At half past eight Prachi reached the school and found one of her pupils, Ritu, waiting by the doorway. Ritu's schoolbag was old, and her uncharged phone could not show any pictures. But between the pages of her exercise book lay a printed sheet: an image of the previous night's message. Prachi's eyes stopped at the first line. The school's name had been spelt wrongly.

'Where did you get this?' Prachi asked.

'A man was printing it at the photo shop near the crossroads,' Ritu said. 'I saw that the picture of the book distribution hanging on his wall was behind him. He said all the photographs came from the same place.'

Prachi did not send Ritu after anyone. She wrote down the shop's name and the time Ritu had seen the man. Before the girl was a witness, she was a pupil, and the school was responsible for her safety.

Shivshankar Mishra arrived there with his daughter Madhavi. Ever since the earlier fraud, the two had not been able to tell each other everything, even by the previous day. Today Madhavi herself asked, 'Babuji, if this message is true, why should we go outside at all?'

'I don't know whether it is true,' Shivshankar replied. 'But last time, when I saw strangers in uniform, I turned my own mind into a court. I shall not make that mistake again.'

Madhavi took his hand. 'Then until we know the truth, we won't forward the rumour.'

Meanwhile word came from Revati's office in Delhi that a video being circulated in the Public Awareness Forum's name appeared to show an old public cultural programme, not an event from the previous day. Its claimed source was an anonymous social-media page. 'Appears to is not good enough,' Arunima said. 'We need records of the old programme and the original footage.'

Revati telephoned from Brussels. 'I corrected a date in a donor register here. I shall write about Patna, but send me the local evidence. Until then I shall not blame any community.'

'I shall send a copy of the earlier photograph verification,' Prachi said. 'But please do not make the pupils' faces public.'

The owner of the photo shop, Chandrakant Thakur, himself called the local officers. Many customers had posters printed at his shop, he said, and he would give out their private details only in response to a proper legal request. But he did confirm one unusual thing. The picture printed the previous day contained, in its background, an old view of the school that he had photographed four years before. On the wall in that picture was a strip of green paint. The wall had been painted entirely white two years ago.

Arunima checked the information about the wall's colour against old school photographs and the maintenance register. It was strong evidence that one of the images was not from the previous day. But it did not identify the person who made the message, that person's political purpose or the source of any money.

Local officers called Mahendra Pathak in his capacity as an authorised representative for publicity about the meeting. 'I had the forum's name printed,' Mahendra said. 'I did not print the violent messages.'

'Who operates your official publicity page?' an officer asked.

Mahendra named two young men but said he did not see every post himself. He agreed to hand over the original artwork for the official

emblem. The officer recorded a request to compare the emblems. Any conclusion about Mahendra's defence or guilt was left open.

Before noon two elderly women, one from the eastern neighbourhood and one from the western, spoke at the same time on a local radio programme. 'My grandson studies in the other neighbourhood,' the first said. 'My daughter's medicine comes from a shop in that neighbourhood,' said the second. The presenter did not use their names to identify either community. He merely asked, 'Can you say you saw with your own eyes something that you have only heard about?' Both women answered together, 'No.'

To Arunima the radio programme was not evidence, but it was certainly a legitimate attempt to reduce public fear. The local police issued a public clarification: the date attributed to the supposed footage of the previous day had not been verified, and evidence had emerged that an image from an older public programme had been reused. The complaints concerning threats were still under investigation.

Revati changed the headline of her draft. At first she had written, 'Foreign Money Behind Tension in Patna.' She had no evidence to support that accusation. Her new headline was, 'An Old Image, a New Fear: Publicity Under Investigation in Patna.' She kept the unanswered question about the Brussels grant for a separate report. 'Will people read such caution?' her editor asked.

'Shall I write lies for those who won't?' Revati replied.

Before evening Prachi went to the school wall. A small piece of white paint had flaked away, revealing the old green line beneath. The wall held not just one day's publicity, but memories of many years. Ritu came quietly with a tin of paint. 'Didi, shall we make it white again?'

'Not yet,' Prachi said. 'That mark helped us work out when the picture was taken. Take a photograph of it first; then we'll paint.'

Just then Abhay Kumar, an actor in the school's old theatre group, arrived. On his phone was the original recording of the very cultural programme from which a cut-and-edited passage was being circulated as proof of a violent insult. 'I recorded the whole play that day,' Abhay said. 'The meaning they have made by removing two sentences from the middle is not in the original play.'

Before replying, Prachi asked, 'Is the whole recording safe? When was it recorded, and whom do you want to give it to?'

Abhay took out his phone but did not open it immediately. 'I have one condition,' he said. 'My younger sister still goes to school in the neighbourhood whose name has been used in the message. If I hand over the original recording, who will look after her safety?'

From a distance came the sound of someone testing a microphone. There was still time before the meeting began. The first layer of the lie had

been lifted, but the fear of the man who could provide the original footage had yet to be answered.

CHAPTER 40

Before the Fire

At daybreak in Darbhanga, Rani Devi took down the pot of milk she had left on the shop veranda. When the first train crossed the bridge, the empty glass jars trembled again. After reading the message the previous night, Amresh had forgotten even to measure the tea leaves. Beneath a picture sent from Patna were words declaring that a fire would break out in the city today, and its flames would reach Darbhanga.

It was not that Rani could not read a message. But she did not need the brightness of a telephone to recognise the fear hidden inside written words. She asked, 'Why do you want a holiday from school? Have you had a quarrel over your studies?'

'No, Ma. Everyone says Patna will be shut down. Some call it a meeting against gambling; others say there is going to be trouble between two neighbourhoods. My friends have sent the same picture with three different stories.'

Rani put the lid on a jar. 'Sending a picture three times doesn't make it three times as true. Tell people only what you have seen. Don't pass on what you haven't.'

That day Amresh began to see a resemblance between the glowing 'Win Again' advertisement he had removed from his phone and the messages from old friends. The gambling page continually reminded him that he might recover the money he had lost. The inflammatory message from Patna demanded an immediate decision too: share it now, believe it now, choose your side now. For the first time the two appeals sounded alike to him, though he had no evidence that they came from the same source.

Mother and son might have gone on arguing, but then the local school in Darbhanga telephoned. A group of Amresh's classmates had been frightened by reports about the programme in Patna. The teacher said the school would open at its usual hour; no holiday would be announced on the strength of an unverified rumour. Rani was somewhat reassured by that ordinary sentence. Even an ordinary day could be something to protect in a crisis.

Amresh opened the notebook in which he recorded his losses. On the first page was an account of the amounts deposited over three months; on the last, the price of the rice his mother had bought on credit. It occurred to him that in a home where five hundred rupees had no settled place, a

city's fear was itself an expense. If people stopped coming for tea, Rani's earnings for the entire day would fall.

In Patna, there had been three knocks at the door of Shivshankar Mishra's room since morning. The first was from the milkman, the second from a neighbourhood worker and the third from his neighbour Harinarayan, whose granddaughter was insisting on going to school. Harinarayan held a printed notice, but neither its author nor its printing office was clearly identified.

'You've already suffered fraud in the name of the police,' the neighbour said. 'Tell us what to do this time. Should we close everything?'

Before replying, Shivshankar looked at his daughter Madhavi. Within their home they were no longer simply parent and child; each had become a witness to the other's fear. 'What happened to me taught me one thing,' Shivshankar said. 'When you're frightened, you should ask more questions, not fewer. There is a way to verify something with the police. We need not obey orders printed on an anonymous sheet.'

Madhavi was studying the bottom of the page. 'This photograph is old,' she said. 'I can see a green line on the school wall. Prachi Didi said yesterday that the wall was painted white two years ago.'

'You know Prachi?' Harinarayan asked.

'I went to a book-distribution event at the school. I heard her speak. She will have the evidence. I can only say what I saw.'

A strange shame stirred in Shivshankar. The men who had subjected him to the digital-arrest fraud had silenced him with false uniforms; his daughter was now speaking with a precise understanding of the limits of her own small experience. He folded the sheet and left it beside the door. 'We'll show this to the officer. But we won't give out your name unless it's necessary.'

At the other end of the city, Prachi Jha was waiting for Abhay Kumar in the school's small office. The previous day Abhay had offered to hand over the original recording of the play, but the question of his younger sister's safety had first to be addressed. In the presence of Archana, a local women's support worker, he was given a written assurance that the complaint and evidence would be received according to lawful procedure and that the girl's details would not appear in a public statement.

Abhay opened his phone. The sound of the full play ran in the background. A character's angry words were contradicted by that same character in the following scene. The short clip being circulated had removed the contradiction. The old green line on the school wall could also be seen in the original recording.

Prachi watched the whole play once. Then she said, 'This message has turned a play into proof of an event. But I am not going to name whoever made the video a criminal. The original recording establishes one thing;

identifying the person who circulated the clip requires another investigation.'

Abhay's phone was formally recorded for examination under the procedure followed by the local authorities. Prachi did not suggest sending his sister elsewhere; the girl's ordinary school day and arrangements for her safety came first. She told her students, 'If an incident is real, its victim deserves justice. If the incident is false, the new victim created by the rumour deserves justice too.'

Meanwhile, papers showing the expenses of the gathering arrived at Arunima's office. One receipt covered bus hire; another, the cost of printing posters; a third recorded daily payments to a few workers around the time of the event. Nilima could have questioned the validity of the first two, but her eyes stopped at the five names on the third sheet. One recipient's telephone number appeared among the contacts of a person in whose name a complaint about a violent threat had been registered.

'What are we to make of that?' Nikhil asked.

'For now, only that there is a lead worth examining between two sets of records,' Nilima said. 'Until we know whether the recipient was aware of anything, what work was done and on which day the payment was made, we cannot call that person a criminal.'

The local station officer was responsible for security at the gathering. His map marked the exit routes, first-aid facilities and arrangements for ordinary traffic. He said that removing people who had come with lawful demands was no way to keep a public gathering safe. He would take targeted action if there was evidence of a concrete threat.

Clouds gathered overhead, but it did not rain. In a telephone conversation between Patna and Darbhanga, Rani told Nilima only this: 'We aren't going to Patna. But I won't teach my son to be afraid again merely because of what they show on television. You find out the truth. I'll keep my shop open here.'

Rani's words stayed with Nilima for a long time. Between court orders and investigation files, how many people across the country were struggling simply to keep their tea shops, clinics and schools going as usual? For them, that too was a practical meaning of peace.

Noon was drawing near. On the road towards Gandhi Maidan were posters, students in plain clothes, young people rehearsing slogans and old people walking quietly. Abhay's original recording had been placed on the evidentiary record; the first lie in the misleading message had been exposed, but the person who had made it remained unnamed.

A microphone had been placed on the organisers' platform. The first voice was not a speech but a worker's: 'One, two, three...' Someone in the crowd clapped; someone else turned to look behind. Before the meeting had even begun, the city was making a choice: whether to trust its fears or its own eyes.

PART THREE

Gleaming Bodies, Dark Business

CHAPTER 41

The Crowd Has a Face of Its Own

In her hotel in Brussels, Revati Karn was watching a live picture from Patna. Her eyes hurt from staying awake all night, but on the screen she was trying to distinguish faces rather than count the crowd. Her editor called from the Delhi newsroom. 'It's an enormous gathering. What number shall we put in the headline?'

'We won't put down a number we haven't counted,' Revati said. 'And a crowd is not one character. Some have come of their own will, some are working, and some are watching. A single camera cannot tell us everyone's purpose.'

In Patna, her local colleague Trisha Karn stood with her camera on the right side of the gathering. Trisha's first interview was with an elderly rickshaw-puller. 'My son lost the family's savings, one small wager after another,' he said. 'I haven't come for a leader. I've come for my son.' Trisha asked permission to publish his name. He refused, unwilling to shame his son.

Elsewhere, university students distributed leaflets about unemployment and digital banking fraud. Their demands did not agree with every part of the organisers' programme. In another section, women were giving people water and medicines. A local voluntary group had given its time to the work. None of their faces could be contained in a headline reading 'Two Communities Clash'.

Trisha asked Deepak, a young man sitting in the shade, 'Why have you come here?'

Deepak unfolded the leaflet in his hand. 'I was paid to put up posters. They told me to stay until evening. Is that a crime?'

'Being paid wages is not a crime,' Trisha said. 'But we need to know what work you did and for whom. Would you like to speak on camera?'

He shook his head. 'If my face is shown, I'll lose tomorrow's work. You can write that I put up posters. Nobody told me to commit violence.'

Trisha recorded his words without his name. A little farther away another young man claimed he had been paid to form part of the crowd for two hours. He pulled a paper from beneath a table, but the line identifying the payer or the purpose was unclear. Trisha told him that before an image of this paper could become evidence, it would have to be compared with the original record, the source of the payment and his statement. She refrained from filling in a false name herself.

Mahendra Pathak looked anxious behind the stage. He was distributing copies of the official speech and saying that the gathering was a place to hear the suffering of families harmed by gambling. One of his assistants stood apart, repeatedly asking about crowd numbers over the telephone. Mahendra took the phone from him. 'Write the number the authorities give,' he said. 'Sending exaggerated figures to the papers won't help the forum.'

Watching this, Trisha wondered whether those responsible for publicity could control every message sent in their name. Yesterday's misleading video was circulating under the organisers' name, but Mahendra denied that it came from an official source. Trisha wrote down two sentences. She would not turn a man into either a hero or a villain on the strength of one remark.

A short message from Arunima arrived on Revati's phone: 'Some payment records from the event contractor received; verification under way. Questions of the code of conduct and the lawful programme are separate.' Revati's professional instinct told her that money lay at the centre of the story. But money alone did not establish the purpose for which it had been paid.

She told Trisha, 'Don't put everyone who received money into the same category. Bus hire, wages for posters, services at a public gathering and transactions connected with threats must be investigated separately. Record what people say. We'll compare the conclusions later.'

At a bend in the road, Shabbir, who had set up his pushcart, hoped for good sales on the day of the meeting. But yesterday's rumour had made his family warn him that opening his stall would be dangerous. Shabbir lifted the lid of a drum of drinking water and handed the first glass to his neighbour Janki Devi. 'For two days now,' he said quietly, 'people have been asking about my religion before they ask the price at my stall.'

'If anyone comes for a drink of water, I'll pay for it,' Janki replied. 'We won't open a ledger for people's religions.' Trisha's camera lingered for a while over this ordinary exchange. It was not a political slogan written on a table, but it mattered to any understanding of the city's condition.

In one corner of the crowd, a child exhausted by the heat began to cry. The person accompanying him immediately went towards the medical tent. There Archana, the volunteer doctor who had also been present when Abhay's evidence was received, seated the child in the shade. No religious or political symbol was printed on anyone's slip of paper. Such service ought to have been as ordinary as daily life; today even keeping it ordinary was difficult.

The first speaker at the microphone told the gathering that families losing money through online gambling needed doctors, lawyers and a trustworthy way to lodge complaints. The crowd applauded. A second speaker raised the question of unemployment. Some people peacefully

expressed disagreement. Trisha recorded all of it; differences of opinion were not evidence of violence.

An unfamiliar man came up beside Trisha and showed her a short clip on his phone. Someone appeared to be throwing a stone. 'Look, there's a fire on the north side of the ground,' he said.

'When was this recorded?' Trisha asked.

'Just now. Send it everywhere.'

Trisha studied the screen. There was no reliable indication of the time. At that very moment, the northern section of the ground appeared normal on her other local colleague's camera. 'First we must check the place and the time,' she replied.

The stranger's eyes hardened. 'Are you a journalist or a police informer? At a moment like this you want evidence?'

'At a moment like this, we need evidence.'

He disappeared into the crowd. Trisha did not run after him. She entered the time, place and his words in her notes and informed the local police officer responsible for controlling rumours. There was no need to publish the unknown man's face.

In Brussels, Revati's editor called again. 'The video's everywhere now. What do we write?'

'Write that unverified footage is being circulated and local confirmation is awaited. Don't write, "A fire has broken out." That sentence will have consequences on the ground.'

While Revati was giving this answer, another video arrived on Trisha's phone. This one seemed to show the entrance to Gandhi Maidan in Patna, but the signboard of a shop behind the crowd bore an older coat of paint. It was not immediately possible to decide whether the two videos showed the same incident.

At that moment some people in one section of the ground began to run without any instruction. First there were three, then ten, and then too many to count by eye. They might have been running from genuine fear; a false message could have magnified it. Rather than pick up her slipper from the ground, a woman caught hold of a small child.

Trisha lowered her camera and made way for the child. A reporter's eye mattered, but in a crowd it mattered no less to remain human. From the distant platform came an appeal to keep calm. At the same time a message from Nilima reached Revati's phone: 'The contractor's payment details have arrived. Two recipients have given different accounts. Don't link this to the rumour yet.'

Revati sent a brief reply: 'Save people's lives first.'

The clocks in Patna showed noon. The crowd remained divided into its thousand different faces; a false video was trying to turn them all into one frightened face.

CHAPTER 42

Patna's Trial by Fire

Standing on the road near Gandhi Maidan, Arunima Rao looked up from her phone. Trisha's information, the local control room's report and the circulating footage all concerned the same event, but they were not the same kind of evidence. Before determining why people were running in the ground, she had to see that they were safe.

The local station officer told his colleague, 'Announce clearly over the microphone that the main exit is open. Take anyone feeling unwell to the medical station. Don't accuse anyone by name.' Two volunteers from the platform immediately offered to help.

After stepping away from her camera, Trisha sent Revati a short message: 'Still no independent confirmation of any fire.' Revati replied, 'Keep yourself safe. People before pictures.' Then she changed the headline the newsroom had prepared.

The officers now had only minutes to act. The verified meaning of the scene unfolding before the reader would become clear only afterwards.

A crowd had gathered near Gandhi Maidan in Patna. Some people had come for a lawful meeting against gambling, others were demonstrating about unemployment, and journalists were taking pictures. The crowd was not of a single kind. Arunima was concerned not about the gathering itself but about two false messages in which insulting and aggressive words had been attributed to people on opposing sides.

Arunima set out the limits of the police operation with the local officers: the peaceful gathering was not to be obstructed; action would follow where there was concrete information about violent threats. Nilima was examining banking evidence. The source of a payment made to one contractor engaged by the organisers was recorded in the trust's books. But the purposes of several smaller payments made afterwards remained unclear. One recipient belonged to a group that circulated messages about violence. A stronger link in the case still depended on that recipient's statement and digital evidence.

Revati quietly interviewed a few young men. One said, 'They only told me to put up posters. Nothing about violence.' Another said, 'I was paid to join the crowd for two hours.' A third walked away, saying he knew nothing about it.

At noon precisely, a false video began to spread. Some people ran and shop doors started closing. The local police control room promptly released authenticated footage, and two respected residents appealed publicly for calm. The organisers also urged people from the stage to remain peaceful.

Arunima cautiously ordered the detention of two people against whom there was direct evidence of violent threats and incitement. The gathering as a whole was not treated as criminal. Gradually the situation improved.

Just then the second part of Vivek's handwritten letter reached Nilima. There was no sender's name on the courier packet. Inside was a single short sentence: 'Fire need not be bought from abroad. It can be bought with money already collected inside the country. But prove the truth; don't merely raise a slogan.'

On the back of the sheet was written a place: 'Rajgir, Old Training Centre.'

'We must now establish whether Vivek is alive,' Arunima said, 'or whether someone is using his name to lead us into a trap.'

The movement of the crowd slowly returned to normal, but a lost slipper, an overturned vessel of water and a torn leaflet still lay at the roadside. Beside the medical tent an elderly man had a minor injury on his arm. A volunteer was trying to inform someone he knew. Arunima had the injury entered in the ordinary medical record; even the small consequences of fear could grow large in a person's life.

A copy of Abhay Kumar's original recording arrived at the office from Prachi Jha's school through the proper procedure. The local officer recorded the time of receipt, the identity of the person handing it over and the arrangements for preserving the original record. It helped establish the full context of the play, but two questions remained unanswered: who had first edited the viral clip, and who had circulated it?

'Details concerning your sister will not be made public,' the officer told Abhay. 'But I cannot promise at this stage that your role will never come up in judicial proceedings. We will try to secure whatever protection the law provides.'

Abhay did not look relieved at once. Yet he found something reassuring in an officer admitting the limits of a promise rather than giving a complete assurance. He signed the receipt for the return of his phone, then called home to ask about his sister's studies.

Mahendra Pathak came down from the platform and entered the local police room. 'There is no place for violence in our programme,' he said. 'But I'll give you the papers for payments made in the organisers' name.' His voice carried anger, though his hand trembled as he put down the documents.

Nilima looked again at the contractor's records and the payment list containing five names. One recipient described the money as daily wages for poster work; another said it covered vehicle hire. The person whose phone

number appeared in the complaint about a violent threat would have to be questioned according to law. Matching numbers did not conclusively establish the person's intention.

'Will this paper produce a news report saying that the public gathering was bought?' Mahendra asked.

'No,' Arunima replied. 'Nor will we protect any individual against whom evidence is found. We need not keep the truth at an equal distance from both sides. We should say only as much as the evidence allows, wherever it leads.'

Shivshankar Mishra was walking home with Madhavi along a safe route. He had gone near the ground, but when people began to run he had not taken his daughter into the crowd. Madhavi asked, 'Babuji, why didn't you speak about the fraud you suffered at the meeting?'

'I was frightened,' he admitted. 'Sometimes I have to gather the courage to tell the truth all over again. But today, at least, I didn't forward the frightening message.'

Madhavi squeezed his hand. 'There will be another day to speak the truth.'

In Darbhanga, Rani's shop remained open until evening. Pictures of people running had appeared on television, but when Amresh read the unverified headline scrolling below them, he turned his phone face down on the table. Rani's first customer asked, 'Has there been a riot in Patna?'

Rani replied, 'I wasn't there. I'll tell you what I hear when it has been properly confirmed. Have some tea.'

Nilima laid out the second part of Vivek's letter once more. There was no sender's name beneath the words 'Rajgir, Old Training Centre'. The handwriting appeared to resemble Vivek's earlier notes, but an appearance of similarity and expert confirmation were two different conclusions.

Arunima asked the local police to verify the location formally. There would be no entry into the premises without lawful authority and no public accusations without confirmation. If Vivek was alive, he would have to answer for his silence; if the letter was forged, they would have to find out what its maker wanted.

In Brussels, Revati changed the last sentence of her article. She had first written, 'A city on the edge of flames.' Her new sentence read, 'A lie was enough to spread fear through a city; no fire has yet been verified.' She did not describe any citizen's peaceful gathering as a crime.

As evening fell, ordinary buses were running on the road from Patna towards Rajgir. Some passengers were reading newspapers, others telling their families over the telephone that they were on their way home. In that darkness, a short line resembling Vivek Sood's handwriting lay in Arunima's file: not a map, only the name of a place.

Nilima suddenly remembered the corner of the letter. The faint blue line on its first part appeared at almost the same position on the second. She

could not yet say that both pieces had been torn from the same sheet of paper, but there was now a question worth investigating.

'I need to go to Rajgir,' Nilima said.

'We will go,' Arunima replied. 'But first we must be sure what the person calling us there intends. We cannot put a witness's life in danger by running after evidence.'

There was no declaration of complete victory in Patna that night. The effort to prevent violence from erupting appeared to have succeeded, but the questions remained alive: who stood behind the threats, where the money came from, and whether Vivek's letter had truly been written by Vivek.

The name of the old training centre in Rajgir was entered in the file. The door before the next clue remained closed.

CHAPTER 43

The Face on the Stage

That morning in Delhi, it was not the crowd in Patna that first came before Kabir as news, but Pranay's window. Drops from the night's rain still clung to the glass. Pranay had left an unfinished painting on the table and was making tea; it showed two faces with an empty space between them. Kabir went on looking at the messages that had arrived on his phone through the night.

'Are you going to Delhi again today?' Pranay asked.

'There's an editorial meeting at the office. We've found three separate accounts for the publicity that followed the report on the Patna gathering.'

'Three?'

'The event's stage, the live broadcast of the news, and the advertising page. Viewers see the same face, but the expenses of all three are separate.'

Pranay placed a cup of tea before Kabir. 'And my photograph?'

Kabir could not answer. The previous threat had referred to an image from their private life and had named a company, Neelpath Communication Services. Neither its ownership nor its address nor the work it carried out had yet been verified. Kabir knew that his report would have to acknowledge this inability to verify it. But the very idea that a stranger might claim the right to lay open the history of his love like a commercial register exhausted him.

Kabir's colleague Akriti Jha reached the office before he did. She was examining public records of digital advertising, but she found it strange that advertisements carrying three spellings of the same word had run throughout the night. Some used clipped portions of a speaker's address at the Patna gathering; some carried an ordinary news report of the whole speech; and on some pages, under the appearance of news, there were glittering symbols of gambling.

'The same logo appears in all three places,' Akriti said.

'A logo can be copied,' Kabir replied. 'The speech was public. The real question is, who authorised the payment?'

Akriti turned her notebook towards him. A public advertising record gave the sponsor's name, but the campaign's final payer was recorded under the name of another service organisation. That name resembled Neelpath, but it was not quite the same. Kabir wondered whether the person issuing

the threats actually knew the records, or was spinning a web out of publicly available papers. Both possibilities remained open.

'People at the office are asking about Pranay,' Akriti said. 'What should I tell them?'

'Tell them only this: it is a journalist's private life. It has nothing to do with the evidence in the story.'

'Shall I also tell them you've lodged a complaint about the threat against you?'

Kabir nodded. 'Yes. But we won't publish the complaint itself. It belongs to the investigation.'

At noon, Sudip Bhatnagar, the newsroom editor, called them both in. On his desk lay a colour front page prepared for printing. The proposed headline read, 'Foreign Money Behind the Stage'. Sudip had drawn a red circle around the word 'foreign'.

'Where is the evidence for this sentence?' he asked.

Akriti opened three pages of records. 'There is an advertising service, a possible connection with a foreign client, and an expense authorisation. But we have not established that all three relate to the same money.'

Sudip struck out the headline. 'Then it isn't news. It's a supposition.'

Kabir showed him his revised page: 'Separate Advertising Expenses Behind Viral Speech: Questions Over the Source of Payment'. Sudip agreed that the details of public promotion could be printed without naming the source, provided readers were told clearly what remained uncertain. He did not sign off on the page. They decided to wait for a written response from the advertising department.

Outside the office, traffic came and went along the road all day. When Akriti reached her motorcycle, she called Kabir. 'I'm going to meet a source. He says he can give me an earlier version of a public record.'

'Which source?'

'He hasn't given a name. He only says the date on the first published bill differs from the date on which it was later changed.'

'Don't go alone,' Kabir said at once. 'Someone could lure you there on the promise of a document. Tell the editor where you are.'

'I'm in a public place, among a crowd. If the meeting doesn't happen, I'll come back.'

Akriti ended the call. Five minutes later, a short message appeared on Kabir's screen: 'He didn't turn up. Two people keep looking back at me.' Immediately afterwards, her phone went off.

Kabir called the number again and again. The first time it rang; the second time there was silence. He informed Sudip, and together they contacted the nearest local police help desk. Akriti's last shared location was close to a public bus stop. Instead of rushing after anyone without preparation, they set the arrangements for her safety in motion.

Akriti was found forty minutes later. She had been seated at a nearby pharmacy. There was a mark of injury on one side of her forehead, and the notebook in her hand had been torn. She said that, a little way from the bus stop, two strangers had tried to snatch it. When they pushed her, she fell at the edge of the road. A rickshaw driver and a shopkeeper intervened, and the attackers ran away. She had seen their faces indistinctly. It would not be right to add guesses to her statement.

Kabir's first wish was to take her home. Akriti decided that she would first undergo a medical examination and give a proper statement. 'The injury isn't serious,' she said, 'but there is a bigger question. The people who failed to take the notebook—do they know about the copy on the computer?'

While the medical papers were being prepared, Pranay arrived too. He had brought water for Akriti and tea for Kabir. Seeing him, Kabir said, 'Because of me...'

Pranay stopped him. 'Our relationship is not your crime. And the blame for Akriti's injury belongs to the people who pushed her. If we start blaming ourselves, we shall lose sight of the real question.'

That night, in the Delhi newsroom, they counted the pages of Akriti's torn notebook. The chain of copies of the original records was secure, but one page was missing. Sudip said they would continue investigating the public payments, but would not print an unverified headline under pressure from a threat.

As Kabir left the office, he remembered Akriti's last observation: 'It seemed to me that the attackers recognised me not by my name but by the blue edge of my notebook.' He would have to record this separately in the complaint as her inference, which still needed checking. The police would find out whether the shopkeeper at the bus stop had a camera.

Just then an anonymous message reached Kabir: 'You've seen the face on the stage. Now hear the voice behind it.' There was no photograph, only a seven-second audio clip of unknown origin. The screen showed not Pranay's name, but the time Akriti had been at the office. Kabir did not open the clip. He first had it preserved as evidence under the reference number of the complaint.

CHAPTER 44

Before Publication

At two in the morning, in her hotel room in Brussels, Revati Karn shut down her computer, but sleep would not come. Her article was ready, with the names of three countries in it, and she had left the largest empty space for a question mark. Sometimes a question mark demanded more courage than all the other letters.

A message had come from the editorial office in Delhi: 'Should we print the news of the attack on Akriti?' Revati wrote back: 'If the connection between the attack and the financial investigation is not established, do not present them as having one cause.' She then asked after Akriti's health.

Early in the morning, Sudip Bhatnagar answered his phone in Delhi. There was the weariness of the night in his voice. 'The doctor has given her first aid. The police have taken a complaint. But someone from the ownership side says we must remove the company's name, or the advertising will stop.'

'What reason have they given for removing the name?'

'They call it "commercial caution". They aren't yet willing to put the reason in writing.'

Before Revati lay two statements of expenditure supplied by Elise Vander in Brussels. The first contained genuine receipts for blankets and food at a relief camp. The second recorded a relatively large payment under the heading 'Public Awareness Communications'. That heading did not, by itself, establish who received the service, who authorised it, or what it was actually for. Instead of calling it expenditure on violence, Revati had asked for three documents: the approval, the record that the service was performed, and the final acknowledgement of receipt.

Elise came to the hotel with Nadia Verstraeten. Nadia was carrying an old, colourless folder. 'The same sum appears with different dates on these two pages,' she said. 'One may be the accounting date for a currency conversion, the other the date of the actual bank transaction. Without checking, it proves no crime.'

Revati read the pages. 'Have you worked for this organisation?'

'Yes. Some legitimate assistance really was sent to India through us. Please don't print the private names of those who received it. There are questions about certain expenses, and the organisation should have the chance to answer them.'

Elise said, 'If an organisation is declared criminal as soon as a question is raised, the people who genuinely receive help from it will lose their way to that help. And if no one can question an organisation's name at all, how is misuse ever to be discovered?'

Revati's years in an editorial office had taught her to find a path between those two extremes. Before every assertion in her draft, she wrote the category of its source: public record, receipt obtained, witness statement, reply from the organisation concerned, or unconfirmed lead. The categories would not appear by name in the printed article, but their influence would be present in every sentence.

At noon, an official invitation arrived from Delhi for a special discussion on civic awareness and relief expenditure. Instead of agreeing to an interview, the organisation issuing the invitation demanded the complete article in advance for 'factual corrections'. Revati replied that she would accept details and documents identifying any particular alleged error. She would not hand over her entire source list or transcripts of unpublished interviews.

Meanwhile, another telephone call came. The caller introduced himself as a 'media coordinator'. 'Your report could receive international attention. Make just two changes: describe the Patna demonstration as proof of a foreign operation, and don't put the genuine receipts for relief work in the second paragraph. We'll arrange special distribution for you.'

'Who are you?' Revati asked.

'What difference does a name make? Look at the opportunity. A journalist needs reach.'

Revati did not hang up. Calmly she asked, 'Could you send this proposal in writing, with the organisation's name and the financial terms?'

There was silence for a few moments. Then the caller said, 'So much paperwork kills an opportunity.'

The call ended. Revati did not treat the proposal made over an unidentified telephone line as conclusive evidence of an accusation, but she informed her editor. The record had to be preserved in a lawful manner. The temptation to make the story bigger was no reason to attach anyone's name to it.

Kabir called just then. 'Akriti is all right. But one page of her notebook is missing.'

'Write only what Akriti saw. Don't decide the motive for the attack in advance,' Revati said.

'The clipped portion of the speech that I found had an advertising symbol after it.'

'Who used that symbol? The person who cut the video, the person who bought the advertisement, and the person who paid for it could be three different people. We have to examine every link.'

Kabir was silent. Revati understood that his silence came from fear. She added, 'Pranay's name will not appear in any draft. What he wishes to say about his life is his own decision.'

Two hours later, Revati's editor sent the finished article back to her. The headline had been changed to 'Foreign Donations Fuel Violence in India: Secret Network Exposed'. Nothing in Revati's original text had expressed such certainty. She read the whole page. Her phrase 'The purpose of the grant remains in question' had been changed to 'Illegal funds proved'. Small alterations had combined to reverse the meaning entirely.

Revati telephoned her editor. 'Did you make these changes?'

'No,' the editor said. 'A new version appeared in the shared publishing system under my name. We're trying to find out who changed it.'

'Then stop publication. Preserve the differences between the copy you sent me and the new one. I won't allow such an article to go out without my signature.'

'That decision will leave today's front page blank.'

'A blank page is better than a misleading accusation,' Revati replied.

Nadia noticed the strain in her face. 'Has your article been stopped?'

'I have stopped it myself for the moment. This isn't silence. It is time to investigate.'

By evening, a documented reply came from Delhi. The record of changes to the shared draft had been preserved, and a formal inquiry into the user's identity was under way. That was evidence of an internal incident at Revati's office, not a final conclusion about an international conspiracy.

Revati opened her old notebook. At the gathering in Patna, people from two neighbourhoods had arrived afraid of one another, but their faces were not all alike. In Brussels there were genuine recipients of relief, although the answers about certain expenses remained unclear. Both truths could exist in the same article. Erasing either could not be called a victory for journalism.

At eleven that night, an envelope arrived at the hotel's reception desk. There was no money inside, only the first page of the altered article. Across the top, in red letters, someone had written: 'Print it this way, and everything will be all right.' The receptionist could not say with certainty who had delivered it. Before touching the paper, Revati arranged for it to be recorded and preserved securely.

Her own name appeared at the bottom of the page, but the words were not hers. For the first time Revati understood that the threat might not merely be to prevent her article from appearing. Someone might try to publish a lie in her name.

CHAPTER 45

Rajgir's Silence

Morning in Rajgir was different from morning in Delhi. A light mist along the hills made the road seem narrower. Nilima had the car stopped some distance from the old training centre. The blue paint on its nameboard had faded to grey. Inside the gate stood a neem tree, with an abandoned bicycle stand beneath it.

Arunima Rao was in constant touch from Delhi. The competent local authority had explained the separate procedure for obtaining permission to examine the premises and its papers. A letter saying merely 'Rajgir, Old Training Centre' gave no legal right of entry. Nilima did not regard the delay as an obstruction.

Harihar Prasad, a local former employee, was seventy years old. He had once been an accounts assistant at the centre and now kept accounts for a nearby pharmacy. Nilima's first question was not about the building, but about the limits of his memory.

'When did your service end?'

'Five years ago. After that, I sometimes met old colleagues at the gate. I know nothing of what went on inside.'

'Have you heard the name Vivek Sood?'

Harihar looked at her carefully. 'A man by that name came twice to give training. But I cannot say for certain that he was the same man whose photograph I saw in the news.'

Nilima wrote down his statement before showing him the old picture. Sometimes showing a witness a photograph could change an older memory. Harihar's first, independent account had to be preserved.

Savita Devi, who kept a small shop beside the gate, was heating water on her stove. She said the centre had appeared closed for a long time, though once in a while a light could be seen at night along the back passage. Nilima asked, 'Did you see it with your own eyes?'

'Twice. But I don't know whether it came from inside the centre or from the house behind it.'

Nilima thought Savita's answer important: she was willing to admit uncertainty. A real witness's hesitation could sometimes be more trustworthy than an invented certainty.

A message from Arunima came on Nilima's phone. The first record concerning ownership of the property had been obtained, but there was a

difference between the centre's old contract and the right to look after it at present. The written-order procedure was under way with the competent authority. Since no immediate danger or emergency had been established, there had been no instruction to enter without an order.

Nilima took out the two pieces of the letter she had kept in the car. She did not spread them on the glass surface; she left them inside their protective sleeves. There was a faint blue line on the first piece and a line in nearly the same position on the second. Whether the papers had come from one bundle was for a specialist examination of the paper to determine. Nilima did not turn a resemblance observed with her eyes into the language of proof.

Harihar then mentioned something new about the old training lists. 'The outside instructors gave their names, but for some classes the attendance sheets were filled in afterwards. Why the institution did it that way, I don't know. I was only the accounts assistant.'

'Where are those registers?'

'When the office was moved, some went to the district storehouse; some remained here. If we look for the receipts, we may be able to find them.'

Nilima did not immediately take any private papers from him. She recorded a formal request for copies of the transfer receipts that could lawfully be made available. When the old registers were found, handwriting and dates could be compared; but the appearance of a name on a list would not by itself prove that the person had entered the premises.

At noon, Dhruv Narayan called Nilima. He had a question about the page from the old office in Delhi. 'The page that seems to be in Vivek's handwriting—does it have a different line in one corner?'

'Why do you ask?'

'In an old audit, some people used different copies of the same printed form. A line of a particular colour identified the version of the form, not the name of the person writing on it.'

Nilima fell silent for a moment. 'That needs to be confirmed. Is there an independent specimen of the form you saw?'

'I have a personal photograph of a copy. The original office records will have to be searched separately.'

'Keep the photograph safe. Don't conclude yet that the letter is Vivek's.'

After Dhruv's call ended, Nilima walked along the public path to look at the back of the centre. There were two plain rooms to the west of the building, with no board bearing the centre's old name. The sound of a sewing machine came from one of them. Nilima realised how easy it was to let suspicion enter the ordinary lives of other people. Questioning those occupants without a reason was no part of her plan.

Savita Devi came over with a glass of tea. 'Why does everyone who asks about this centre ask for one name?'

'Which name?'

Savita thought for a moment. 'I can't remember now. A man came two weeks ago. He also asked where the papers of the old training centre were kept.'

'Did you see his face?'

'He had a cap on in the afternoon sun. I saw his face, but I can't describe it well enough to risk having the wrong person caught.'

Nilima accepted the answer. The tea Savita had made was weak, but the question she had raised was weighty: was someone already following the trail of records at this closed centre?

By evening, the competent authority's written order had still not been completed. Nilima arranged for the local inspection team to record photographs of the outer boundary, with times and locations noted; nothing inside the gate was touched. An office employee might have access to an old key, but possession of a key and the right to enter were two different things.

As the sun was going down, the guard standing at the gate said, 'Madam, that lock wasn't there yesterday.'

Nilima looked towards the gate. Near the old hasp was a bright new iron padlock. There were fresh-looking scratches around it, but their age could not be established by sight.

'When was it put on?' Nilima asked.

'I've been on duty since morning. I'll have to look at the picture I took earlier today and see if the small lock shows in it. I can't say for certain.'

Nilima asked for the earlier photograph of the exterior. To establish whether the lock had already been there or had been added later, the image would be compared with the officer's daily record. If it was new, who had put it there, and on whose authority, would be separate questions.

Then Arunima called again. 'No entry into the premises at Rajgir yet. We'll complete the written process. And no public statement about Vivek's possible presence.'

'Yes,' Nilima said. 'But a new lock appears to be on the gate. And the old accounts assistant has given us a lead about a register.'

'Is there any danger to someone who might be held inside?'

'I have seen no immediate danger of that kind. But I don't know who is inside the building.'

The first lights of the night appeared beside the hills. Through the car window Nilima watched the gate of the old centre. The new padlock shone. She remembered something Vivek had once said: 'The document I find most convenient is the one whose evidence I must examine most carefully.'

At that moment, no sound came from within the gate. Silence could not be taken as proof of life, nor of death. Nilima wrote in her notebook: 'Condition inside unknown. Awaiting lawful inspection. Lock—possibly new; verification pending.'

As the car was turning back, Savita Devi was closing the door of her shop. Nilima looked behind her once. A little torn scrap of paper caught beside the lock moved in the breeze. She did not stop the car to decide whether to pick it up. She only had a photograph of the exterior preserved for the officer to examine.

Night settled over Rajgir beside that closed gate. Whether permission would come the next morning, and whom they might find inside if it did, were questions on the other side of the gate, where the law and silence were, for the moment, waiting for one another.

CHAPTER 46

The Old Training Centre at Rajgir

At dawn, the hills of Rajgir looked as though the night's mist had washed the colour from the stone. To Nilima, however, dawn was merely a time on the clock. She was studying yesterday's padlock in the photographs on her phone. One showed the right corner of the gate; another showed a new shadow falling across the same corner. The pictures had not been taken from precisely the same angle, so they could not establish when the lock had been put on.

Savita Devi was sweeping her courtyard before opening her shop. Nilima asked her, 'That torn piece of paper you saw yesterday—is it still near the gate?'

'The wind was strong this morning,' Savita said. 'I haven't picked it up. It didn't seem right to touch somebody else's paper without knowing what it was.'

Yesterday, Nilima would have found that an ordinary answer. Today it brought her a certain relief. Before a piece of paper left by someone else could become evidence, the questions of who had touched it and who had seen it were never small questions.

An officer from the district telephoned. Written authorisation had been granted to inspect the records. The precise objects covered by the authorisation, whose presence was required and what could lawfully be secured were read out separately. Arunima Rao was on her way in person. Nilima stopped the car outside the gate and took a copy of the order in her hand. Authority and curiosity were not the same word.

Two guards stood at the gate. The man in front pointed to an old loop of rope and said, 'I don't know whether anyone came inside during the night. I can tell you only what is entered in the duty register.'

'Is that register kept safely here?' Arunima asked as soon as she got out of the car.

'Yes, but the signature entry for the night shift is incomplete.'

Arunima did not immediately see a crime in that unfinished line. What troubled her was where the person who had been too frightened to sign his name might be now. She asked the guard only whether he had heard an unusual sound, a vehicle or a cry for help during the night. Instead of saying 'No', he said, 'I heard nothing of the kind.'

Before the lock was opened, the scratches in the fresh paint were photographed. A written record of the handover was prepared. Nilima still could not imagine seeing Vivek behind the door. She remembered the night the report of the accident had come to Delhi—a lively officer's name had suddenly become 'deceased' on a sheet of paper. At the memorial meeting that night, Nilima had laid down a flower. What frightened her most today was this: if that man was really found alive, whose death had been hidden behind that flower?

When permission to enter was given, the members of the team recorded their names and the times of their entry. Fine ash, almost like dust, lay on the floor; in the right-hand corner of one room were footprints that appeared relatively recent. The investigators did not immediately announce their measurements; first they secured the scene. From the rear corridor came a faint metallic clinking. It might have been a pipe, an open window or the movement of a person.

Nilima stopped dead. She wanted Arunima to speak first, but Arunima signalled for everyone to stay still. The sound came again. This time a weary voice could be heard: 'Is anybody there?'

'We are an inspection team accompanied by the local police,' Arunima said. 'Are you safe? Do you need medical attention?'

A very faint answer came from inside: 'Open the door first.'

The voice seemed familiar to Nilima. Rather than decide in her own mind whose voice it was, she stood holding her breath. A familiar voice could so often be a trick played by memory. Yet the silence within now seemed closer to certainty.

Behind the hills of Rajgir stood the disused old training centre. The investigation team had arrived there with the local police. There was a new lock on the main door, but signs of someone's presence had been found on the premises. Inside were electrical wires and record papers on an old table.

Vivek Sood had been staying there. He had grown thin, but he was alive. When Nilima saw him, the burn mark on his right hand was unmistakable. For a moment neither could speak.

'You were dead!' Nilima exclaimed.

'The body found after the accident was wrongly identified. At first I went into hiding; later I wanted to bring out the truth. But some innocent people could have been caught up in this crime. So I did not publicly name anyone directly.'

Arunima asked sternly, 'Why did you not inform the police of the mistaken identification? And the death certificate issued in your name will have to be investigated.'

Without making excuses, Vivek said, 'I ran away because I was afraid. I am ready to answer for that mistake.'

He opened a thick ledger. It contained three kinds of entries: transactions from actual games, claims for advertising expenses, and

suspicious connections with money from other crimes. He had marked many names in red, but there were question marks against some of them as well.

'At first I thought all the money belonged to one owner,' Vivek said. 'Now I understand that some criminal groups use the money routes of this gambling network, but the groups are not all a single organisation. Details of two payments connected with the drug trade are here; the actual connection will require separate seizures and witnesses to establish. There is also one proposed expenditure relating to the arms trade, but for now it is an unverified lead.'

'And the five per cent?'

'The supposed share of local cash managers and middlemen. Some papers say five per cent; elsewhere it is more or less. It would be wrong to apply a uniform percentage to the entire turnover.'

Nilima turned the page. It bore the date of Amresh's first loss. Beyond it was a reference to a Hong Kong expense statement. The journey of five hundred rupees had not followed a single straight line, yet at several points in the accounts the mark of the same control was beginning to appear.

Suddenly there was the sound of a vehicle stopping outside. The investigation team became alert. Two men outside the premises claimed to be employees of the electricity department, but there had been no official notice of their arrival. The local police stopped them for verification. On one man's phone they found a recent contact with an associate of Viraj Sahni.

Arunima said to Vivek, 'You will not hide now. You are a witness, and your mistake is also a matter for the law.'

For the first time, Vivek drew a breath of relief.

The investigators did not immediately stuff all the papers found inside into one bag. An old register lay on one table, Vivek's thick ledger on another, and a pile of blue printed forms beside the window. The position of each item was recorded separately. Vivek understood that his old habit of keeping papers in order would now raise questions for him.

Nilima went up to Vivek. 'You are alive,' she said a second time, with more disbelief than joy. 'For six months I went on working in the belief that a false report of death was true.'

Vivek lowered his eyes. 'Perhaps I no longer have the right even to ask for time.'

'You have the right to tell your story,' Arunima said. 'But first we must make sure your injury is treated and you are safe. After that, all statements must be taken according to law. The family that has been led by your silence to believe it has lost someone has rights too.'

Outside, the identities of the two men who had arrived in the name of the electricity department were being checked. Finding the number of Viraj Sahni's associate on a phone proved contact, nothing more. To call it an

instruction to commit a crime would be easy; to prove it would be difficult. Arunima authorised no immediate announcement of an arrest. The men's employment identities, any valid work order and the phone records became three separate matters for investigation.

Vivek's thumb strayed unconsciously over the burn mark on his right hand. Nilima kept looking at that hand. The mark was on a living body; it had not been on the death certificate.

'Come,' Arunima said softly. 'First let us find this living man a safe place. We shall not invent the dead person's name from the next piece of paper.'

Outside the gate Savita Devi asked, 'Did you find the person you were looking for?' Before answering, Nilima looked at Vivek. He made no attempt to hide his face behind a scarf or a sheet of paper.

'We found a person,' Nilima said. 'The questions that remain are grave.'

Without asking anything more, Savita took the water for tea off the stove. The hills of Rajgir were as still as before, but for the first time Nilima felt that behind news of a death, the hearts of living people went on beating.

CHAPTER 47

The Guilt of a Living Witness

Beyond the window of the temporary secure rest room, two neem leaves stirred again and again. Vivek Sood picked up his cup of tea three times and put it down each time without drinking. The doctor had recorded the condition of his injury. Being in a safe place diminished his physical fear, but made his fear of responsibility all the clearer.

Before putting her questions, Arunima explained the written procedure. Vivek's statement, the questions that might arise against him and the separate investigation into the identification of the dead body must not be rolled into one. Vivek was an experienced former officer; he ought not to have needed a reminder of such a basic distinction in law. But six months of fear can distance a man even from his own experience.

'Tell me about the first day,' Arunima said. 'Not about the papers. About the day you heard of your own death.'

Vivek looked at the mark on his right hand. 'I was not at the accident site where the police later said the body was found. Let me make that distinction clear at the outset. That day I was travelling north. My car was stopped on the road. There was pushing and a scuffle, and my hand was burned by fire. But I have no evidence that anyone attempted to kill me. I fled.'

'You were injured, yet you did not go to a hospital?'

'I went to a small dispensary. I did not give my real name. I left the car behind. In the morning I heard the news that Vivek Sood had died. At first I thought it was a misunderstanding. Then I was frightened that if I returned, other people would lose their lives because of what I had seen.'

'Why did you take it upon yourself to decide how to save other people's lives? Did you inform anyone—the police, your family, the court?'

'No.' Vivek's throat tightened. 'That "no" is my greatest mistake.'

Nilima stared at the wall. She remembered so many earlier meetings in which Vivek had insisted on keeping different categories of evidence apart. The man who used to explain the limits of evidence had concealed the fact that he was alive. That day Nilima saw that intellectual honesty and moral honesty in a moment of fear were not necessarily the same thing.

'On what basis was the wrong identification made?' Nilima asked.

'I read in the newspaper that a watch and an identity card had been found. Both were mine, but I do not know how they came to be beside the

body. Before the journey, the papers and my old watch had been left in the car. I am telling you this now for the first time; it ought to be confirmed by independent records.'

Arunima wrote his words down exactly. The claim that the objects had been left in the car was Vivek's account, not a finding verified by the police. The original medical details of the reported death and the procedure used for identification were being requested.

'Your family?' Arunima asked.

Vivek drew breath twice. 'My wife began living separately long ago. My daughter is abroad. I did not telephone them. I thought my silence would protect them. Instead I imposed the burden of grief on them.'

'And the body registered under the name of Vivek Sood?'

At that question Vivek went completely still. 'That person's family may still be waiting for him.'

'Possibly,' Nilima said. 'We do not yet know who he was. We shall not give any family wrong news a second time. We may need to consider lawfully held older records, dental records, biological tests or comparisons with relatives to establish identity. First we must determine the proper scope of the investigation.'

Vivek wiped his eyes. 'I am at fault for not reporting that I had been declared dead. But please do not assume that I caused the death of the person whose body was found. Those two accusations require separate evidence.'

'We shall preserve that distinction,' Arunima said. 'And if your silence has caused an unjust decision, we shall not turn away from that either.'

A nurse left some medicine beside the window. Vivek's hand trembled again. That trembling held more than a fear of prison. It held a fear of the people who had already written tributes in his name.

In the afternoon a copy of Dhruv Narayan's old photographic form reached the investigation team. There was a blue line at one corner of the paper. Vivek recognised the form as soon as he saw it. 'We used a version in this colour in the department.'

'Then you wrote the letter?' Nilima asked.

'Some of the words in the first letter may be mine, but the colour of the paper does not prove it. I wrote many pages; many people wrote on those printed forms. I am trying to remember whether I told anyone the address in Rajgir.'

The answer did not satisfy Nilima. Yet such uncertainty was better than a manufactured certainty in response to a question. She thought that Vivek's honest admission could not wipe away the guilt born of his earlier fear. Rebuilding trust meant testing everything he said.

Before evening, the team requested the status of the available records concerning the body in the old accident case. The hospital replied that some samples had been formally preserved, but the official inventory and history of their transfer still had to be examined. It was necessary to

determine how heavily the initial identification had relied upon personal objects. Nobody supplied the name of a newly identified dead person over the telephone.

A notebook was placed before Vivek so that, if he wished, he could write down the date and main points of his oral account himself. He wrote: 'I am alive. This truth is no substitute for anyone else's death. I kept silent because I was afraid.'

At that moment a message came from the reception desk of the secure centre. Two women were standing at the door—one elderly, the other about thirty. They had brought a newspaper cutting about the old accident. The older woman said that her son had not returned home since that week, and that the declaration of death based on an identity card had never convinced her.

An officer immediately told Nilima, 'We shall verify who they are, but there must be no new announcement yet about Vivek or the dead body.'

From the fold of her scarf, the elderly woman took out a copy of an old photograph. 'This man's name is Shailesh,' she said. 'I have not come to demand punishment for anyone. I have only come to find out where my son is.'

Vivek heard her voice from inside. He tried to get up, but Nilima asked him to remain seated. There were two possibilities before them: Shailesh might have been the person who died in that accident, or something else might have happened. Either possibility called for an examination of the facts. Vivek felt it would be an insult to describe the waiting in the old woman's eyes merely as the mystery of a story.

He pushed away his unfinished cup of tea. For the first time he asked the question he had forgotten while worrying about his own safety: 'What can I do now to help her?'

'First tell the truth about what you actually know,' Arunima replied. 'Do not imagine things about Shailesh. And do not retreat from your own responsibility.

CHAPTER 48

The Original Ledger and the Copy

On the table in the Delhi office lay three objects: Vivek's thick original ledger, an earlier photographic copy of it, and a certified copy of records obtained lawfully from the bank. Nilima looked at the three as though three witnesses sat before her, each speaking a different language. The ledger held the writer's memory; the photograph was a map of that memory; the bank records provided independent information about transactions. Even if the three accounts agreed, a conclusion would not follow automatically.

The ledger had arrived from Rajgir in a sealed cover. The signatures recording its receipt, transfer, the authority to open it and each stage of making an image copy were kept separately. Nilima hesitated for a moment as she opened its pages. These lines of lifeless accounts touched questions concerning so many human lives. She remembered some entries she had seen before Vivek disappeared, but she did not begin by giving in to the temptation to make figures fit her memory.

On the next page were the small words 'Service 5'. Beside them stood three different percentages, including five, three and a half, and two. She remembered Vivek's earlier statement: five per cent did not apply everywhere. Nilima did not pick up her red pencil. First she entered the date, payer, recipient and written description of the service in separate columns of a table.

Meghna Sen joined by a secure connection from Hong Kong. 'The service name in your ledger resembles one on an old consultancy invoice I have seen,' she said. 'But I cannot say that the recipient on my invoice and the beneficiary in your entry are the same person. Even the Devanagari transliterations of the names differ.'

'What would let us say so with certainty?' Nilima asked.

'The original contract, confirmation from whoever issued the invoice, and the bank's actual record of receipt. If these three disagree, that disagreement becomes a new question in its own right. I shall send a written account of the limits of what I have seen.'

After ending the call, Nilima looked for the date of Amresh's first loss. In the ledger there was a small mark and a reference to five hundred rupees. The bank records showed several payments of that amount on the same day. Without independent details from Amresh's phone, it would be risky to call

one line in the ledger his personal wager. Nilima kept the date of his statement and the preserved phone record together, but separately marked the next procedure needed for a final match.

Rani's voice came over the phone from Darbhanga. 'Is my account working again, or has it been closed?'

'Unauthorised activity in your name is under investigation,' Nilima said. 'You ought to receive the bank's answer in writing. I cannot order the bank to act from here.'

'And my shop?'

For a moment Nilima looked up from the papers. To the person whose name occupies the smallest box in an official table, the shop's next working day is an enormous question. 'Keep separate records of the sales actually received into your account. Work with your lawyer and an authorised bank officer to find the lawful means of assistance. I can make verified documents available.'

'I don't want to be tempted by another five thousand rupees,' Rani said. 'I only want the money I earned by selling water and tea.'

Nilima wrote in her notes: 'Actual ownership of an account involves not only a signature but also effective control.' It was her personal observation, not a legal conclusion.

Arunima came into the meeting. 'Shailesh's family's statement has been recorded. His old missing-person report has been found. But we are not going to write anywhere yet that Shailesh was the dead man.'

Nilima agreed. 'Nor shall I strike out any names in this ledger. The question marks will remain question marks.'

She brought forward a page of the original ledger. The first figure matched the bank statement. The second was the same amount, but the transaction date was a day later. The letters where a third name ought to have been had been crossed out. The crossed-out letters were less visible in the photograph; the indentations were clearer on the original page. Without an expert examination, Nilima did not claim to read a name beneath those marks.

'Was the photograph made before the original was altered, or afterwards?' Arunima asked.

'To answer that we shall have to examine separate digital records and the paper's history of preservation,' Nilima said. 'The sender's account is one source. The original file on the phone, its time data and the chain by which it was received are another.'

An employee came in. A second letter from the bank had arrived, showing matching transaction times for four different recipient accounts. The details for the third account were incomplete. Nilima drew no red circle on the paper. The missing details would have to be awaited; colouring in the empty space of incomplete evidence was not justice.

In the evening Vivek telephoned from the secure centre. 'There are some headings in the ledger that I myself no longer regard as reliable,' he admitted. 'Once I received a photograph of a seizure inventory. I copied two names from it. But I do not know whether that image was of the original or a cropped copy.'

'Where did you get the photograph?'

'An anonymous message. The file may still be on my old device. I shall not touch it. I shall hand it over when the proper procedure has been completed.'

'Good,' Nilima replied. 'And we shall not call all the sums in those papers criminal proceeds from a single source at this stage.'

Vivek was silent. Then he said, 'If I had exercised this caution before, perhaps six months of fear would not have cast such a shadow over so many lives.'

'You will have to say that yourself before the court and the people concerned,' Nilima said. 'I will not allow your remorse to take the place of evidence.'

At the beginning of the night Nilima made one last examination of the comparison sheet for the three sources. Among a dozen entries were some matches, some discrepancies and some blank spaces. To someone glancing over the sheet, everything might look like one vast network. But Nilima knew that truth sometimes demanded the courage to leave a blank space blank.

Then, as a fold in the back of the ledger was opened, two lines of amounts came into view. Their heading was 'Narcotic substances'. Beneath it were some figures in different handwriting and against different dates. It was not yet clear whether Vivek had written the heading himself or copied it from a document sent by someone else. Neither of the two amounts could be matched directly to a payment in the bank information first received.

Arunima looked at the page. 'This could become an allegation of a new offence. At present these are only written words.'

'And two amounts,' Nilima said. 'Without verified goods, recipients, a seizure or witnesses, we shall not invent a prosecution on the strength of the heading.'

Light from the Delhi night fell through the room's window. Outside, thousands of people were busy with their own lives. Those two lines in the ledger could ruin someone's life if published without verification. That fear did not make Nilima close the page. She had its image preserved by lawful procedure and wrote beside the question: 'Connection not yet established.'

The three objects were placed once more upon the table—the original, the copy and the bank's account. Between them a fourth place remained open: for the testimony of the person whose name had not yet appeared in any of the lines.

CHAPTER 49

A Voice That Escaped

Morning came so quietly to the shelter in Macau that Mira noticed the drops of water on the windowpane before she noticed the street. A light breeze rose from the sea, and she counted the clothes in her small bag. Every day she tried to close the bag; but the thought of going home brought back the red-thread bracelet Sujata had worn. She was not staying here against her will. A way of leaving was open to her. What was difficult was knowing how many questions would remain unanswered if she chose to go.

Ana Fernandes gave her a sheet of paper. It set out three options clearly: give a statement to the local authorities, provide only limited information, or decline to give a statement for the time being. 'You have the right to remain safe whichever you choose,' Ana said. 'Do not say anything merely to please me or Joana.' Mira read carefully. In the hotel, the papers placed before her had provided no options, only a blank space for her signature.

'I don't want my name made public,' Mira said. 'People in the village will question my mother. Even Sujata's name isn't certain. But if no one hears me, the people who told me I could never get out of that place will have won.'

Ana did not even touch the edge of the paper. 'Your account belongs to you first. If we put it on paper, you must understand how it may be used and its limits. If you cannot remember something, say you cannot remember. If a date is an estimate, we shall record it as an estimate.'

Mira made a small mark on the sheet. It was consent, not surrender. Daylight was spreading outside. She thought that this one little mark gave her more freedom than all the papers of her first journey abroad.

In Joana Lou's office stood a clock whose hands seemed to move far too quickly for Mira. The officer's first question was, 'Who offered you the job? Did you see any papers?' Mira said that a telephone call had come to her home; she had been told the work involved organising events, and promised a regular salary after a few days' training. She had a copy of an appointment letter, but her original travel identity documents had been taken on the first night after she arrived at the hotel.

'Did someone snatch them by force?' Joana asked. Mira raised her head. 'They told me the documents would be kept in a safe cupboard in the office.

When I asked for them back, they said I must repay a debt first. No one would put in writing when the debt arose or what it was for.'

This time Mira did not break down in tears. Her voice was flat. That composure, too, was an effect of fear: before, panic had made her lose her words; now she was choosing them. Some scenes were sharply illuminated in her mind, others blurred. When Joana wrote 'three days later', Mira stopped her. 'Not exactly three days. It was the day of the festival of the moon, and that's why I tried to telephone home. I can ask my family for the date.' The words were struck out and the correction entered.

During the statement, they came to Sujata. Mira described the young woman's face, her red-thread bracelet and the last glimpse of her in the corridor behind the hotel. 'She told me her name herself. But I did not see her passport.' Mira knew such an admission would not give the officer a complete story. For the first time, however, she was under no obligation to complete it with guesses.

Reshma Gurung's independent account was due the next day. For now, Reshma was not shown Mira's statement. It was only when different people recalled the same thing independently that the agreement would have significance. Samir Bose was sitting in another room. He had become someone Mira trusted, but his role did not replace an interpreter or an official's decision. Even the protection he could offer Mira had limits set down in writing.

At lunchtime the smell of adauri—sun-dried lentil dumplings—came back to Mira. Her mother used to dry them in the sun at this time of year. She asked Ana, 'Will I be able to go home after giving evidence?' Ana replied, 'I can explain the practical arrangements that would have to be made for you to return. No court will answer every question about your life at once. But the decision will be yours.'

'And Sujata?'

'The responsibility for finding her belongs to other officers. You cannot put your own life on hold indefinitely in order to save her.'

Mira fell silent at that. In the weeks before, she had felt that going back to her village herself would mean abandoning Sujata. Today, for the first time, she understood that helping someone and ruining her own life were not the same thing. She telephoned her mother. Her mother first asked about the weather and then said, 'I've swept your room.' Mira smiled. At that moment the window of the shelter seemed like the veranda of her own home.

In the evening Joana received Reshma's separate account. Both statements mentioned the red bracelet, but differed by two days over the time. A copy of the transport register indicated yet another date. The officers agreed that these differences must be preserved as they stood. The bracelet, the memories and the register did not establish where Sujata was now.

In Delhi, Arunima Rao was informed that only an essential evidentiary summary of Mira's statement would reach her through authorised channels. Mira's original personal details were not circulated generally. Arunima told her colleague, 'If we are to examine a connection between gambling money and this employment exploitation, we first need separate financial records. Until we have them, do not turn the victims of two crimes into decoration for a single prosecution.'

In the Delhi office, Nilima set aside photographs of the two lines in the original Rajgir ledger headed 'Narcotic substances'. Mira's statement did not mention any such goods. Nilima sent her no questions designed to fill that absence. The events the woman had endured were grave enough in themselves. Steering questions to make her a witness to a crime she did not know about would not be an investigation.

In Macau, Ana was filling in the night register when a newly appointed colleague brought her a sealed envelope. The envelope bore the shelter's official address. Inside were a printed photograph and two lines of writing: 'If Mira speaks, everyone will know her home address.' The photograph showed Ana herself outside a public building the previous week.

Ana first looked towards the window. Ordinary people were walking along the street. The photograph might have been taken in a public place; the written threat gave it a criminal significance. She did not immediately show the letter to Mira. She had the incident recorded, requested protective measures, and noted separately the time when the envelope was received.

Mira was asleep in her room. For the first time in many days, she dreamt that she was on a train with green fields beyond the window. In the dream she did not have to ask anyone for her passport. In the morning she would be told that someone helping her had received a threat. But for that night, at least, her sleep belonged to her.

CHAPTER 50

A Name Sold, Evidence Preserved

In Delhi, before the morning meeting began, a page turned over in a thick file. Arunima picked it up. Four separate bundles of papers lay on the table —banking and payments, employment and human trafficking, suspicious commercial invoices, and the financing of public promotions. In a fifth, empty space she placed one sheet headed 'Unconfirmed connections'. That blank sheet made some of the officers uncomfortable. They were in a hurry to display a complete map of the investigation.

'Won't so much caution hold up a decision?' a senior colleague asked. Arunima invited him to sit at the table rather than stand by the window. 'A wrong decision is a decision too. We saw in the Rajgir case how many lives it can take to correct one.'

Nilima had been awake all night. Vivek Sood's original ledger, its image and the bank information were all in the same room, but their separate origins were recorded on separate papers. 'A matching sum and proof of particular goods are different things,' she said while preparing for the meeting. 'We have found no independent evidence of a recipient or seizure of goods for the two entries about narcotics. Today we shall present them as questions, not assertions.'

The officer dealing with human trafficking read a copy of the limited evidentiary summary of Mira's statement. The woman who had given evidence had asked to keep her identity confidential. 'We will not put Mira's name on the office's shared presentation,' the officer said. 'Give her justice, but no one has the right to make her private life public.'

Revati was waiting outside the meeting. All she had been told was that the investigating institutions were cooperating. No private passages from the documents had been given to her. As a journalist she wanted news; after the mistaken identification of Vivek's death, she had learnt that one prematurely certain headline could remain a source of grief in someone's home for years.

Rani had caught a bus from Darbhanga and arrived that morning. In her small bag she carried the accounts of the tea shop, papers from the day of Amresh's first game and old bank receipts, each wrapped separately in cloth. Her main question was very simple: while the investigation continued, where should she put the money from the shop's next day's sales? The question appeared on no departmental noticeboard.

The coordinated investigation meeting in Delhi was attended by officers from different departments: a bank compliance specialist, the cybercrime branch, money-laundering investigators and specialists dealing with human trafficking. Each had a piece of the picture. It was necessary to put the pieces together, but even more necessary to resist the temptation to turn them all into one story.

At the beginning of the meeting Arunima said, 'We are not composing a newspaper headline today. What is proved will have its own place, what is suspected another, and there will be a place for what we do not understand at all.'

Mira's statement had been taken according to law. The young woman, who had been placed somewhere safe by local support workers, did not want her identity made public. An appointment letter, a complaint that her passport had been taken and a second young woman's independent account supported one another. Whether gambling money had reached that place, however, was a separate question of proof.

The name of one company matched a name on the seizure inventory of an older drug-trafficking case. There was also a suspicious invoice in an arms case, but its authenticity had yet to be tested. Nobody at the meeting said, 'All the mafias operate the same gambling website.'

Nilima laid out the latest details of Rani's account. The bank's internal inquiry had found that a local agent had obtained control over accounts in some people's names by giving false information. There had been negligence by certain bank employees; the suspicion that two individuals had knowingly assisted was strong. This was not a finding of fault against the entire banking system.

Rani was called in. Showing the thumb of her right hand, she said, 'I cannot read the papers. Amresh's friend said I would get five thousand rupees if I opened an account. To me those five thousand rupees meant three months' rent.'

Nilima said, 'Your statement is extremely important. But it would be wrong to assume that you knowingly consented to every offence involving the money that moved afterwards.'

Rani fell silent. Then she said, 'My son lost money at gambling; Shivshankar Babu lost his savings to fraud. But the people who got the five per cent live in big houses. Let the law go to them first.'

As the meeting was coming to an end, an original agreement bearing a five-per-cent stamp was presented. It was signed by an assistant to Viraj Sahni. Previously it had been disguised as a supposed 'transaction facilitation fee'. Beside the agreement were evidence of the different kinds of sums routed through the account and statements from relevant witnesses.

At last, names were beginning to appear behind the money.

After the original agreement was produced, everyone's gaze settled on one signature. Arunima authorised no announcement to the press. She

asked the officer who had brought the agreement which office it had come from, when it had been seized, and whether the pages of the original corresponded to those of the copy. The answers were recorded; verification of one signature remained outstanding.

'It says five per cent,' one officer said. 'Is that on the entire amount deposited?'

Nilima opened her earlier calculations. 'This paper refers to a separate schedule for the basis of the fee. That schedule is not available in full. If money has repeatedly been deposited, withdrawn and redeposited through the bank, we cannot call the whole amount one month's revenue without distinguishing those transactions. We still have to establish who actually paid the five per cent to whom, for which service and how many times.'

An inventory of seizures from an older narcotics case was also placed before the meeting. The company's name matched, but its registration number and the description of the goods were incomplete. A supposed arms invoice bore a clerk's name in different handwriting, but the original document was missing. Arunima had the two copies marked separately. 'Do not take a matching name for a matching offence. When something is proved to be true, only then shall we write it as such.'

When Rani had finished giving her statement, someone brought her water. Her hands were still trembling. Every employee in the building had an identity card; Rani, too, had a bank letter bearing her name, but she did not know where else that name had been used. The greatest question in her life was not who headed a worldwide criminal empire. It was whether, if she sold tea tomorrow, she would receive the money.

Arunima said, 'Your statement has opened some paths for investigation. The bank will follow its regular grievance procedure; any necessary orders and legal assistance will be considered separately. I cannot promise that every restriction on your accounts will be lifted at once.' Rani grew serious. 'It is good that you don't give me false hope. But make sure the truth reaches the bank.'

In the evening Nilima received a short message from Meghna in Hong Kong. A term for a service in the agreement also appeared on a foreign consultancy invoice, but the addresses of the two recipients were different. Meghna wrote: 'Not a confirmed match; comparison only.' Arunima filed a copy of the message in the evidence register together with its limitations. Such caution gave offenders the chance to complain of delays in the investigation; but removing the caution would also close a path of defence to the innocent.

At the end of the meeting, Rani's bag was left on a low table. An employee returned it to her. Rani opened it and looked inside: the bank receipts, her shop's notebook of credit sales, and Amresh's record of his first game wrapped in red cloth. She closed the bag without a word.

As she stepped outside, a news reporter asked, 'Has the owner of the gambling operation's five per cent been caught?' Rani gave no answer. Revati watched the scene from a distance. She did not put the reporter's question in her article; she wrote that an original agreement had been presented to investigators and that its interpretation and verification remained separate stages. It was a less dazzling headline, but Rani, back in her own home, would understand its value.

Late at night, a letter from Jayant Sinha's bank branch was sent to Rani. It said that the question of restricted transactions would remain under investigation and that, regarding ordinary livelihood earnings, she should come to the branch with supporting documents. The letter contained several dates. Rani could not read it by the light of her phone.

Amresh said over the telephone, 'Ma, I shall go to the bank with you tomorrow.' Rani replied, 'Tomorrow I shall open the shop first. The account is blocked, not our bread.' After those words, there was a long silence at both ends of the line.

CHAPTER 51

Five People at the Bank

When the morning train crossed the bridge in Darbhanga, the tin roof of Rani Devi's shop trembled again. There were biscuits in the jars, but only half as many as before. The water for tea took longer to boil today. Rani lifted the lid of the big iron vessel as though she might read the letters in the bank's papers in its steam. Amresh had been awake all night. Again and again he read the last line of the letter: 'Subject to examination according to law.'

'What does that line mean?' Rani asked.

'It doesn't say you are guilty,' Amresh replied. 'It says the bank has not yet reached a decision about some transactions.'

'Then where will the money go from the tea I actually sell?'

The letter did not answer that question. Amresh remembered the day of his five-hundred-rupee game. That day he had believed that if the figures for money changed, the shortage in their home would change too. Now he understood that when a number entered the wrong bank ledger, a bridge could break between the lives of a tea-shop owner, a neighbour who washed clothes, and a small trader.

After opening the shop, the two of them went to the branch. Four people were already standing in the queue outside. When Rani stood behind them, there were five. A rickshaw driver had brought a letter asking to withdraw his daily earnings, an elderly woman had come to understand a pension notice, a woman had a dispute over payment for some small sewing work, a young man wanted to report unusual activity on his account, and Rani had come for what remained of her tea shop's livelihood. All five faces were different; at the bank door it would have been easy to hand each of them a paper headed 'Problem'.

The branch manager, Jayant Sinha, looked particularly tired that day. Notices connected with the investigation had been arriving repeatedly over the previous month. He recognised Rani but did not discuss her account details in front of everyone. 'Come and sit in a separate room,' he said. Amresh tried to go inside, but the manager asked Rani, 'Do you give your son permission to be present?' Rani said yes. It was a small question, yet for the first time in the bank she felt that her wishes mattered as much as a piece of paper.

On the table Rani opened an old notebook. Written in her hand were the figures: Monday, 480; Tuesday, 320; Wednesday, 560. 'This is all from selling tea and biscuits,' she said. 'The lakhs that come and go in those accounts are not from my shop. I sell biscuits, not lakhs of rupees.'

Jayant asked Rani's permission before drawing the notebook towards him. 'It will be useful to keep these sales records separately,' he said. 'But the notebook alone cannot prove or disprove who controlled the earlier unauthorised transactions on the account. For that we need to examine the branch's device records, earlier authorisations and the statements of other customers.'

'I cannot read the papers,' Rani said, 'but Amresh can tell you when I sold tea. I have named the man who spoke of giving me five thousand rupees ever since that day. Have you questioned him yet?'

The manager was silent for a moment. Then he answered directly. 'The internal inquiry follows a separate procedure. I cannot tell you here every detail of who has been questioned or what was asked. But I shall give you in writing the receipt number for your complaint, the date by which you should get the next answer, and the name of the authorised officer concerned.'

Amresh reached for his phone. Jayant stopped him. 'No photographs of another customer's details in this room.' Amresh put the phone away. Once, when he played the gambling game, he had looked at the screen and thought everything shown there must be clear fact. This time, turning off a screen helped to protect the truth.

Outside in the courtyard, the woman waiting about her sewing payment had a separate dispute. Her account was not linked to the suspicious account, but a rumour had spread that money in every small account at the branch would be stopped. Jayant instructed his staff to explain clearly that an order applying to an individual and ordinary banking services were different things. The smoke of distrust was spreading through the branch faster than money.

As Rani was leaving, a young man stood nearby. He had previously been seen asking questions about her account. Smiling, he said, 'Auntie, why run about so much? We can arrange everything for you. Just give me a copy of the letter you received.'

'Who sent you?' Amresh asked.

'I help people,' the young man said. 'Everything will be all right in five days.' He showed no identification. The man promising an immediate solution did not even know the exact nature of the problem. Rani put the letter back in her bag. 'I shall give my papers to someone authorised at the bank. Not to a stranger on the market road.' The young man stopped smiling and disappeared into the crowd.

At midday Nilima received an official copy of the branch's written notice. It acknowledged Rani's complaint, but the question of how the old

account had actually been used remained open. Nilima told Arunima, 'We might call this case the broken bridge of payments: on one side the victim's livelihood, on the other the possible movement of criminal funds. But we must not treat both as grounds for the same restriction.'

Arunima replied, 'It may be a fine phrase, but the order must be clear. If transactions on an account are restricted for specific reasons, those reasons, the duration, the review process and the route for complaint must be explicit. Otherwise an innocent person's livelihood can be destroyed in the name of investigation.'

By the time Rani returned to the shop, the sun was going down. Amresh had washed the tea cups. When he saw his mother he said, 'We sold three hundred and twenty rupees' worth today. I've written it in the notebook.' Rani smiled. Among all the evidence, this little truth was the easiest to understand.

As they were closing the shop that night, a postman brought an old envelope. Rani's name was written correctly on it, but two letters of the address were wrong. Inside was a letter: 'If you name certain people at the bank, the figures in your shop's accounts will change.' With it was a photograph of the sales register from four days earlier.

Amresh shuddered when he saw the image. The written threat was new, but the photograph was of a notebook kept only in the shop. Rani did not snatch the letter from his hand. 'Whoever knows exactly when and how much tea I sold isn't sitting only across a distant sea,' she said.

Amresh did not turn the letter over and over in his hands. He recorded the stated time, the postal mark and the circumstances in which it had been received, and sought a way to make an authorised complaint. He had no wish to put on a spectacle before the neighbours at his mother's expense.

Rani put out the stove. The last train of the night roared across the bridge. The jars in the shop trembled again, but this time Rani did not reach out to steady them. She was looking at the photograph inside the envelope. The criminals knew not only her bank account but the pattern of her daily life, and that fact appeared in no calculation of five per cent.

CHAPTER 52

The Name of an Unknown Body

After the first drops of rain fell in Delhi, water had collected on the steps of the government building. As Vivek Sood climbed them, he listened to the sound of his shoes. A few weeks earlier he had been worried about escaping the news of his own death; today he was summoning the courage to ask the name of the other person buried in that news. On a board to the right of the steps were the words: 'Visitors are requested to wait.' Vivek's eyes rested on the word 'wait'.

Arunima Rao did not leave him standing in reception. Separate arrangements had been made for a meeting with the independent officer investigating the identification of the body, the records custodian and the family's representatives. Vivek was told clearly that he was a witness, not the person who would decide the identification. His own memory of the accident could be heard; but it could not be concluded merely from the fact that the body was not his that it must be Shailesh's.

The elderly woman sat holding a carefully folded cloth. Inside it were an image of Shailesh's old work identity card, two pages of a ledger and a school group photograph. The younger woman accompanying her introduced herself as Shailesh's younger sister, Gauri. 'When my brother left home, he told Ma he'd be back in two days,' Gauri said. 'Those two days have now grown longer than six months.'

Bhuvaneshwari Devi, Shailesh's mother, said nothing. Her eyes were on the door, as if Shailesh might come in behind the next person entering the room. Vivek moved his chair a little farther back. The old woman looked towards him. 'You are alive?' There was no accusation in the question; it held both the disappointment of that moment and an uncertain hope.

'Yes,' Vivek said quietly. 'And my silence is responsible for the delay in your hearing that I am alive. But I shall not claim to know what I do not know about your son.'

Arunima indicated the three bundles on the table. The first contained the preliminary description of the accident; the second, an inventory of the available medical material relating to the body; the third, old documents supplied by the family. 'Not every link in any of these is complete yet,' she said. 'The identification made at the time of the accident depended on an article and the accounts of two people. We need to examine again whether an independent identification of the body was verified accordingly.'

Gauri's face flushed. 'If a mistake was made, who issued the wrong certificate?'

'That question needs a separate answer,' Arunima said. 'First we must establish who the person was. Then we shall examine which officer possessed which information, at what time, and why that conclusion was reached. Responsibility cannot be decided merely by noticing that a mistake occurred.'

Bhuvaneshwari Devi spoke up. 'I don't want papers. I want my son's name.' In the silence that followed, Vivek remembered, one by one, all the decisions he had made during those six months. No line written by an official could replace that sentence for a mother.

The doctor examining the identification of the body explained by telephone that a comparison would be possible if dental records became available. A lawful comparison of biological samples was also proposed, but would require the family's informed consent, an intact chain of custody for the samples, and the proper institutional authorisation. 'I shall not write down anyone's name yet,' the doctor said. 'If the evidence is insufficient, I shall record in my report why a conclusion cannot be reached.'

After the meeting, Nilima came up to Vivek in the corridor. 'It was necessary for you to come here,' she said. 'But coming here does not complete your atonement.' Vivek did not protest. For the first time he realised how convenient guilt could be during a criminal investigation: a person could become so absorbed in his own suffering that he escaped the effort of listening to another person's real pain.

Later in the day, a government records clerk brought an old statement. Showing the heading first, he said, 'This contains a claim of employment, not confirmation of employment.' The list described a person named Shailesh as a temporary accounts assistant. The company's name resembled that of a firm providing export-related services, one of whose invoices was already recorded in Aditi Rane's investigation. But the staff list bore no authenticated company seal; its source was an unidentified copy.

Reading the writing on the paper, Gauri suddenly said, 'My brother told us at home that he was going to Delhi for a few days' training connected with business in Surat. But he didn't tell us this company's name then.' Bhuvaneshwari Devi stopped her. 'Say only what you remember. Do not put a name you have just heard into what you said in the past.' Arunima looked at the old woman. The least educated woman in the room had just stated the strictest rule of evidence of the day.

Nilima had a copy of the staff list entered in her investigation register with a mark indicating uncertainty about its source. A payment document dated two days after the date beside Shailesh's name on the list had been found in a Mumbai file. Even that match was not complete. The name might be common; the address was incomplete; the image of the signature

was unclear. She wrote: 'Possible connection; identity of person and confirmation of employment outstanding.'

As evening fell, the family's papers were returned to Gauri with a receipt. Folding her cloth, Bhuvaneshwari Devi asked, 'Will you announce the new name you found today in tomorrow's news?' Arunima said, 'No. You will be informed properly first. Someone in another home might also receive wrong information, and that is why caution is necessary.'

Outside, the rain had stopped. Going down the steps, Vivek saw Bhuvaneshwari Devi making room for Gauri beneath her umbrella first. The umbrella was small; both were getting wet. Vivek stepped forward and asked permission to hold it up. The old woman looked at him for a moment, then silently handed him the handle. It was not forgiveness. It was simply permission to walk a little way together through the rain.

That night, a message reached Nilima's secure register: the digital copy of the staff list received from the office had been created after the accident. The paper bore an old date, but the file had been made later. Nilima added a new line to the evidence summary: 'Newly created copy of an earlier event; original office register must be found.' The name remained unknown, but the possibility that someone was rewriting the past of a dead person now required investigation.

CHAPTER 53

The Trap of Numbers

Four coloured pencils lay on Nilima's desk, but today she was writing only in black ink. She had been reminded again and again that giving figures different colours did not make the truth clearer. Before her was an image of a publicity sheet: 'One platform in India—two thousand crore a month.' Behind the figure there was no certified audit, only a printed headline and two torn pages of an anonymous presentation.

A new officer was enthusiastic at the investigation meeting. 'If twenty lakh players each put in five thousand rupees, then...' He began calculating. Nilima stopped him. 'Which record gave you twenty lakh? Active accounts, downloads, people who saw an advertisement, or people who deposited money? And is five thousand per person really a fresh deposit, or the total value of repeated play with the same money?' The officer's notebook remained open. His arithmetic was not wrong; there was no evidence for the premise on which he had begun.

From the other side of the table, Meghna Sen joined on a secure telephone connection. An audit in Hong Kong had revealed some service-expense entries. 'If you add all deposits and withdrawals here, and then add the service payments I have here as well, you may count parts of the same financial flow twice,' she said. 'My documents are evidence of separate service agreements, not an account of the Indian platform's entire turnover.'

Nilima wrote an imaginary example on a plain sheet of paper. A player deposits five hundred rupees. He wagers the five hundred. His account balance then becomes three hundred and twenty. He uses three hundred of that balance to play again and withdraws twenty rupees. 'In this example, the new money coming in from outside is five hundred,' Nilima said. 'The total wagers are eight hundred; the withdrawal is twenty. But those four numbers alone cannot tell us the platform's net profit or its criminal proceeds. We also need the charges, the balances after wins and losses, the other transactions and the accounting period.'

Vivek Sood was studying the example. 'My notebook may contain exactly this mistake,' he said. 'I recorded receipts and transfers on different days. I did not mark the second journey of the same money.' Nilima looked at him. For the first time, his admission revealed not only fear but a specific

error in calculation. To establish that error, the original bank evidence for each entry would be needed.

The bank representative raised a separate question. 'One account may merely be a channel; another person may be the true beneficiary. Calling something a mule account does not prove that the account holder knowingly consented. Some accounts were taken over by deception, some were rented out, and some operated with the help of employees. Those three situations require different evidence.'

Arunima had read a copy of Rani's bank letter the previous day. 'And the sales at Rani's tea shop?' she asked. The officer replied, 'Those ordinary earnings will remain in a separate category. A restriction on suspicious transactions cannot be treated as a reason to close all her lawful business indefinitely.' At the corner of her page Nilima wrote: 'A human livelihood = the ethical limit of an investigation.'

Meanwhile, in Darbhanga, Amresh was copying the list of games on his old phone onto paper, separating the entries by day. At first he had seen only the five hundred rupees he had lost. Now he could distinguish bonuses, returned sums, cancelled wagers and money deposited again. The gaming screen showed everything in strikingly clear colours; yet, to discover how much had actually gone from his pocket, he also had to ask his mother about the money he had borrowed.

'Do you remember that I gave you seven hundred rupees that week?' Rani asked. Amresh noticed an empty line in his notebook. 'I did not record two hundred of that seven hundred,' he admitted. Rani opened her shop notebook. 'But the loan is written here. In business I know when two hundred rupees are missing, even if your mobile shows a lakh.'

In Delhi, Nilima received a summary of Amresh's personal calculations prepared with his consent. Its limits were clearly stated: it was based on one player's memory and the screenshots available, not a comprehensive audit of the company. Nilima decided to use it only as an illustrative example to explain the difference between categories, not as support for a public accusation.

At the afternoon meeting, the two-thousand-crore figure from the publicity sheet was divided into four parts: actual verified bank receipts, possible duplication from money moving round again, commercial service invoices, and estimates with no identified source as yet. Some columns were blank. Someone suggested filling the blanks with averages, but Arunima said, 'Write "not yet known" for what we do not know. A blank page is less dangerous than false certainty.'

Meghna spoke again. 'If the Malta company papers, the Beijing service-change records and the Arizona technical records are connected through the proper channels, they will help us understand the structure of the business. But do not take any of those three as proof of financial benefit

either. Issuing a contract, supplying a service and actually receiving money are three distinct events.' Nilima wrote down her entire statement.

Revati Karn was waiting outside the office. Her editor had sent a message: 'Will we find out the truth about the two thousand crore today?' Revati wrote back: 'Today we will find the limits of its verification.' No immediate reply came from the other end. Once a number has appeared in large print on the front page, writing 'still unverified' beneath it takes professional courage.

An assistant brought in an old table of relief expenditure. It showed a particular sum under assistance to victims. Beside it appeared a matching code for an advertising agency, but the payment dates differed, and another column referred to a reimbursement. Nilima did not immediately conclude that unlawful money had passed from the relief fund to a promotional account. She asked, 'Is there an original authorisation? From whose account did the money go out? What service did the recipient supply? What lawful explanation might there be?'

The financial crime specialist replied, 'Some institutions place legitimate advertisements to raise public awareness. But if assistance to victims and payments for commercial publicity have been mixed under the same heading, we need to verify their purpose.' This time Nilima opened a separate file—examination of relief expenditure. Adding it to the file on total gambling turnover would have been another error in calculation.

At night Nilima was writing the last line in her notebook when a message came from an unknown number: 'Your calculations find mistakes; but do you have the courage to look for the people who changed the figures for assistance funds?' The message was accompanied by a torn portion of an invoice. It contained the words 'Victim Assistance', with the letters below them rubbed away.

Nilima did not switch off the phone. She initiated the formal procedure for preserving the original digital message. She repeated her decision not to announce anyone's name from the indistinct writing on the fragment. Outside, advertising hoardings shone along the Delhi road. Inside, the last question she wrote was sharper than their light: if money set aside for people's care had gone into publicity, who had authorised it?

CHAPTER 54

The Smoke of Two Thousand Crore

When Revati Karn entered her editor's office, the same headline was going round and round on a large screen on the wall: 'Two thousand crore every month.' Beneath the words were rapidly changing images of gambling coins, buildings abroad and Indian banknotes. The editor said, 'People want pictures. Not complicated accounts.' Revati put her notebook on the table. 'If the picture is wrong, people will build their fears around it,' she said.

'Do you have evidence to disprove it?'

'No. And there is no evidence to confirm it either.'

The editor rose from his chair. 'We can't run a programme on those two answers.' Revati looked towards the window. A small school bus had stopped in the street. An attendant was taking some time to gather the children who had got off. She thought how much ordinary time mattered in people's lives, and how difficult it was to notice it at the speed of the news.

At that time, in Delhi, Nilima was making an initial comparison of documents received from different countries. Two dates were written at the top of each document: the date it had been created and the date it had reached the investigators through an authorised procedure. Meghna's audit, Sofia's registration papers, Lin Yu's records of changes in service arrangements, and Lata's preserved technical notes answered four different questions. It would have been easy to tie them all together; in a prosecution, however, each paper needed its own distinct legal meaning.

Vivek's original ledger was still preserved in a sealed location. Examining its comparison copy, Nilima recorded the different categories under which five per cent appeared. In some places it was a service charge, in others a middleman's share, elsewhere only the abbreviation 'Service 5'. The original agreement signed by Viraj Sahni's assistant clarified certain payments, but that signature could not establish that Viraj was the ultimate beneficiary of every company in the world.

Revati asked Nilima, 'Are we to tell people only that the calculations are difficult? We can see how great the losses have been in their lives.' Nilima replied, 'A person's testimony about their loss is a complete human truth. The evidence of the associated accounts is a separate matter in law. Do not allow an unverified figure of two thousand crore to make an actual loss of five hundred rupees seem less important.'

In the new account book of her shop, Rani wrote clearly: 'Medicine: 60. Tea leaves: 180. Postal letter: 25.' The threatening envelope had been kept safe. Amresh had written the police complaint receipt number on the notebook's first page. Total sales at the shop that day had been four hundred and eighty rupees. The news circulating in Viraj's home and these small figures written in Rani's shop belonged to two worlds existing at the same time.

In Delhi, a senior member of the investigation said to Nilima, 'If you add up all the papers from foreign service providers, you may come close to the publicity figure.' She replied, 'I can add the names of the people who own the papers, not verify the financial basis of the figure. The amounts in cross-border contracts must not be mistaken for money actually deposited in India.'

The first edition of the evening news was ready. The headline of Revati's report was shorter than everyone had expected: 'Two Thousand Crore: Claim, Calculation and Unanswered Questions.' The editor sent it back for another change. Revati did not alter the opening line. She wanted readers to be able to read about uncertainty in the truth as well. Meanwhile, at Viraj Sahni's house, a lawyer was opening a bundle of letters after seeing the same headline.

Viraj Sahni sat in the bright corridor of his large house. On television an old speech of his was playing: 'We shall give young people a secure future.' A lawyer sat opposite him, calmly advising him about a bundle of documents.

'The investigation must be answered with papers,' the lawyer had said. 'Every offence committed by an employee does not automatically become the owner's offence, but evidence of instructions knowingly given is a separate question.'

Viraj set his phone down. The screen showed that a meeting would begin in ninety minutes. At that meeting they were to decide whether the platform's advertising in India should be suspended or continued. But word had already come that money connected with several Indian accounts had been lawfully frozen and certain devices secured.

A news headline appeared: 'Gambling Empire Worth Two Thousand Crore a Month Exposed.' Nilima stopped in front of the television. She told a journalist, 'Please do not describe this figure as verified criminal income. An internal presentation estimates an alleged gross monthly flow; verification is still in progress.'

Over many days of investigation, fragments of lakhs of transactions had been obtained from different sources. The difficulty in calculation was that the same money could be used in a game, withdrawn, and then put into another game. Counting it three times did not make the actual new funds three times as large. The preliminary investigation report stated clearly: 'The figure of two thousand crore is a possible hypothesis, not verified net profit.'

Meanwhile, Samir Bose gave a statement from Macau; Sofia's certified company papers arrived; Meghna's audit notes were added; the date of Lin Yu's approval for the service change was matched; a request was advanced to obtain the preserved records of Lata's company by legal procedure; and papers about the suspicious assistance category in Brussels were added too. Sources from many cities were emerging behind one prospective prosecution, but each was being tested against its own standard of proof.

Nilima noticed a final entry. It was not Amresh's loss of five hundred rupees that night. It was a record of a large amount approved under 'Victim Assistance Expenditure', part of which had actually gone into an advertising account. The destination of the other part remained unclear in the investigation.

Revati asked, 'What do you see as the greatest crime here?'

'One section of the law will not answer that,' Nilima said. 'In one fraud, a person lost savings; in another, an identity; in another, freedom over one's own body; in another, people's trust in one another. But without accounting for the money, all this will remain only anger.'

After the television broadcast ended, Nilima did not turn out the light in her office. The source copy, authorisation note and payment references for the particular expense entry she had found were placed in separate covers. The answer had not been found at the time of the first raid; even now, after the new papers had been added, the precise character of the allegation still had to be established.

Revati telephoned her editor. 'I cannot change your headline, but no unverified net-profit figure will appear under my name.' The editor's voice changed. 'Then the article will run without a byline.' Revati replied, 'Then do not include my quotations in it either.' The conversation ended there, but a question about her employment the next day lay open before her.

Elsewhere Viraj's lawyer said, 'We shall give the lawful response to the investigation papers. We cannot accept that every assistance payment should be called unlawful.' Viraj went to stand at the window. There was a sound of cars in the distance. He recognised the description of one category of payment in the agreement on the table, but instead of looking at it he continued staring at the dark screen of his phone. At this moment in the story, his silence was not a confession of guilt but a scene of pressure; the truth would emerge from later papers and witnesses.

Nilima sent Rani information safely through Amresh, rather than calling her directly, that the bank complaint and the threatening letter were being investigated separately. She promised no arrest. Rani asked only, 'Before you catch the person who took a picture of my notebook, will I be able to close my door and sleep at home?' Nilima said she would immediately check arrangements for contact with local security authorities. She understood that an immense report on financial crime might have no

category for one woman's sleep at night, but that without it the meaning of the investigation was incomplete.

In the last part of the night, confirmation of a payment from an account connected with victim assistance arrived through an authorised channel. The evidence grew stronger that part of the sum had gone into an advertising agency's account, but it remained undecided whether the agency had actually run a public-information campaign for victims or had provided cover for promoting gambling. Nilima made separate columns for these two possibilities.

Then another message arrived. In Mumbai, Aarav Malkani could provide the original copy of an old accounting note issued in his name, but first he was asking in writing how he would face questions arising against himself if he gave evidence. Reading the message, Arunima said, 'This time the person approaching us is conscious of the responsibility he may have to bear. He needs both protection and a fair procedure.'

Nilima wrote: 'Two thousand crore: unverified. Aarav's original note: awaited.' Blank spaces no longer frightened her.

CHAPTER 55

The Witness to the Equation

There was no fog in Delhi that morning, yet Aarav Malkani could not clearly see the face of the taxi driver standing on the other side of the terminal glass. On the journey from Mumbai, he had opened his leather bag three times—once on the plane, again beside the baggage carousel, and a third time after settling into the back of the car. Inside lay a thin bundle of white papers, a few old receipts and a letter he had written to his daughter but never sent. The papers weighed little; the hand carrying them felt heavy.

In the outer room of Arunima Rao's office the hands of a clock moved steadily, but once Aarav entered, it seemed to him that time here was measured by the order in which papers were examined. His lawyer accompanied him. Arunima welcomed them; Nilima sat on the other side of the desk. 'We shall record the source of each document you have brought separately,' Arunima said. 'And if questions arise about your own part in these matters, that too will not be exempt from investigation.'

Aarav tried to laugh. 'Then there is no reward for coming here?'

'Your statement will be recorded accurately. That is the respect due to it,' Arunima replied. 'But we cannot promise immunity from prosecution in exchange for the truth.'

Aarav did not put his bag on the table. First he took out the carefully folded letter to his daughter. 'This is not for the investigation,' he said, then put it back. The small movement told Nilima something. The man was trying to draw a boundary between his memories and his papers; a boundary that protected private life could sometimes conceal a crime as well.

The first page bore Aarav's signature. Below it were three columns —'Approved Service', 'Intermediary's Share' and 'Special Arrangement'. The heading of a fourth column had been partly struck out. Without lifting the paper, Nilima asked, 'What was written here before it was crossed out?'

'If I remember rightly, "Risk Adjustment",' Aarav said. 'But remembering is not evidence. I prepared this note in my office after a meeting. I cannot say that every person concerned was present at that meeting.'

Nilima looked at the note's date. It fell after the first amendment to the Arizona service agreement and before the Malta promotional document. That sequence established an important limit: which papers Aarav could

have seen when he wrote the note, and which he could not. 'How many copies were made?' she asked.

'Two, as far as I remember. One with me and one in the office records. But I do not know whether a third copy was made.'

'On what basis do you call the copy you have brought the original?'

Aarav pointed to the right-hand corner of the page. There was an old ink stain. 'A tea stain I made myself when my hand slipped.' Arunima immediately had it recorded that the story of the stain was Aarav's assertion; independent verification of the paper's provenance was still outstanding. Watching her, Aarav said, 'Do you people not believe a single word?'

Nilima replied calmly, 'We believe that you have come here. Corroborating what you tell us protects both you and us.'

Three different references to five percent appeared in a photocopy of an old bank statement. One concerned payment for a verified service, another the share of an unidentified intermediary, and the third an entry with more code than description of any service. Aarav said that he had not authorised every amount. His office examined some bills; other entries were changed at another level even after he had signed them. Two dates matched the copy of the ledger already in Nilima's possession, but there were differences in some amounts and beneficiaries' names.

'If the names were changed, what did your signature mean?' Nilima asked.

It took Aarav a long time to answer. 'I used to think signing was merely a formality. And I used to say the same thing to the employees who worked under me. Now I see those very words in my own papers.'

His daughter's call appeared on his mobile phone. Aarav looked at the screen but did not answer. Outside the office window, two children in school uniform were getting into a car. His own daughter was eighteen now; whenever she earned admission to a good college, her father would send photographs of her results to all his acquaintances. But for two weeks he had not told her plainly where he was. 'When I stop telling lies, whom do I begin with?' he asked softly. No one answered.

In a separate examination room, Vivek Sood was shown only the relevant extracts from Aarav's note. He stopped at the words 'Special Arrangement' in the old agreement. 'I heard those words used at a meeting,' he said. 'I refused the proposal. But before you attach anyone's name to it, find the invitation to that meeting.' Arunima made it clear that Vivek's recollection and Aarav's document belonged to two separate categories of evidence.

When Aarav sat down again with his lawyer, Nilima showed him four old service invoices bearing a blue stamp. 'What does this mark mean?'

'Passed internal scrutiny,' Aarav said. 'But I could not find out when the same mark began to be used on another payment route. On the day Anurag

Bedi telephoned me in Mumbai, a proposal had come just beforehand to remove two such files.'

'Who gave the order to remove them?'

'The message that reached me bore no clear signature. I have no evidence at present that Viraj himself gave the instruction.' Aarav had this sentence added to his statement of his own accord. It might also serve his defence; but if it was true, it would save the investigation from taking a false turning.

By midday, Aarav's statement was read back to him. He corrected the wording in two places: 'I saw' became 'I was told', and 'The money was sent' became 'The payment was recorded as approved'. Nilima did not regard these corrections as an obstruction. A single wrong verb could, months later, unsettle a witness's entire account in court.

When he came outside, Aarav opened his phone. There was a message from his daughter: 'Papa, where are you staying tonight?' He typed, 'In Delhi. Important work. We'll talk tomorrow.' Then he deleted it. At last he wrote, 'I have made some mistakes. There is an investigation going on. I won't lie to you.' After sending it, his hand trembled, but he did not switch off the phone.

That evening, the lock on an old cupboard in Viraj Sahni's private office was changed. A junior employee, Mrinal, saw a document headed 'List of Old Agreements'. His superior said, 'These files are to be kept somewhere else.' Mrinal asked, 'A receipt for the transfer?' In reply he was handed a blank sheet. He did not sign it.

Mrinal could not tell whether this was routine records preservation or an attempt to remove evidence. Yet as he tried to answer the question, he thought of his job and the rent on his home. He looked at the office clock. It was ten minutes to eight at night. A car had already reached the gate, and the first box was still inside.

CHAPTER 56

The Night Before the Raids

Looking out at the light beyond the train window before reaching Patna, Arunima Rao became conscious of how tired her body was. Everyone understood that the following morning would bring decisive action. But the first question before her was not one of decision; it was one of limits—which offices could lawfully be searched, which papers could be seized, and whose private lives must not be needlessly exposed.

A signed copy of Aarav Malkani's statement had been secured separately in Delhi. The paper bearing the note, Aarav's assertions about it, and the actual bank records remained three different things. On this basis, authorised agencies in different cities had applied for judicial permission within their respective jurisdictions. Arunima reminded all the officers once more: 'We are investigating certain people. That does not mean everyone working in an office is accused of the same offence.'

A junior officer asked, 'What if an employee begins removing papers himself?'

'First establish what the paper is, what the order permits, and what information was actually given to that employee,' Arunima said. 'We must not accept conjecture in the name of law. And if there is any resistance, people's safety comes first.'

At the guesthouse near Gandhi Maidan there was a smell of cooking-fire smoke and damp paper. Outside, the grounds were being cleaned after a public event. There had once been such an uproar over the video of that Patna gathering; now there was just as much silence. Revati Karn telephoned. 'I've heard there'll be action tomorrow. Shall I publish the news?' Arunima said, 'The decision about your report is yours. I shall not give you a date for an operation that has not been confirmed. And if someone's life could be put at risk, consider that ethical responsibility too.'

Revati looked at an old newspaper on the table. On one page was a photograph of an injured citizen, with the words 'Hired Crowd' printed beneath it. The person's identification had later proved wrong. Revati turned the paper over. Publishing an image quickly did not make the truth arrive any faster. That night, for the first time, the cost of not writing a news report felt to her more personal than professional.

Local officer Renu Prakash was part of Arunima's team. Her responsibility was not to identify people for arrest, but to maintain a

register of ordinary employees present in the offices. She said, 'After the news of an earlier raid, my sister's neighbour couldn't operate his bank account for several days. He couldn't withdraw his wages.' Arunima asked, 'Have you brought the papers relating to the complaint?' Renu opened her notebook. 'Yes. I don't want that mistake repeated in this investigation.'

In the evening an indistinct message arrived: 'Look at Warehouse No. 7; fire will finish everything.' It had not been confirmed which telephone had sent it. Enquiries in the area revealed a complaint about old electrical wiring in a rented warehouse. There was no proof that this warehouse was connected only, or at all, with the organisation under suspicion. Arunima recorded the message as a threat, but treated the risk of fire as a separate matter of public safety.

'If a fire has started, get the people out before the papers,' she said. 'To enter a building outside the scope of our order, we need a separate lawful basis. The message is anonymous. Nobody is to use it as an excuse to extend the limits of our authority.'

The senior officer's brow furrowed at this instruction. 'At this rate, with so much caution, the evidence will keep disappearing,' he said.

'If we burn away citizens' rights to save evidence, what will the evidence we save be worth?' Arunima asked. The senior officer turned towards the window before replying. Moths were circling in the light of the streetlamp outside.

In Delhi, Nilima was reading the paper bearing Aarav's signature once more. Between two lines under 'Special Arrangement' stood a person's initial. It matched Aarav's statement, but the corresponding entry in the original bank records was still awaited. Nilima left that space blank. Vivek Sood asked her, 'Aren't you afraid we're moving too slowly?'

'I am afraid,' Nilima said. 'There is the fear of arresting the wrong person in haste, and the fear of losing evidence through delay. I cannot choose one fear and ignore the other.'

In one room a photograph of the old gate at Rajgir lay before Vivek. The memory of his six months of silence pricked him again. While he had been in hiding, the family of the person declared dead had been denied the truth. Vivek was helping the investigation now, but his earlier moral debt had not been automatically cancelled by that cooperation. He handed Arunima a signed account of his travel dates. 'This is what I remember,' he said. 'Compare it with the passport records.'

At nine that night no journalist was given new information in the control room. Arunima heard a complaint over the telephone from an elderly watchman: 'I've been told that if there is an investigation tomorrow, I'll be blamed.' It was difficult to tell which office employed him. Arunima told the authorised local officer to examine the threat and trace the source of the message. 'A person does not become guilty of stealing evidence merely because he works there,' she reminded him.

Meanwhile, in Viraj Sahni's private office, Mrinal had put the blank transfer form in a drawer. Savitri, a cleaner, said, 'Sir, why are the boxes going out so late at night?' Mrinal could not answer. He only noticed that the edge of a thin file left inside the old cupboard carried the words 'Service Five'. Savitri held a broom, but her eyes lingered on the name on the paper.

At half past ten, news came of smoke rising from a warehouse in Patna. A crowd had gathered at the gate, and the whereabouts of two workers inside were unknown. The fire brigade arrived first; the local police moved people back to a safe distance. Renu Prakash telephoned Arunima. 'Somebody is giving orders in your name to save the papers.' Arunima answered at once: 'I have given no such order. Find the workers first.'

Half an hour later, both workers were found safely outside. The fire had been confined to the rear of the warehouse, but several boxes were damaged in the smoke. One paper seemed to bear an old goods-transport stamp; a connection between that building and Viraj's company had not yet been established. The cause of the fire became a separate subject of investigation. Arunima breathed more easily, though she regretted how many people's night the anonymous message had overturned.

On hearing of the fire, Aarav's lawyer telephoned Delhi. 'I hope everything my client said hasn't been published?' Arunima replied, 'The statement is part of the official record. But at present we have drawn no causal connection between the anonymous report of a fire and his statement.' Aarav was listening at the other end. It struck him that the eagerness to find someone responsible for every incident could itself give birth to a lie.

After midnight, Arunima arranged three piles of papers—permissions, the authorised inventory, and contacts for the relevant witnesses. She told no one that victory was near. The history of investigations was full of nights when every paper was in order but the outcome uncertain. Outside, car keys jingled. Closing a drawer, Renu asked, 'Will people know tomorrow morning what we have done?'

'First they will know whom we have not called guilty,' Arunima replied.

At that moment a final telephone call came: an attempt to remove two boxes of old records from the Delhi office had been stopped. The caller said only this: 'The papers are safe for now, but the pen belonging to the person who was supposed to sign the written inventory cannot be found.' Arunima looked through the window and imagined the first light of the next day. The smoke from the warehouse had subsided; elsewhere, among white sheets of paper, some invisible fires were still burning.

CHAPTER 57

The Owner of the Five Percent

The following morning, operations took place simultaneously in Delhi, Patna, Kolkata and several other cities. At every location there were limits set by judicial orders, local jurisdiction and the evidence obtained. No one was declared a criminal because a news camera caught his face; some people were released after questioning, certain materials were seized and some accounts were frozen.

A computer, written agreements and an account book suitable for verification were found in Viraj Sahni's office. Viraj said, 'I have no connection with unauthorised activities in my business. I shall respond through the law.'

Arunima placed an approved payment document before him. 'Will you confirm this signature?'

Viraj looked at his lawyer. He remained silent.

The entry on the document read 'Facilitation Fee: Five Percent'. Some complaint numbers from known fraud cases matched entries in the accompanying financial records. Expert testimony and an impartial examination of the allegations were necessary to determine the legal meaning of those matches; nevertheless, the preliminary grounds were strong enough for the investigation to proceed.

Vivek then showed them an old appointment letter from his office. Viraj's group had offered to make him a consultant. Vivek had refused. A second proposal had offered a five percent share.

'What was the five percent for?' Arunima asked.

'The price of keeping quiet in the name of a service,' Vivek replied. 'They wanted certain local intermediaries in India to go on opening routes without asking questions. But I accept that these words are my interpretation; the legal evidence rests on the letters and payments.'

The claims of transparency made by Viraj's respected institution broke apart, piece by piece. Yet no one announced that every allegation had been proved before a court had ruled on it. The investigation team accomplished something substantial: it closed some of the principal gateways of financial flows connected with India and began formal procedures to preserve evidence of possible links overseas.

That afternoon, the 'Amber-9' symbol disappeared from Amresh's phone. By evening an advertisement bearing a new name appeared. He was

about to open it, then stopped. His mother was at the shop. He put the telephone on the table, opened his notebook and began to write down three months of losses. For the first time he did not imagine that the money he had lost would 'come back in one turn'.

At dusk in Delhi, Arunima was reading the first inventory of seized papers. At the moment the agreements were found, Mrinal, an office employee, had volunteered a fact without being asked: 'Yesterday I was told to sign a transfer form. I didn't sign it.' The page he showed them recorded the number of items, but not their names. Arunima had his statement taken down; she did not conclude from that statement alone that a conspiracy to destroy evidence had been established.

Savitri, the cleaner, was questioned separately. 'I've worked there for years,' she said. 'We were told not to clean a particular cupboard. Yesterday was the first time I saw its lock changed.' Savitri had also kept an account of the wages still owed to her. Her voice held the fear that every office worker would lose employment in the name of the investigation. The officer explained that giving testimony and being treated as an accused person were two different things.

Viraj's lawyer insisted on examining every entry in the seizure inventory. The external serial number of one computer had been written down incorrectly; the mistake was corrected at once and verified. Arunima said, 'If we do not correct a small error today, tomorrow the credibility of a major document will suffer.' As a junior officer obtained fresh signatures on the page, he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Nilima noticed a difference between two names in the consolidated payment table. One belonged to a consulting firm, the other to an advertising agency. Both had entries for five percent, but the base amount on which the percentage was calculated differed. 'We have found a link from an original agreement,' she said, 'not a single owner of the entire world.' Vivek nodded. Long ago he had written 'the price of silence' in his notebook; now he understood how carefully a figure of speech written there would have to be treated in court.

When Aarav Malkani heard that the original account book had been found at the office, he felt fear rather than relief. The 'Special Arrangement' he had written matched entries in that book in some places and failed to match in others. If other people had changed how his accounts were used, at what point had his signature become his responsibility? If he himself had not asked questions earlier, who would reckon the cost of his silence? The answers would ultimately come not from Aarav's lawyer, but from the records and the administration of justice.

In Mumbai, Anurag Bedi's phone was found switched off. Some people began to claim that his absence meant he had fled, but Aarav said, 'Not answering a phone doesn't make a man a fugitive.' Instead of writing down the remark, Nilima looked at Aarav's face. When a person demanded

respect for the limits of evidence in his own defence, accepting those same limits when speaking of someone else was his first genuine test.

Elsewhere, at Rani's shop, the price of tea was counted again that night. On the back of his school notebook, Amresh wrote three lines: 'Money Lost', 'Money Deposited' and 'Actual Sales'. His mother asked, 'What will you find by adding all this up?' He said, 'At least I'll stop calling money that isn't mine my earnings.' A train passed over the bridge. The glass jars trembled, but this time Rani did not steady them with her hand.

Two rival headlines were under discussion in Revati's newsroom. The first read: 'Owner of Global Gambling Network Caught'. The second: 'Five Percent Agreement Found; Inquiry into International Control Continues'. She chose the second. The editor asked, 'Will that headline sell?' Revati replied, 'If it doesn't sell today, it will still stand up to the evidence tomorrow.'

That night an image of a new advertisement sent by Amresh arrived on Nilima's phone. The gold had become purple; the game's name had changed; the slogan was the old one—'Win Back What You Lost'. Nilima did not immediately connect it with the earlier Amber-9 name. She wrote: 'New advertisement; promoter unknown; possible connection with former structure still to be investigated.'

As they closed the papers, Vivek asked once more, 'Have we found the owner of this five percent?' Nilima replied, 'We have found a direction in which responsibility for a line in an agreement may lie. Who owns the whole network remains an open question.'

Darkness was gathering outside. But that night the investigators did not find the closed website the most frightening thing. More frightening was the advertisement that had changed its name and printed its first promise all over again—as if every loudspeaker in the country knew that people do not easily give up the hope of recovering the five hundred rupees they have lost.

CHAPTER 58

The Name Changes Again

When the evening train crossed the railway bridge, the telephone in Amresh's hand shook once. Formerly, at such moments, he would have been staring at a game's screen. Today a new purple symbol flashed there—not the name of the earlier game, but the temptation of winning was written in the same language. He counted the railway carriages as they went by and switched off the phone. He was no longer frightened by the noise of a train; he was frightened by the little message trying to draw him back towards his old mistake.

Behind the shop, Rani Devi was emptying tea leaves into a broken tin. 'What's come this time?' she asked. Amresh did not answer. He had long been accustomed to hiding his phone from his mother. Placing bread beneath a cotton cloth, Rani asked again, 'Is it news about the game?' This time Amresh put the mobile before her.

'The name is different,' he said, 'but it's the same thing. A promise of getting back the money you've lost.'

Rani reached towards the screen with an anxious hand, then stopped herself. 'Then don't open it. We've been answering for what happened before for so many days.' There was more exhaustion than command in her voice. Amresh understood that one person had played the game, but the consequences of his wagers were being borne by an entire household.

He laid the old bank message, the new advertisement and his household notebook together on the table. 'I've sent the image to Nilima Didi,' he said. 'But that isn't a formal complaint. Will you come with me?' Rani set down the kettle of tea. She was afraid their bank account might be frozen again; yet remaining silent without filing a complaint would also keep their old fear alive.

In Delhi, Kabir had opened his archive of old advertisements. Some phrases appeared identical on the golden Amber-9 page and the new purple advertisement; the game's symbol and the company's name were different. He recorded the dates of both images, then wrote clearly at the top of his note: 'Similar advertising language; not proof of the same operator.' His editor was unhappy with this small distinction.

'The same swindler is back under a new name. Now there's a strong headline,' the editor said.

'It is strong,' Kabir replied, 'but we have no evidence for it. If we print that accusation, the people actually responsible may slip away without a word.'

There was another message on Kabir's phone. A threat had again been made to link a private photograph of Pranay's to the name of an advertising group. Kabir's first response was anger. He was about to connect the two incidents at once when Pranay caught his hand. 'This part of my life isn't evidence of anyone's crime,' Pranay said. 'Find the person issuing the threats, but don't turn my love into the name of their business.'

Kabir put his phone aside. He sat facing Pranay, as though for the first time he had to answer an ordinary question outside journalism. 'I want to protect you,' he said. 'But in my fear I forget to ask you what you want.' Pranay said, 'Tell me the truth, and don't give my photograph to anyone without my consent.'

The next morning, Amresh's feet trembled in the complaint office at Darbhanga. Rani sat on a chair outside. The clerk first asked Amresh's age, and then whether he had opened the advertisement. Amresh answered plainly, 'I didn't open it. When I saw the name I remembered my earlier losses and became frightened.' He showed the original message and the time at which it had arrived. The clerk gave him a complaint receipt, but explained that seeing promotional material and proving an offence against someone were two separate stages.

Rani could not read the small print on the back of the receipt. Amresh read it aloud. She was not proud that her son had learnt the language of law; she was relieved that, for the first time, he had chosen the path of evidence instead of temptation.

In Delhi, Arunima received four different copies of the new promotion on the same day—from Darbhanga, Surat, Patna and an overseas telephone message. The images were kept separately with their dates, sources and acknowledgements checked. Finding traces of an old colour in a new advertisement was a lead for investigation; no one had yet proved that the whole business was controlled by the old organisation.

Revati Karn called Kabir. 'Has Amresh filed a complaint?'

'Yes,' Kabir replied. 'And his mother went with him.'

'Then he should have the first line of the report,' Revati said. 'I am not going to write the story of a national victory just yet. Why do we treat it as such a small thing when a boy turns away from the temptation that once trapped him?'

By afternoon Arunima received a reply about the new service's identity. Its customer-support office claimed that all its services were provided by a 'completely separate company'. The document contained a company address, but nobody had yet checked whether the office really existed, whether the game was operated from there, or whether the statement was true.

Arunima did not attach the reply to the old agreement. She drafted a separate lawful request to verify the newly registered address. 'If these people really are separate,' she said, 'we must hear their evidence too. If they aren't, the documents will establish that.'

In the evening Amresh received a message acknowledging his complaint. It offered no prize and no promise of recovering the money he had lost. Closing the brass tin in her shop, Rani said, 'For so many days you were staking five hundred rupees. Today you've saved five hundred.' Amresh did not laugh. He sat down beside his mother.

That night Kabir's report was published. There was no proclamation of victory in the headline. It read: 'New Promotion After Closure of Earlier Gambling Site; Identity of Responsible Operator Still Unknown.' Moments after the article appeared, a short reply reached him from an unfamiliar help desk: 'You're looking at the wrong company.'

Kabir showed the message to Pranay. 'That could be a lie,' he said.

'Or the truth,' Pranay replied. 'Either way, you'll investigate.' For the first time Kabir understood that the patience he was learning in order to protect his private life was also the most demanding discipline of his profession.

CHAPTER 59

Six Months Apart

In the first week after the raids, the queue at the bank in Darbhanga did not become shorter; it grew longer. One man whose account had been frozen had to pay the milk seller. Another, whose account had received suspicious funds, had been planning to buy a water pump. Rani was recording the shop's earnings separately from the money in the account under scrutiny, but the bank clerk asked for a new document each time. 'Bring the papers; then you'll hear from us,' he would say.

One day Rani grew tired of watching the rain outside the bank. An elderly woman sitting beside her said, 'Two thousand rupees came into my account. Now I can't even withdraw my own pension.' Rani did not confuse anyone else's case with hers. She understood that not everyone's fear was the same size, but a locked bank door looked much the same to them all.

Amresh now did the evening accounts at the shop. As the day for paying his school fees approached, his mother said nothing; he marked the date himself in his notebook. The last page of that notebook had once held guesses about the game; now it listed the prices of rice, tea leaves and milk. For the first time he understood that adding small sums produced no miracle, only the labour of one day after another.

After two months, a pile of correspondence from India and abroad had gathered in Nilima's office. Some requests brought the relevant records; some replies asked for more information; others were met with silence. In the margin of every page Nilima wrote: 'Requested', 'Received', or 'Independent verification pending'. Entries in Aarav's note matched those in the original account book, but those matches did not themselves establish an amount that could be recovered.

In Patna, Shivshankar Mishra was climbing the steps of a government office with his daughter Madhavi. Steps of ordinary height had once been easy for him; now, on each step, he remembered the money he had lost. Madhavi's bag contained the complaint receipt, bank statements and a doctor's prescription. The papers relating to her father's illness did not prove a financial crime, but they bore witness to what had broken in the family's life after the theft.

'Will we have to come here again?' Shivshankar asked.

'We may have to,' Madhavi said. 'But this hearing is not a promise that the money will come back at once. First we'll ask the people who lied to us for an answer.'

Shivshankar looked at her. 'I used to think you were angry with me,' he said.

'I am angry too,' Madhavi said. 'But I won't leave you on your own.' She stopped them both at the turn of the stairs so that her father could catch his breath. In that moment, her anger and her affection could be held in the same hand.

In the third month, Revati wrote an article asking why ordinary account holders had to wait so long even after the five percent agreement had been found. She offered to conceal Rani's identity. Rani said, 'If my name is there, will I lose customers at my shop again?' Revati asked, 'Your name won't be in my report without your consent.' Rani said, 'Write about the household accounts, not the name. But don't make people like us keep quiet out of shame.'

After the article, an officer telephoned Revati and told her that parts of the investigation were sensitive. Revati replied, 'I won't publish anything that puts witnesses' safety at risk. But saying an investigation is underway cannot make people's difficulties invisible.' The officer was silent for a moment. Then he gave her the date of the next public progress hearing.

In the fourth month, there was talk of the first charge sheet. Viraj Sahni's name stood out in the reports. Arunima reminded her colleagues that the facts set out in a charge sheet would be tested in court, where the rights of the defence and the protection of witnesses had distinct places. A lawyer for one of the accused raised the question of the incorrect serial number in the seizure inventory once more. The error had already been corrected, but the full sequence of dates and signatures recording the correction had to be produced again.

'Remember this before giving evidence,' Arunima said. 'When the court asks about an error, we will not hide it. The fact that a mistake was acknowledged and corrected must itself be part of the record.'

In Macau, the arrangements for Mira's security were continuing through another institution. In a notebook for learning a new language she had written the name of her home. Sujata's safety had still not been fully confirmed. A message came from Samir Bose: 'New information has been received, but its source cannot yet be made public.' Mira did not close her notebook. That day, for the first time, she opened a new page for her own future.

In the fifth month, the name of a new gambling game began to be heard in Darbhanga market. On hearing it, Amresh looked at his complaint receipt instead of taking out his phone. He did not know whether the new name was proof of a connection with the old network. But that day he told a friend something: 'When we put in money a second time

hoping to win back what we've lost, we aren't adding to someone's profit alone. We're spending our own family's evening.'

The process of lifting some restrictions on Rani's account began, but the disputed funds remained separate. Even this small improvement brought no complete relief to her face. She could at least give her milk supplier a definite payment date for the following week. In a crisis, relief is sometimes measured in very small things—a reliable date for an ordinary payment.

At the beginning of the sixth month, Shivshankar replaced the strap of his old watch. Madhavi laughed and said, 'That won't make the court move any faster.' Shivshankar replied, 'It's no small thing if my own time keeps moving.' The ticking reminded him of his long wait, but he now heard it like a familiar sound inside his own home.

In Delhi, Nilima received a court notice. A date had been fixed for the preliminary hearing. She informed Revati, who wrote down the details but did not publish them immediately. She first needed to understand the limits imposed by witness safety and public disclosure. This time, the court date would not be an ending but a difficult beginning.

Late that night another note reached Arunima's desk. The question of a payment connected with an overseas service-assistance arrangement remained unanswered. She kept the page among the continuing enquiries linked to the first case, without concluding from it that one criminal was responsible for every offence in the world. In a corner of the file lay a copy of Amresh's first complaint receipt. So many different lives had entered the same file. Looking at it, she wondered again how much suffering a courtroom could hold.

The day before the hearing, Rani spread her best sari over the frame of her bed. Amresh asked, 'Ma, are you afraid?' Rani said, 'Not of the court. I'm afraid of the day someone says I gave my consent myself and so have no right to complain.' Amresh did not look away from his mother. That night he told her that, after the court visit, he would reach the shop first.

In Patna, Shivshankar put his medicines in his bag. Madhavi filled a small bottle with water and reminded her father, 'Take care of your health, even while giving your statement.' Shivshankar smiled faintly. As they left for Delhi, he did not know that in the court veranda there would be a woman whose suffering was different from his, but that on first sitting beside her he would feel a little less burdened by shame.

CHAPTER 60

The Accounting of Darkness

The morning sun had not yet reached the steps outside the court building. News cameras stood in a long line. Revati told her colleague, 'Don't photograph the victims' faces without permission. People haven't come to court to provide a spectacle.' The young man holding the camera nodded, though his eyes continued to search the crowd for a familiar face.

Nilima carried two files. One held the bank calculations, the other the witnesses' statements. She checked the pages of the first: fresh deposits, repeated wagers, withdrawals and actual losses were listed separately. A line containing the estimate of two thousand crore was underlined; opposite it, in bold, were the words: 'Not yet verified.' She closed the file.

Arunima checked the dates in the inventory of evidence with the court officer. She made no comment on any matter without authorisation. Viraj's lawyer requested an additional copy. Following due procedure, Arunima had the request entered in the record. What the crowd on the court steps regarded as decisive was only about to begin its legal examination inside the courtroom.

Kabir, sitting at a distance, sent Pranay a message: 'The hearing is about to begin. The grounds for the charges will be heard now, not a final judgment.' Pranay replied, 'Come and have tea tomorrow. Life outside the news needs some of your time too, after all these days.' Kabir smiled. He understood that the shadow of crime could reach a long way, but it did not fill the whole sky of life.

Nilima's eyes moved towards two ends of the veranda. On one side stood Rani with her household papers in a bag; on the other, Shivshankar was approaching with the help of his walking stick. Nilima knew them both, but they had not yet met each other. She stepped forward to introduce them, then stopped. Sometimes people choose their first words themselves; that right ought to be protected too.

Six months later, on the day of the preliminary hearing, Rani Devi and Shivshankar Mishra sat in the same court veranda. Neither had known the other before. Shivshankar said quietly, 'They told me too: complete one small formality and your money will be safe.'

Rani said, 'They told me I'd receive five thousand. When you're poor, you find yourself trusting quickly.'

There was silence between them. Then Shivshankar held out the water bottle he had brought with him.

The public progress report on the investigation brought forward facts that were limited but important. Irregular transactions had been stopped in numerous Indian accounts; formal charges had been brought against some of the accused; assistance had been requested from certain foreign institutions; and separate support for victims such as Mira was continuing. In the payments suspected of being linked to the instigation of violence, evidence of a connection with one provocative group had been found, but no one treated the entire lawful movement as criminal on that account.

The claim of a monthly two thousand crore had still not been fully verified. Experts were working to distinguish promotional figures from actual illicit funds. Even after the five percent agreement was authenticated, the role of each payment was being examined separately. It was details of this kind that strengthened the case, not sensationalism.

Revati Karn approached Nilima to write the final paragraph of her report.

'You said this was an electronic chit fund,' Revati said. 'Is it really?'

Nilima replied, 'In law, every gambling app is not a chit fund. But encouraging people to hope for a large return on a small sum, enticing them repeatedly to recover what they have lost, and draining the savings of countless households—there is a social sense in which the comparison can be understood. Make the difference between metaphor and legal definition clear in your report.'

'Then what is the answer? One site closes and another opens.'

On a clean sheet of paper Nilima wrote: 'Continuous monitoring of small wagers; timely detection of suspicious account patterns; proper verification of account holders; prompt reporting of fraud; international cooperation over evidence; accountability for advertising; rehabilitation of victims; fair judicial process.'

She did not hand the paper to Revati. 'Those are the names of measures, not the whole answer,' she said. 'If a bank employee's complaint goes unheard, if the police treat a victim as a criminal, if a family conceals a son's losses through shame, if the law catches only the small intermediaries, the network will spread again.'

Revati asked, 'And what about the question of raising funds for violence within India, without bringing the money in from abroad?'

'There are indications in this case that some funds were misused. Don't turn that into a judgment on every movement. But the question matters: if the proceeds of crime have already accumulated inside the country, stopping cross-border transfers alone won't be enough. Financial crime cannot be considered apart from people's safety and civil liberties.'

The court bell rang. Everyone rose. What was to be placed before the judge was evidence, not assertions.

A message from Amresh arrived on Nilima's phone: 'We sold five hundred rupees' worth at the shop today. I didn't put it into the game. Ma says that's the first good victory.'

Nilima smiled. There was sunlight outside. But she knew that darkness does not end with the arrest of one criminal. Its accounts must be written down every day.

The preliminary proceedings continued. Revati sat apart from the gathering and recorded in her notebook only those statements made in court that were public. A colleague at a news agency telephoned. 'Has the judgment been delivered?' Revati answered, 'No, there is no judgment today. Today the limits of the evidence are being set out systematically before the court for the first time.' She could clearly hear the impatience at the other end of the line.

In Rani's bag was a small account book from her tea shop. Seeing it, Shivshankar asked, 'Will that notebook be of any use in court?' Rani said, 'Sometimes to understand the bank accounts, sometimes just for myself. These pages tell the story of money that never reached home.' Shivshankar showed her his prescription. Neither read the other's papers; they merely understood their weight.

Vivek came and stood beside Nilima. The separate investigation into the mistaken identification of the body had deepened the weariness in his eyes. 'My testimony may help the investigation,' he said, 'but to the family that lost someone, the discovery that I am alive is not a solution.' Nilima said, 'That family's questions will be pursued separately. We shall not shorten their history for our convenience.'

After coming out of court that afternoon, Arunima asked a fellow officer to correct a name. A protected witness's identity had appeared unnecessarily in the public progress note. The name was removed at once. 'Accuracy in evidence is not only a matter of numbers; it is also a matter of keeping living people safe,' she said.

Shivshankar and Rani walked from the shade of the veranda towards the road. Before going their separate ways, they each turned to look back once. Nobody proclaimed a victory; nobody promised that every rupee they had lost would be returned. But after the exchange of these two testimonies, they saw not shame in each other's eyes, but the recognition of another human being.

That night the image of another message was added to the investigation record in Delhi. The presence of an old colour, an old logo or an identical slogan was not sufficient; a lawful investigation needed independent records of the new promotion's original source, the actual payment routes and the company's control. Arunima recorded the date and closed the file.

Amresh's complaint receipt returned to Revati's mind. It was no triumphal story, yet it contained the beginning of a new one: someone once regarded merely as a customer could now become a witness to his own

experience. Revati did not write the final line of her report. That night she first telephoned Amresh's mother to ask whether the shop had closed.

EPILOGUE

The Next Name

That night, an advertisement for a new site lit up an unknown phone: 'Try Your Luck Again.' The young person to whom it had been sent picked up the phone and, instead of opening the game, searched for the formal way to make a complaint.

Elsewhere, in a secret office, someone was drawing up a list of new names. The list contained the names of cities around the world. But this time the Indian investigators had prepared an inventory of evidence with which the financial links of a crime could be examined even after the names changed.

The story was not over. But for the first time the people who had become its victims were no longer merely its silent characters.

PART FOUR

The Export of Lies

CHAPTER 61

The First Day of the Next Name

The great iron gate outside the Delhi court had been open since morning, but the document that reached Revati Karn required no permission for anyone to go inside. A public-safety liaison officer from Darbhanga's cyber complaint office had sent her news organisation an image of an acknowledgement. The receipt established only that a complaint had been registered. Yet on the screen of the advertisement sent along with it, a familiar sentence glowed: 'Try Your Luck Again.'

Revati did not worry about her morning tea growing cold. She placed the two documents apart. The first was an official record; the second, an image of an advertisement preserved by the complainant. One proved that an investigation had begun; the other showed only that a particular message had been received at a particular time. It would have been easy to put the two together and publish a story saying that the owner of the old 'Amber-9' had returned under a new name. Verifying that claim was the difficult part.

In the newsroom, Sahil, the new sub-editor, said, 'The same sentence. The same purple colour. Are we to call even that a coincidence?'

'There is no need for the word coincidence,' Revati said. 'Write simply that the sentence and the colour match. That does not establish that the designer, the customer list and the person who owns the money are one and the same.'

'But readers won't pay attention to so much caution.'

'Then give them a reason to pay attention,' Revati replied. 'I don't want another victim merely so that we can sell a sensation.'

At that moment Rani Devi called. The ordinary bustle of the shop was audible in her voice: milk was heating and customers were asking for tea. 'Didi, the boy who received that complaint receipt—my son—has had another message. He didn't open the game. But it says that even after making the complaint, his old account is still active.'

'Does the message show an account number?' Revati asked.

'No. Only his first name. And a little blue button.'

'Don't let him touch the button. Don't delete the original message. Have the time of the new message added to the record through the officer who took the complaint.'

Rani said, 'Explain one thing to me. Whatever name they use, why do they keep coming back for my son?'

Revati did not answer at once. The advertisement could have reached him through email, an old phone list, ordinary marketing, or stolen data. To settle upon any one explanation would turn Rani's fear into supposed proof. 'We must find the answer to that question,' she said. 'But we haven't found it yet. Amresh did the right thing by not opening the game.'

After ending the call, Revati went to see Nilima at her office in Delhi. On Nilima's desk lay the evidence list for the first case—a case whose hearings had begun, not one that was over. She took out a separate, empty file for the new complaint. She wrote no criminal's name on the cover. She wrote: 'New promotion: preliminary information.'

Looking at the advertisement on Revati's phone, Nilima noticed a small corner of the image. There, in lettering smaller than the main promotional name, were the words 'Navkshitij Seva-Sampark'. The name brought back an old export record from Surat. Months earlier, Aditi Rane had shown her that name on a service invoice connected with a Sagarvastra shipment.

'You've found it!' Sahil exclaimed when he heard about it over the phone. 'The company whose invoice turned up before is named on the new site!'

'I've found a name, not an owner,' Nilima replied. 'First we must establish whether the name in that line belongs to a real service provider, to whoever prepared the advertisement, or has been used without permission.'

Revati struck out the first line of her notes. She had written: 'The old network reborn.' In its place she wrote: 'New advertisement appears while the first case is in progress; one name also occurs in an earlier Surat document.' The sentence was less spectacular, but it carried more weight.

A restricted meeting with Arunima Rao took place that afternoon. Arunima instructed them to keep the records of the old case pending before the court separate from the papers relating to the new complaint. Permission would be sought to verify the secure chain of custody of the original invoice bearing the name 'Navkshitij'. The original source of the advertisement image and any connection to financial transactions would also require independent investigation.

'But what if the company is registered on paper?' Revati asked.

'Registration does not, by itself, answer the question of an offence,' Arunima said, 'and the absence of a registration does not answer every question about an offence either. At present, there are separate questions about the applicant, the service, the payment and the person exercising actual control.'

Outside the room, Revati received a call from an unknown number. A voice said, 'Are you planning to go to Surat? You'll find plenty of invoices for goods there. Will you do nothing but read papers?' The voice was a man's, with the harsh noise of a market behind him.

'Tell me your name,' Revati said.

'If my name is written down, the road home will be closed to me,' came the reply. 'The seal you think is official has two meanings.' The call ended.

Revati noted the time of the message, preserved the contact details and did not publish them. That night two papers from Surat reached her—one relating to textile exports, the other to social services. In the corner of each appeared what looked like the same blue circular mark. She laid the papers on the table and studied them for a long time. No computer image could measure the fear of the unnamed man that lay between those matching marks.

CHAPTER 62

Two Meanings of the Same Seal

The smell drifting from the cloth-dyeing factories lends a Surat morning a memory of its own. When Aditi Rane reached the office of Sagarvastra Exports, she could hear the men unloading goods at the warehouse gate. Cloth really was made here, and the workers really did receive wages. That truth did not make the question of an unverified service invoice any less important. On the contrary, it made careful questioning more necessary.

Ramakant Poddar sat in his father's old chair. As soon as he saw Aditi, he said, 'The seal again? Last time it was my dead father's signature. Today someone has telephoned an employee and told him the company will be shut down.'

'I haven't come to announce the closure of your company,' Aditi said. 'I want to show you two documents: one relating to your exports, the other to a service agreement. If the mark means the same thing on both, we shall ask who authorised its use. If its meaning is different, we shall record that distinction.'

Ramakant called his daughter Tanuja. She was learning the accounting work and asked her father only that the questions raised that day should receive written answers. 'We have no right to hold back our employees' wages,' she said. 'Nor can we keep quiet about documents we ourselves do not understand.'

Two sheets lay spread before Aditi. On the export invoice, the outer ring of the circular mark was clear, with two curving lines inside it. In the image of the service agreement, the ring was almost identical, but a fine notch at the centre was different. One original paper was available; the other existed only as a digital copy. Aditi did not immediately call the resemblance between the two images a forgery.

'Is this your company's seal?' Aditi asked.

'It is not our export-approval mark,' Ramakant replied. 'The printing press used to put its own mark on blank invoice forms. We fill out some of those invoices later. But I don't know who prepared this service agreement.'

Opening her old email register, Tanuja said, 'People from other companies may also have bought this form from the printer. A mark on a sheet of paper doesn't transfer ownership of a signature.'

'Which is why an investigation matters,' Aditi said. 'We need the original printing agreement, the register showing when the invoices were

issued, and the authorisation of the person in whose name the service was taken. We cannot see one mark and immediately declare one crime.'

At that moment Jiten came in. He was usually a loud man; today he spoke quietly. 'Mahesh hasn't reported for his shift since yesterday. His mobile is switched off too.'

Mahesh was the same watchman who, months earlier, had spoken about a separate register for the third vehicle. Aditi carefully recorded his full name, shift hours and last attendance. 'Has he applied for leave?'

'Not in the staff register. But his wife said he may have gone to see his mother. She lives a long way from here.'

Ramakant spoke at once. 'Mahesh sometimes goes away without telling anyone. Don't turn this into a kidnapping case.'

'I haven't called it a kidnapping,' Aditi replied. 'We want to know if he is safe, and whether the papers he had are safe too.'

Outside the warehouse she met Shankar Paswan. The threatening envelope sent from his village was still part of the security inquiry's records. He had sent his daughter's fees that month as well, but sleep came less easily at night. 'Mahesh showed me that notebook,' he said. 'Three vehicles. He said he'd kept another copy. Where is that copy now?'

'I don't know either,' Aditi said. 'Write down what you remember, in your own words. But I won't guess where Mahesh is.'

That afternoon Aditi received a limited reply from Mumbai through Aarav Malkani's lawyer. The blue circular mark also appeared on an old service invoice of Aarav's, but the origin of that copy could be traced to digital printing software. The mark alone did not establish joint ownership between Aarav's company and Sagarvastra. Aarav had written: 'My responsibility for my own signature is a separate matter. I will not invent a name for the source of a mark I do not know.'

From an old box in the warehouse, Tanuja took out a receipt. It bore the name 'Navkshitij Seva-Sampark'. Its description read 'Record compilation and customer assistance', and its payment date was a few days later than that of the earlier export invoice. To find out whether the service had actually been provided, Tanuja wanted to inspect the employees' work register.

'Could my grandfather have signed this?' she asked softly.

Ramakant's expression changed. 'My father was not alive on the date written there,' he said. 'But whether the paper was filled in later or someone used an old signature, I do not know.'

Tanuja asked, 'Papa, I want the answer not to blame somebody else but to put our own company's accounts in order. All our livelihoods are here.'

That evening Aditi met the elderly owner of the printing press. He opened a heavy ledger of old accounts. The number of forms sold was recorded, though the list of companies using the same form was incomplete. 'I sometimes printed the blue seal on blank sheets in advance,'

he said. 'If somebody later used that paper to make a false invoice, that is their wrongdoing. But I shall preserve the evidence that I sold the paper.'

Aditi wrote: 'Legitimate supply of identical forms possible; forensic examination of original signature required for digital copy.' She did not know whether a forgery had in fact taken place. One thing, however, was becoming clear: the seal that everybody had begun to treat as a criminal's mark might also belong to the ordinary business of printing.

At eight that night Jiten telephoned. 'Didi, there was nobody at Mahesh's house. His old slippers are still there. His wife has taken the two children to relatives. She says she cannot decide whether to make a police report.'

Aditi immediately asked about arranging a lawful welfare check through the competent local authority, with Mahesh's family's consent. The document containing the threat against Shankar belonged to a separate record. There was as yet no basis for saying that a suspicious absence and a threat were connected.

As she was leaving through the gate, Jiten showed her a rusted key. 'The door of the back room in the warehouse has been locked for two weeks. Mahesh used to keep the key, but this duplicate was found in the office.'

'Do you have authorisation to open the lock?' Aditi asked.

'We've asked the owner. He'll give written permission tomorrow morning.'

Aditi did not take the key. She noted its appearance and where it had been found, then turned towards the door. The lock was certainly old. But in the dust upon it, the mark of a pale finger looked new.

CHAPTER 63

The Locked Warehouse Door

At six in the morning the wheels of the trucks outside the warehouse stood still. Aditi Rane felt a peculiar weariness at the thought that the people who had been counting the weight of goods last month must today examine permission to open a locked door. The papers of a judicial or administrative inquiry make no noise, but one signature on them can change the means by which the people inside a locked storeroom earn their living.

Ramakant Poddar gave written permission. Tanuja was present too, so that no one could later claim the room had been opened in secret. The relevant local officer recorded the prescribed limits of the inspection, the presence of Jiten as the employees' representative was entered, and it was made clear that the first inventory of anything found inside would be taken in the presence of the owner's representative.

'When customers see this, they'll say there's crime in my warehouse,' Ramakant said quietly.

'I am not making an accusation to your customers,' Aditi said. 'If the goods are in order, we'll record that fact just as carefully.'

Shankar Paswan remained some distance from the gate. He was worried about Mahesh's safety but did not wish to serve as a witness to the opening of the door. A few months earlier his daughter had written, 'Come home, Papa.' Now that sentence meant something different once again. To go home, it had become necessary to keep an honest account of his work as well.

The old key entered the lock and stuck. Jiten tried to turn it with both hands. Ramakant stopped him. 'Don't force it. If the lock breaks, who will be able to say later who opened the room?' The authorised local officer photographed and recorded the condition of the lock. Only then was a second key used in the approved manner.

When the door opened, the stale smell of cloth came out. Empty wooden frames occupied half the room. In the remaining corner stood three bundles covered with tarpaulin. Four marks of a different shade on the wall suggested that a large stack of goods had once been there. But the colour of a wall could not tell them how many bundles there had been.

Tanuja opened an old list. 'Twelve bundles are entered for this room.'

'When?' Aditi asked.

'Eight days ago. They were listed as temporary storage then.'

'But there are only three here,' Jiten said.

Aditi stopped him. 'Three are visible here. Whether the other nine were taken out, stored somewhere else, or incorrectly entered in the first place is a separate question.'

There was some white dust beside the back wall. Shankar, watching from outside, said, 'That's not dust from cutting yarn. It looks like bits of cardboard.' Aditi did not call him inside. She had a request for a safe examination of the material recorded with the staff who were present. A guess made by eye was not written down as the result of a test.

Ramakant pointed towards a trunk. 'Those are old receipts. They've been kept since my father's time.' He wanted to open the trunk himself, but Tanuja held his hand. 'Papa, first have the trunk entered in the inventory.'

The trunk held samples of thread, pieces of cloth, dusty old invoices and some transport receipts. Several receipts corresponded to actual goods. One clearly showed the texture and measurements of the cloth and the recipient's signature. Aditi kept its copy apart. If the inquiry established that some consignments were genuine, hiding that fact from the reader would also be a lie.

Behind the third bundle lay a small brass-coloured box. Inside were two pieces of a torn page from the warehouse register, but there was no basis for saying whether Mahesh or someone else had put them there. Surprise showed on Jiten's face. 'This is the same size of paper as the separate notebook Mahesh used to keep.'

The page bore half of an entry number for the third goods vehicle. Some dates were clear; in other places the ink had spread. The page alone could not prove that a vehicle had actually carried away goods. It brought to light only a possible record of entry.

Just then the local officer received a response about Mahesh's welfare through his family. His wife said Mahesh had telephoned once. He had spoken only briefly and had not said where he was. The time of the call had been recorded. The possibility that he was alive had grown stronger, but whether he had been taken somewhere by force or had gone of his own accord remained unknown.

'Perhaps he's gone to see his mother,' Ramakant said again, though there was less certainty in his voice now.

'It's a relief to hear that someone has heard his voice,' Aditi said. 'The rest must come from his own statement and an independent inquiry.'

Outside the warehouse, Aditi and Tanuja laid three transport records side by side: the warehouse entry register, the temporary list of goods, and a note requesting a certified copy of the ship's departure record. As they set the details out on one sheet, a difference of four days emerged. In one account of the ship's movement, the departure date preceded the day on which bundles from supposedly the same consignment were recorded as entering the warehouse.

'The goods went aboard the ship first and only afterwards arrived at the warehouse?' Jiten's frightened laugh died halfway through.

'Or two separate consignments have been treated as one,' Aditi replied. 'Or a date was entered in the first record afterwards. Or the system used to record times is faulty. We must first consider the possibilities that can be tested.'

Tanuja said, 'I never noticed this four-day difference before. Why?'

'Because you were looking at different papers to solve different problems,' Aditi said. 'Now they are making a claim about the same consignment. Our task at present is to examine that claim, not to choose a criminal.'

At that moment a written reply arrived from an overseas customer. It said that the customer had duly received one consignment of cloth from Sagarvastra, but the disputed shipping number did not appear on the receipt. The reply confirmed the existence of Ramakant's genuine trade and made the question of the disputed consignment more serious.

At the other end of the table lay the service invoice from 'Navkshitij Seva-Sampark'. The original source of the blue seal upon it had still to be examined. Aditi wrote three separate sentences in her notebook: 'Genuine export of cloth confirmed'; 'Identity of disputed consignment incomplete'; 'Four-day discrepancy requires further investigation.'

As evening fell, Jiten was closing the warehouse gate when he said, 'If Mahesh comes back, what will you ask him?'

'First, whether he is safe,' Aditi replied. 'Then which vehicle he actually saw. We will not put words into his mouth about things he does not know.'

In their village in Madhubani, Shankar's mother said over the phone that her granddaughter had done well in her school examination. Shankar was quiet for a few moments, then said, 'I'll come home soon.' After hanging up, he looked at the verified warehouse table that was to be sent to Nilima. He did not know for whom the difference of four days would become a danger. But for the first time he felt that missing days might be recovered on paper.

That night a new notification lit up Aditi's phone. A payment instruction connected to the same shipping number had been found among Aarav's archived records in Mumbai. Its date was one day before the warehouse entry and three days after the ship's supposed departure. These three points in time did not fit into a single sequence. Aditi did not open the image of the instruction. She first wrote a request acknowledging the need for the record from its original source. Her next journey would be to Mumbai, and her question had now become a matter of four days.

CHAPTER 64

The Difference of Four Days

When the sea off Mumbai is grey at dawn, even his own face looked unfamiliar to Aarav Malkani in his office window. He had been awake since two in the morning. Three documents were spread across the table: the list of goods received at the Surat warehouse, the ship's purported departure details, and his own company's payment approval. All three referred to the same consignment, yet their dates contradicted one another.

The previous day Aarav had told his assistant, 'Don't change a single line. If I signed something wrong, that too is part of the record.' Today those words sounded severe to his own ears. He had no accounting of how many people's salaries had been paid on the strength of that signature, or how many customers' trust had been broken.

At eight o'clock the accountant Anurag Bedi arrived, carrying two paper cups of tea. 'Those four days kept me awake all night again,' he said.

'It's not the number of days but the sequence that keeps me awake,' Aarav replied. 'The consignment is shown as leaving on a ship three days earlier, its payment was approved three days after that departure, and it entered the warehouse the day after the approval. Did somebody record one time incorrectly, or are we reading three different events under one name?'

Anurag laid his thumb on the paper. 'Look at this. The reference number at the top is the same. But one line says twelve bundles and another says three packing units. When we joined the papers together yesterday, we treated a packing unit as a bundle.'

Aarav's throat went dry. 'Then the three bundles found in Mahesh's room are no mystery at all?'

'Don't say that. The goods description will tell us how packing units relate to bundles. We don't have the actual weight of the goods. Twelve appearing instead of three does not, by itself, prove a lie. But the same shipping reference appearing in two forms does raise a question about an incorrect entry.'

For the first time, Aarav looked properly at Anurag's face. There was a small, old scar above his eyebrow. Until now that scar had been an unremarkable part of the office. Today Aarav felt that this man too came to work with a home, fears and silences of his own.

'Write a note in your own name,' Aarav said. 'Not for my sake. Write what you saw. Don't write what you didn't see.'

Anurag smiled faintly. 'If you had always said that, I might not have been so afraid of my own signature.'

Just then a message came from Aditi Rane. The request for a certified copy of the original record had been accepted, but the port record was still being verified. Aarav called her. Their conversation was formal; instead of showing their anxiety to each other, they kept their questions precise.

'Mr Malkani,' Aditi said, 'we still don't know who prepared the shipping details that reached the warehouse. A public tracking page cannot replace the original bill of lading. Do you have a copy of the actual bill of lading?'

'I have a scan. I cannot call it the original. I've sent a written request to the lawyer who obtains the company's records.'

'Look at the edge of the scan. Is there any writing of a different kind?'

Aarav picked up the paper. Below the name of the ship there was a small mark in blue ink that appeared to resemble the earlier 'blue stamp'. He was about to say that the same criminal had made the mark, but he remembered his first mistake.

'There is a mark of the same colour,' he said, 'but that doesn't prove it was made by the same stamp. This paper is an old image. We must wait until we have the original.'

At noon Aarav received an email from a former customer of his company, a customer who ordered textiles from Surat. It read: 'Your payment list gives a shipping reference number, but the bill of lading I have under that number describes spare machine parts rather than cotton cloth.'

Aarav felt as if the cool glass of his office had suddenly grown hot. 'Machine parts?' he murmured. The receipt of Sagarvastra's genuine customer described cloth. Why did two different kinds of goods appear under the same number? It was a frightening question. Someone might have made a false document, or the reference numbers of two records might have collided. Both remained possible.

'Shall we ask the customer not to make a public statement before verification?' Anurag asked.

'No. Don't frighten him. Request a secure copy of any document he is entitled to provide. And we will make no attempt to alter our records or silence him.'

At that moment Aarav's wife Nanda called. Their daughter was performing in a play at school the next day. 'Will you come, or will it be another excuse about work?' she asked.

After a long time Aarav found some gentleness in his voice. 'I don't know whether I can come. But if I can't make it this time, I won't lie about it.'

'I don't just want a ticket to the play,' Nanda said. 'I want an answer for our daughter when she asks why her father is always frightened.'

Aarav looked out through the glass towards the sea. He did not know how much of his mistake he could tell his wife, but he understood this

much: settling accounts was not merely a matter for the courts. There were answers to be given at home as well.

That evening Aditi received a verification summary from Mumbai. Independent evidence supported receipt of the cloth in Sagarvastra's specified textile consignment; a second bill of lading had been obtained for the disputed shipping number, but it described different goods. Aarav had sent the summary in his own name, noting that the source and purpose of his earlier payment approval remained under investigation.

Anurag was pushing back his chair to leave when an office security guard brought in a white envelope. Inside were only the name of the ship, a different bill-of-lading number and two words: 'Actual cargo'. There was no signature.

Aarav had an image of the envelope preserved, recorded the time of its receipt, and set aside the original paper for authorised records preservation. He understood that an anonymous piece of paper proved nothing by itself. Yet for the first time, behind the four-day discrepancy, he saw the possibility of another story—not merely a clerical error, but a question about what the cargo really was. The ship's actual bill was saying something else, and its meaning had yet to be worked out.

CHAPTER 65

The Value of Family

As a train crossed the bridge, the roof of Rani Devi's shop shook. In the past, Amresh would hear that sound while placing a bet on his phone. Today he sat on an empty bench, entering the cost of tea, milk and biscuits in an old school maths exercise book. After many days, Rani saw her son's fingers moving over paper instead of a screen.

'There's a mistake,' Rani said. 'Four cups of tea went on credit yesterday. You've written down three.'

Amresh looked at the page. 'Bauji drank the fourth cup. He didn't pay for it.'

'If he didn't pay, then it's credit, isn't it? Write the two things separately.'

Amresh corrected the account. That small correction marked a new understanding between them. On the gaming screen, figures rose and fell as if by magic. In the shop's notebook, behind each number were milk, water, coal, wages and a person's face.

The previous month, restrictions on her bank account had forced Rani to extend more credit at the shop. Transactions involving unusual movements of money through her account were under examination. That did not mean the inquiry had instantly established her innocence. But the bank had explained in writing which lawful route remained available for regular essential expenses. Rani kept that letter in the wooden drawer of the shop beside her biscuit invoices.

Amresh's phone vibrated again. An advertisement for a gambling site with a new name filled the screen. He closed it at once. But as soon as it disappeared, a message from an unknown number arrived: 'Your old losses will be returned if you don't miss today's last chance.'

How often he had heard the words 'last chance'! Once they had stirred a craving. Now a faint trembling rose in his chest. He went into the room at home and put the phone face down on the bed. Outside, Rani was serving tea to a customer. She is my mother, Amresh thought; that ought to be enough reason to save myself. But desire does not die merely because it has heard a reasonable argument.

At the outer doorway stood their neighbour Sushila. Her son too had lost money in online games. 'I hear Amresh has mended his ways,' she said. Rani paused. Praise could hurt as well, especially when the struggle within was not yet over.

'My son is keeping the accounts today,' Rani replied. 'I don't know what tomorrow will bring. But he hides his mistakes less than he used to.'

Amresh came outside. 'Ma, I've had another message. I didn't open the game. But for a while I wanted to.' His eyes dropped as he said it. For a long time he had not been ready to say even that much.

Rani was holding a kettle of hot tea. She put it aside and said, 'Wanting to do something and doing it are different things. If you feel the urge, tell me. I don't want only promises from you. I want you not to be alone on the day you feel you might lose again.'

Amresh opened his phone again. 'Look at this phrase—"last chance". Someone used it before too. And this time, instead of naming my school, the message is threatening me with the name of a village.'

'Whose village?'

'My maternal grandparents' village, towards Madhubani. But anyone could find its name on social media. That doesn't prove the sender knows me.'

Rani looked at him in surprise. Earlier, Amresh had heard such caution from Nilima. Now he was using it himself in his own defence.

At noon they went to the cyber assistance office to give a supplementary account of the complaint. Along with the receipt for the earlier complaint, Amresh submitted a sheet noting the date of the new message. The employee on duty listened and explained that similarity in the wording of messages did not establish the sender's identity. Rani was content that her son's fear, at least, had become part of an official record.

On their way back, Amresh saw a young man beneath the railway bridge, drinking tea with a blue bag slung over his shoulder. He was a customer; strangers came to shops like theirs all the time. Amresh could not treat him as the sender of the message. But when the young man turned towards the rear lane of the shop, he said into his phone, 'Take a look at the door once, then the account will change.'

Amresh shivered. That was the very manner of speech he had once heard in a threatening voice message: 'Take a look at the door.' He did not run after the young man to seize him; anger and fear had risen together. He stayed in front of the shop and separately wrote down in his notebook the blue colour of the bag, the direction the man walked, the words he had said and the time.

'Has something happened?' Rani asked.

'I heard words I recognise,' Amresh said. 'But the person who spoke may have nothing to do with the person I know. I don't want the wrong man caught.'

'That you're able to think so carefully is no small thing,' Rani said. 'But don't hide what frightens you from me.'

In the evening, after the young man had gone, another customer came: an elderly rickshaw-puller who wanted to know how much he owed

towards his grandson's fees. Rani did not press him to settle the amount quickly. 'Run your household first, then think of the debt,' she said. Amresh entered the figure in the notebook. Here, credit was not a way of circulating money but of protecting trust.

After closing the shop that night, Rani found a small slip of paper in the drawer. It was not one of the shop's usual old invoices. Three words were written upon it: 'Take a look at the door.' The letters were thick. There was no envelope and no sender. Amresh's hands shook.

'How can we believe a paper like that?' he asked.

'Not belief—safety,' Rani replied. Without disturbing the contents of the drawer, she decided to inform the police officer with whom they had previously been in contact. Their family's victory was not that fear had come to an end. It was that, even after being frightened, the two of them were still speaking to each other—and not a single rupee had been staked.

CHAPTER 66

The Real Work of Volunteering

In a small rehabilitation room north of Patna, the morning sun came in through a torn window screen. Prachi Jha sat on an old wooden cot checking the children's exercise books. On the third bench, Sunita was keeping safe a copy of a document her husband had left behind. It carried her signature for receiving assistance, but her chief concern that day was the wages due for her sewing work.

'Didi, this paper says I received help from the camp three times,' Sunita said. 'I was given money for medicine only once.'

Prachi studied the page carefully. These were details from within the genuine organisation: a medicine receipt, bus fare and a meal provided on one occasion. The list recording 'assistance three times' was a separate document and had to be checked against the office register. She assured Sunita that her statement would not be made public without her permission.

When Revati Karn entered, Prachi first showed her the children's drawings from the little school. 'The work here is not meant for a camera. If you take a photograph, you must obtain separate permission from the child and the parent,' she said.

'I haven't come for photographs,' Revati replied. 'A financial statement is being circulated in your organisation's name. But first I want to see what the organisation actually does.'

Prachi showed her the sewing classes for women from villages, the register of legal-aid camps and receipts that could be checked. Ink had spread across one receipt; another bore the clear signature of a local doctor. There were both mistakes in the records and genuine services within the same organisation. Revati had no wish to turn anybody into a saint, but neither was she prepared to make criminals of people on the strength of an image.

At noon Farida Khatoon, an associate of Janchetna Manch, arrived. She carried the file of a family that had returned from hospital. 'This woman's name isn't on the grant list,' she said, 'but she did receive real help. Evidence of our work doesn't always come on impressive sheets of paper.'

'And how many lies remain hidden in dark-looking papers,' Prachi said quietly.

Farida said nothing. Since the last meeting in Patna, many messages had circulated under their names. Some concerned genuine health camps; others were posters whose creators could not be identified. At the time, someone had claimed that every member of the Manch was taking money from abroad to spread disorder. Prachi had publicly denied the allegation, but she had no wish to escape scrutiny.

'If there's an error in our accounts, we'll correct it,' Prachi told Revati. 'But why should work that isn't ours be put down in our name?'

Revati took two papers from her bag. The first contained the registration details of the genuine Janchetna Manch; the second bore a similar name, 'Janchetna Seva Manch'. A circular symbol of the same colour appeared at the top of each, but their office addresses, office-bearers and areas of assistance were different. The existence of the second organisation was not itself a crime; nor had any intention to create confusion yet been proved.

'Have you heard this second organisation's name before?' Revati asked.

Prachi shook her head. 'No. But programmes have been held using a similar name before. We submitted a complaint because people were going to the wrong address to ask for help.'

'Do you have an acknowledgement of the complaint?'

'Yes. But no reply has come yet.'

Revati noted the date of the letter. With such similar names, it was easy to allege a financial connection. The real question was whether anyone had deliberately used one organisation's credibility on another organisation's documents. And if so, who stood to gain?

At that moment a commotion rose outside the inner room. A young man was holding up his phone and filming the volunteers. 'Look! They're pocketing foreign money!' he shouted. Instead of stopping him, Farida said, 'You may film what is visible from a public path, but don't show the faces of people who have come for treatment without their permission. If you have questions about the finances, put them in writing.'

The young man was silent for a couple of moments, then said, 'But the list I received shows grants of five lakh rupees each.'

'Who has the original source of that list?' Revati asked.

The young man said, 'A news fellow sent it to me.' On his phone was a screenshot, with an organisation's name above and amounts below. It did not contain full bank-account details. He admitted that he did not have the complete document. Instead of asking for the young man's name, Revati advised him to preserve a copy of the published link to his source.

As evening approached, the accounts were reviewed in Prachi's office. This was not a government or institutional audit ordered from outside, but an internal reconciliation of their own records. Actual spending for the year included medicines, repairs to sewing machines, rent and assistance to a hostel. The entry showing a grant of five lakh rupees in the viral list had

no corresponding amount in their original bank statement. Why it did not appear there was a question requiring independent confirmation from the bank.

'So we're innocent?' Farida asked.

'Within the limits of the records we've examined, we haven't found such a payment,' Prachi said. 'That isn't a certificate from a court. The other organisation's name, account and beneficiaries must be checked separately.'

Revati was surprised by the restraint of that answer. A news report could easily have said: 'Allegation of foreign funding proved false.' But such a decisive sentence had no place here yet. Protecting the truth meant resisting haste in proclaiming innocence as well as haste in making accusations.

Just then an elderly woman came over from the shelter. Her name was Kamla Devi. She had come to return an old medical prescription to Farida. 'You people put the medicine into my hands yourselves,' she said. 'That's what I know. I don't know whose names are on the papers.'

Prachi recorded the receipt of the prescription. The old woman left. Revati added a sentence to her notes: 'The experience of an actual recipient of help matters, but it cannot be treated as complete proof of every financial transaction.' Prachi agreed.

That night a message arrived on Prachi's phone. Before an authorised response could come from the bank, an anonymous person had sent an incomplete summary of transactions. It contained an entry for money linked to suspected online fraud under the name 'Janchetna Manch—Relief', but the final digits of the account did not match the genuine organisation's available records.

Looking at the phone, Revati said, 'This paper has no identifiable source. Don't turn it into a news story yet. We need lawful confirmation of the account holder and the original source of the money.'

Prachi looked out of the window. The sounds of children going home from their gathering faded into the distance. 'If somebody is pouring money around like water in our name, on what day will someone come and stop even the real work we do?'

'That's why the two questions must be examined separately,' Revati replied. 'Your work must be allowed to continue. And if money has been taken under a false name, the people responsible must be identified separately.'

Prachi moved the medicine receipt on her desk away from the anonymous summary of money. One paper carried evidence of a life helped that very day; the other held the shadow of an accusation whose original source was still concealed. In very small letters at the foot of the second paper was a name: 'Janchetna Seva Manch'. A fresh question arose in Revati's mind: of the two organisations with such similar names, who really owned the money?

CHAPTER 67

Two People with the Same Name

The morning sunlight in Delhi had reached the right-hand window of Arunima Rao's office. The covers of the two files lying on her desk were the same colour. As both bore the word 'Janchetna', her assistant Nikhil had fastened them together the previous night. Arunima removed the rubber band and separated the papers again. What appeared to be one thing from the outside contained two distinct histories.

The first file belonged to Prachi Jha's genuine Janchetna Manch in Patna: a school, medicine receipts, a list of relief given, and an old complaint. The second contained registration details for Janchetna Seva Manch, invitations to public programmes, and a questionable summary of assistance. Arunima placed a blank sheet beside the two files. To her, it was the most necessary paper on the desk just then; nobody yet had the right to write an accusation upon it.

'Shall I write that the same organisation is operating under a changed name?' Nikhil asked.

'No. First establish what proves the existence of the first organisation and what proves the existence of the second. When names happen to match, we cannot combine the histories of two people merely for our convenience.'

The words 'two people' sounded odd to Nikhil. 'You mean two organisations, don't you?'

'Look at the last page of each file today,' Arunima said. 'Both give the local contact's name as Vinod Kumar. But the years of birth, signatures and addresses differ. The same name on paper may belong to two different men; at times, two names may also be different identities of one person. Neither possibility can be settled by guesswork.'

A faint rattling mingled with the noise of the office fan. Nikhil took Prachi's statement out of the first file. A volunteer named Vinod Kumar in Patna lent his motorcycle to fetch medicines. In the second file, the word 'consultant' appeared after the contact person's name, but the public telephone number had been disconnected since the previous week. That file contained no original identity document.

'Should we summon the first Vinod through the police station?' Nikhil asked.

'He is to be treated as a witness, not an accused person. And don't ask for more private information than is necessary when he can supply the relevant

papers himself. For the second person, first obtain a certified copy of the registration record.'

At noon they held a video call with Patna. Behind Prachi Jha, the wheel of a sewing machine was turning in the room. Revati Karn was present too, but Prachi answered the officer's questions herself.

'Our Vinod carries boxes of medicine to villages,' Prachi said. 'He has never been entrusted with the accounts of any foreign grant. Two years ago, when registering his name at a school, he included his father's name. His family has been harassed by calls made to the wrong person ever since.'

Arunima was silent for a moment. In an office, an error on paper seemed no more than a mark of ink; in a village, it became a telephone ringing at somebody's door in the middle of the night.

'Assure him that his personal details will not become material for public news reports,' she said. 'If someone has used his name, he may himself be a victim.'

Revati asked, 'Prachi, where did the list claiming assistance of five lakh rupees in your organisation's name come from?'

'I have only an image of the screen. The final digits of the actual account shown there don't match our records. But people are saying now that we are hiding money.'

'I'll report that the underlying bank particulars supporting the accusation have not been published,' Revati said. 'But I won't turn your work into an advertisement in order to defend you, either.'

Prachi smiled faintly. 'I don't need publicity. The seven children who learnt to write yesterday need books again.'

When the call ended, Arunima wrote two separate questions in her inquiry note. First: into whose account had the alleged grant money actually gone? Second: why had somebody written 'Janchetna' against those particulars? A wrong name appearing on a document was one thing; proof that somebody had knowingly entered a false name was another.

Towards evening, a written reply came from an office in the capital. The genuine Manch's complaint had been received earlier; its reference number and receipt stamp were clear. The second organisation's public records showed a correspondence address at which three different organisations had registered correspondence that year. A shared address was not in itself fraud, but a list of the people who had worked there was needed.

Turning over the papers, Nikhil said, 'Three names, the same floor. Perhaps all the companies belong to the same people.'

'Don't mistake a floor for an owner. The tenant, the person running the office and the person whose name is on the papers may all be different.' Arunima put a question mark beside the address with her pen.

Just then an elderly man was found standing in the corridor. His name was Vinod Kumar, Prachi's volunteer. He had come from Patna to Delhi not on any secret instruction, but for the treatment of his ailing sister.

With Prachi's permission, he had also brought a copy of the application concerning his complaint that his name had been misused.

'I've come to save my name,' he said. 'In the village, people ask me how much money has arrived. The roof of my house leaks. Nobody believes I used to pay out of my own pocket for the journeys I made to fetch other people's medicines.'

Arunima gave him a chair. There was nothing sensational in his statement: his sister's medicines, receipts kept in a cloth bag, his daughter's examination. But he produced an old invitation. A small honorarium had been promised for the programme; in the recipient's line, beside his name, stood a signature that was not his.

'When did you receive this?' Arunima asked.

'When the school headmaster telephoned me. He said, "Why have you stopped explaining things even after taking the money?" I have never received any such amount.'

'Your denial will be recorded. But without an examination we won't decide who actually made the signature.'

As he was leaving, Vinod asked, 'What is the problem if two people write the same name?'

'The problem isn't the name,' Arunima said. 'It is the money for which somebody's name has been supplied while somebody else does the work. And it is the fear of the person who is called a thief without evidence.'

After the elderly man went out through the gate, Nikhil brought in a fresh letter. The published statement of expenditure of an advertising-services company mentioned a visual-rights agreement with Janchetna Seva Manch. Of two payments recorded by the service office, one had incomplete beneficiary identification. The nature and sources of the sums did not appear the same at first sight.

'Could this be gambling money?' Nikhil asked.

'It could be. It could equally be an ordinary advertising fee. Ask for the original agreement and certified information from the bank. The question isn't what we think we see; it is what the documents say.'

Arunima was preparing to leave the office when Revati called. In Mumbai, Kabir had found an old promotional receipt. Beside the advertising service's name, it mentioned a programme by a well-known YouTuber, but the programme date on the receipt did not match his public broadcast schedule.

'I don't want you to put him on a list of people to be arrested,' Revati said. 'Kabir is still asking questions.'

'And I'm still making a way for the answers to be obtained,' Arunima said.

After putting down the phone, she closed, for the first time that day, the files bearing the two identical names. Another sheet lay beside the closed

files, mentioning a confidential payment to the YouTuber. In the Delhi office, the question of a name had reached behind a screen in Mumbai.

CHAPTER 68

The Voice in the Advertisement

The sea off Mumbai was heaving as before, but the first heavy clouds of the monsoon made it seem as though someone had hung an enormous black curtain over the city. Kabir did not open the hotel window. On the screen in front of him, a young man was smiling as he said, 'Keep your earnings in your own hands.' Golden letters floated behind him, only to turn a moment later into cricket results and pictures of prizes.

The young man was Nihal Chaudhary, presenter of the popular nationwide YouTube programme 'The People's Voice'. Every day he raised questions about unemployment, mobile-phone fraud and failures in public services. Some of his reports had brought real help; on some accusations, he had also published corrections openly. Kabir had not come to Mumbai to make a criminal of him. He wanted to know which platform had paid for the message about 'your earnings', and who had decided upon the four seconds of flickering images that appeared afterwards.

Shaival was with Kabir. Akriti Jha was now slowly returning in Patna to a life between treatment and work. After the earlier attack, their office had made a rule: nobody would be sent alone to follow up a lead. But a rule requiring two people did not guarantee their safety on every occasion.

'Look,' Shaival said. 'The brand's name is blurred in the public video. It's clear in two older copies of the advertisement. Someone has deliberately concealed it.'

Kabir removed his headphones. 'We can say somebody blurred the name, and no more. Whether Nihal himself did it, or his editor, the broadcaster or whoever uploaded it later, we don't know yet.'

At noon, Nihal gave them an appointment at his office. As they went up in the lift, Kabir saw advertisements for social campaigns, photographs of books donated to schools and pictures of awards hanging on the building's walls. Here, truth and sales appeared inside the same glass frame.

Nihal's office had five cameras and thirteen white lights. Yet when he sat down in front of them, his voice was unexpectedly subdued. 'You've sent me questions about promoting gambling,' he said. 'I make programmes against fraud. It took me some time as well to understand the contradiction.'

'Then show us the payment agreement,' Kabir said.

'Which agreement?'

Kabir opened his notes. 'First, there was a public campaign run in your name. Second, an agency's statement of expenditure names your programme. I am not calling the two things proof of one and the same crime.'

Nihal summoned his finance manager, Nidhi Mehta. Nidhi came in with a folder. The papers recorded a formal fee for an educational campaign called 'Financial Awareness for Youth'; they contained the dates on which the programme began and ended, the rights to the material displayed, and a payment receipt. Nothing there directly mentioned a crime.

'Does this agreement cover the link shown to viewers after the broadcast?' Kabir asked.

Nidhi turned a page. 'The agency was supposed to provide the link to the viewer-assistance page. We included a warning in our original proposal. I can't find a separate approval for the final version in our records.'

'So you accepted no responsibility for the link?' Shaival asked.

'It means I cannot find evidence of approval in our records,' Nidhi said. 'Those are two different statements.'

Kabir looked at Nidhi. In her restraint he could see the difficulty of his own work. The language of evidence slowed a story down, but it also protected the lives of innocent people.

Nihal opened his phone. 'I'll admit one mistake. I didn't adequately supervise the advertisement that ran outside my programme. But whether I received money for criminal promotion is an allegation that requires other records to answer.'

'Will you explain this publicly?' Kabir asked.

'When I have the evidence, I will. But you're not going to publish a story first saying that Nihal sells gambling, are you?'

'I'll write only what is established. And I'll include your response.'

As soon as the meeting ended, Shaival said, 'You've given him a door to escape through again.'

'I'm a journalist, not a prison guard,' Kabir said. 'If he's a criminal, we'll have to follow the papers to him. If the papers don't support it, making him guilty merely because he's popular isn't my job.'

That night, Kabir answered Pranay's call at a small tea stall by the sea. In Delhi, Pranay was hanging the last painting for his new exhibition.

'How many faces did you see today?' Pranay asked.

'One cheerful face that looked terribly tired once the cameras were off.'

'Does every tired man look suspicious to you?'

'My own face looks tired just now.'

'Then send me a photograph. I'll put it on the list of offenders.'

Kabir laughed freely for the first time that day. In days filled with threats, such laughter felt like a little home in a foreign land.

Pranay went on, 'Akriti called me today. She said that ever since the attack, journalists have been writing "the victim journalist" instead of her name. She wants to write an article to get her own name back.'

'She should write it. But I won't put any pressure on her.'

'Do you ever ask the artist's permission for the pictures of artwork you put beside your news reports?' Pranay's question was light, but it carried the memory of the earlier threat to expose private pictures.

Kabir fell silent. 'Not always. I will now.'

The next morning, an email came from Nidhi. She had sent a public version, the approved broadcast script, and the date of a complaint received after transmission. She stated clearly that the company's original private banking particulars would be supplied in response to a lawful request, not through an unauthorised copy. Kabir accepted that limit.

Shaival placed two sequences side by side. In the first, approved version, the programme ended with the words: 'Beware of promises of quick profits on your mobile.' At the end of the other, transmitted copy came a new four-second sequence: a golden square, a brief tune, and a line suggesting that what had been lost could be won back. It did not directly name a gambling website. But Kabir had seen this sequence before in a gambling advertisement made for Indian viewers.

'Which editing room did this come from?' Shaival asked.

'That's what we have to find out,' Kabir said. 'Identical sequences of images don't prove the same author. But we can examine the difference between the version of the broadcast file and the approval letter.'

By noon, a fresh detail had emerged. The same third-party advertising agency was named in two papers: a small service fee for Nihal's educational campaign, and the broadcast expenditure of Janchetna Seva Manch. The company's name was the same, but the clients and purposes were recorded as different. Kabir sent the company questions seeking confirmation of the connection, allowing a reasonable time for a reply.

'So the common network is proved now?' Shaival asked.

'No. An agency works for many clients. We need to find out who had the authority to add which images.'

That evening, Nihal himself telephoned. 'I'll explain the last four seconds of my programme to the viewers. But give me one promise. Investigate the mistakes of somebody trying to make amends, certainly, but don't dismiss all the good he might do at a stroke.'

'Journalists don't sell promises,' Kabir said. 'I take responsibility for reporting facts.'

After the call, Shaival found an old editing note. A small mark had been added after the filename of the approved main broadcast. The mark might have been an ordinary way of identifying a version, not a secret signal of a crime. Yet the line identifying who had authorised that version was blank,

and in the cut just before the final four seconds of the broadcast, there was a fragment of an unfamiliar voice.

Kabir did not play that voice again. First he drafted a written request for the original recording. On the screen, the four-second golden flash remained still. Behind that flash no face could be seen, only an edit for which there was an empty space where an answer should have been.

CHAPTER 69

The Distance Between Two Women

In the Arizona desert, the heat did not fall as soon as night descended. Outside the window, the stones slowly gave up the sunlight they had absorbed all day. Isha—whom everyone at the office called simply Isha—kept a clock set to Delhi time beside her bed. Her phone showed the time in both cities, but the hands of that clock remained fixed on Sara's city.

It was morning in Delhi. Isha had written and deleted a message three times. The first was: 'Can we talk now?' The second: 'I need you.' The third message she sent: 'Have you eaten?' The words were ordinary, but in their very ordinariness lay an old habit of bearing the distance of thousands of miles.

Sara did not reply. In Delhi, she was listening to a woman's petition in a legal-aid office. The woman had come to have her employment papers examined; she was afraid that the company would make her personal photographs public. Sara first gave her some water, then closed the cover over the papers.

'Do you want us to look at these pictures?' Sara asked.

'No. I want no one to see them without my permission.'

'Then let's first record the dates of the threatening messages and what you have consented to. There's no need for every employee in my office to see the pictures.'

Sara heard such things every day, but today her own phone kept vibrating under the desk. A message from an unfamiliar number read: 'Ask Isha for the truth. Your office's list is leaving Arizona.' Attached was a blurred image in which some letters looked like Isha's name.

Sara turned the phone face down. She made no place for her own fear in front of the woman seeking help. But during the noon break she studied the picture. On the date beside the name, Isha had been talking with her on the telephone through the night. That was not an explanation, merely an awkward memory: two people could work while talking to one another.

By evening in Delhi, Sara's voice on the phone was stern. 'Isha, have you used any information from my office in your work?'

Far away in the desert, Isha went absolutely still. 'Why are you asking me that?'

'Answer the question first.'

'No. I don't have your office records. And even if I came across something, I wouldn't open it without authorisation.'

Sara let out her breath. 'I've received a message. It has your name in it.'

'From what source?'

'An unknown one.'

'And you immediately accepted it as true?'

'I didn't accept it as true. But what name should I give to fear? Your work and mine both bring us among people who can steal the details of other people's lives.'

Isha suppressed the impulse to send documents in her defence at once. She had no authority to show Sara the particulars of her lawful technical work. In the name of love, she could have opened confidential records to try to prove her innocence; but then the price of what she proved would have exceeded the moral trust they shared.

'I can give you my word,' Isha said, 'but not confidential documents from my work. If there's a lawful complaint about me, let it be examined through a separate procedure. My love for you doesn't authorise me to open a court's confidential file.'

'And my suspicion doesn't make you a criminal,' Sara said softly. 'But it is frightening to read a message like that.'

For a few moments there was silence. Once they had understood silence as the comfort of love. Today it carried the sharpness of a question.

Isha looked out of the window. 'You may ask me what I am permitted to say. Let me ask something too: are you safe?'

'For now, yes. But two colleagues at the office have received messages like this too. I can't tell you their names.'

'Don't. File a secure complaint with the responsible person in your office. A message I haven't myself received cannot become some all-knowing proof of either its falsity or its truth.'

Sara did not laugh. 'There's a procedure in every answer you give.'

'And there are people in every question you ask. We both see what the other lacks. Perhaps that's why we've stayed together so long.'

The call ended without any conclusion. That night, Sara's mother telephoned her. 'You're very quiet today,' she said.

'I'm worried about work.'

'Have you spoken to Isha?'

'Yes.'

'A quarrel?'

Sara thought for a moment. 'Not a quarrel. We understand differently how to protect each other.'

Her mother asked nothing more. Then she said, 'There's a door between two rooms. Sometimes it must be kept shut, and sometimes opened. But what matters more is knowing who put a lock on the door.'

Sara continued to think about this simple comparison. Her mother did not understand privacy law, but she had an eye for the distance between her daughter and the woman she loved who lived so far away.

In Arizona, Isha was writing a note for her next technical report. The reason for the seventeen-minute discrepancy found earlier had not been determined; supplementary questions had now been sent officially about the time zones and the synchronisation of the devices' clocks. She had no right to turn that evidence into an answer to Sara's fear.

On a call with colleagues, Lata Desai asked, 'Will you take part in tomorrow's meeting concerning testimony from India?'

'In the portion that falls within my authorised remit,' Isha replied.

'Would you like to say something in your own defence?'

Isha was startled. 'What has made you think I need to defend myself?'

Lata showed her a brief office notice. An anonymous complaint claimed that specialists working abroad were obtaining personal information from a legal-aid office in India. Nobody was named, but the job title was similar to Isha's.

'The source?' Isha asked.

'Unknown. And there are no original records to support the accusation.'

'Then no individual's name should be released. A general account of my work-related access rights can be given to an institutional inquiry. Not the private details of people seeking help.'

Lata nodded. 'That's the right boundary.'

That night, Sara received a second message: 'Isha is keeping her distance because she has found out everything.' This time the message included words from a private conversation about their relationship, something that had once passed only between the two of them. Sara blinked. The words were indeed familiar, but not quite right: the form of address Isha used when they were alone had been written incorrectly.

On first reading the message, she had assumed that something had been taken from Isha's phone. Now she searched for evidence of her own reaction. Half the same sentence had appeared in an old public email exchange of hers, but the remaining private words had not. Someone might have taken a public fragment and fashioned the illusion of private intimacy. Still, the sender's actual access remained unknown.

Sara preserved the original message and informed the appropriate assistance desk at her office. Only then did she call Isha. In Arizona, the first light of morning was touching the stones.

'I've made a mistake,' Sara said.

'I have something to say too,' Isha replied.

'Listen to me first. An unfamiliar message found the fear inside me. I didn't take it as proof against you, but it affected the way I spoke to you. I have to acknowledge that.'

'And I kept telling you about the limits of my professional duties instead of listening to your fear. Those limits matter, but there must also be words for love within them.'

After a few moments of silence, Isha asked, 'Shall we fix the date for my visit to Delhi, the one I've kept postponing?'

'Yes. But the matter of the messages will still be under investigation.'

'It will. I don't have to wait for an investigation to end before I can see you.'

When Sara ended the call, for the first time that day she felt a wish for a little morning sleep. Enough trust had been restored for the two women not to turn every detail of one another's private lives into evidence for a court.

But when Sara reached the Delhi assistance office, an unfamiliar letter was waiting in the office register. The writer had not identified themselves, but the old name of a Hong Kong company and the public address of the legal-aid organisation appeared on the same line. The next line contained only this request: 'Look for the person who cannot live under their real name in the records of ownership.'

Sara did not make the letter evidence against Isha. She separated the public portion, concealed private particulars and recorded its receipt in accordance with the proper procedure. She had heard the Hong Kong name before in several financial records; now it had appeared in an anonymous letter. The question was not merely why somebody had sent it. It was whether someone was trying to break the private trust between two women in order to alter the direction of their work.

CHAPTER 70

The Colours of a Foreign Company

When the first rain fell in Hong Kong, the glass of Meghna Sen's office grew cloudy again. The wind from the sea felt as though someone had opened a drawer that had been shut for many days. She was aligning the corners of three files on her desk. The first contained a company's former name, the second public information about its present directors, and the third questions written by Tara Lama. Tara was still missing. A new employee now sat in her chair, but whenever Meghna looked at it, she saw the emptiness first.

Eric Chen stood by the door, holding a small umbrella from which water was dripping. 'You're the first to arrive again today?'

'A name kept going round in my head all night,' Meghna said. 'A name that has had three different coats of colour put over it.'

Eric did not laugh. He looked at the third file on her desk. 'Was this the colour Tara was talking about?'

'Tara didn't talk about colour. She read the dates written on the backs of pages.'

An old record named a Hong Kong company called Samudravritta Services Group. At one time, a shareholding in it had been recorded through Malta's Neelpravah Consultancy. In an Indian service agreement, however, the Malta entity was described as a consultant, not an investor. All the records established was that the three names had been linked in commercial documents on certain dates. They did not establish who owned an entire criminal empire.

Meghna drew a red line in the corner of the first file. 'This is the company's registration. The second paper is an old shareholding list. The third is a commercial contract. These three do not answer the same question.'

'Then why have you put them together?'

'Because someone wants us to treat them as a single answer.'

The new employee sitting opposite, Li Wen, straightened his identity card before speaking. People in that office worked in both English and Chinese; Meghna had seen many times how it was not a name but a role that changed in translation. Li Wen showed her an old company notice. A word that meant 'contact representative' in the English copy had become 'controlling officer' in a privately prepared summary.

'Who prepared this summary?' Meghna asked.

'There's no author's name in the file,' Li Wen said. 'But there is a stamp here.'

The stamp was red, with a broken edge. Meghna remembered the blue seal in Surat, but immediately checked herself. The colours of two stamps did not establish a financial connection. She asked for the document's date, provenance and the name of the authorised translator. Everyone understood that obtaining the original record would take time.

At noon, Sofia Vella called. A clock was chiming in the room behind her in Malta. Without any introduction Meghna said, 'The name of the owner of Neelpravah in your earlier statement has reached me with a different spelling.'

Sofia asked, 'A different spelling, or a different person?'

'I can't say yet.'

'Then keep both possibilities separate. The business name in the register may have changed, the beneficiary may have changed, or there may be an error in the copy. I need to request a certified answer that can be used in judicial proceedings. I can't send you an unauthorised client list.'

When Meghna ended the call, she was not surprised; that respect for boundaries had existed since her first meeting with Sofia. Eric, however, was impatient. 'People are fleeing all over the world and we're looking for permission to see papers.'

'Without permission, the papers themselves will run away from the investigation in the end,' Meghna said.

Just then, a message arrived from Tara's mother. It contained an old photograph: Tara laughing with a glass cup of tea in her hand. Behind her was not the sea but the white wall of an ordinary apartment. Her mother had written, 'Her birthday is coming. I haven't had any new information from the police. Can you tell me one thing about her—what did she enjoy outside work?'

Meghna looked at the photograph for a long time. She had remembered Tara only as an auditor carrying a red pencil. Now she recalled that Tara used to make sweets for her younger brother on Sundays and send funny drawings even when she was ill. Meghna wrote back to her mother with those details. It was another kind of loss to reduce the whole life of a missing person to a 'case'.

That evening, Li Wen brought an old list of names. It was a copy prepared from the company's public records, but on its last page was a handwritten note: 'Who really gives the instructions?' No independent examination had established that the handwriting was Tara's. Meghna kept an image of the note and recorded how the original page was being preserved. Beneath it were attached two separate specimen signatures. Both names could be read as belonging to the same person, but the signatures and years of birth did not match.

'This is like what happened to Vinod Kumar in Delhi,' Eric said. 'Two people, one name.'

'Or one person doing business under different names,' Meghna replied. 'These are possibilities. I have no evidence for the third possibility yet.'

That night a woman was standing outside Meghna's office. She introduced herself as a former employee of a cross-border company, but did not ask to come inside. 'I knew Tara,' she said. 'There was one thing she was afraid of: everyone believes the man whose signature is behind the name on the old list is dead.'

Meghna asked her name. The woman hesitated. 'I won't give my identity without protection. But look at the second page of the old list of beneficiaries. Where everybody reads one name, there's something more after the first letter.'

She disappeared into the crowd. Meghna did not run after her. She had no authority to photograph the crowd and pursue an unidentified person. She simply recorded the time and place of the meeting and the words she had heard. Then she returned to the office and opened the old list again. The writing beside a fold had been pressed flat. The crescent-shaped part of a letter could be seen through the layers of paper.

Eric stood holding his breath. 'Could that letter change who owns the company?'

'I don't know,' Meghna said. 'But if someone is afraid that a person may disappear because of half a letter in a name, that fear needs to be investigated.'

The old list would not be substituted for a new record. Meghna completed the application for certified current particulars and wrote a reply to Tara Lama's family. Three company files with differently coloured covers lay on the desk; one white bulb shone in the closed room. In its light, Meghna understood for the first time that something was harder than tracing three layers of companies: joining the life of a human being back to their name.

CHAPTER 71

Charity and Commerce

By the time Elise Vander came out of the library in Brussels, the light rain had stopped. A few hours earlier, winter clothes had been distributed there to three families. The edge of an elderly woman's shawl was torn, but she had thanked them, saying that now her granddaughter would not cry with cold at night. Elise remembered her face. It was because faces like hers existed that Elise checked each doubtful entry in a relief fund twice before calling it a crime.

Nadia Verstraeten accompanied her to the office. There was a meeting of the donors' committee that day. Some members wanted all foreign payments stopped after the recent controversy. Others wanted no questions raised at all, because the institution's reputation might suffer. Elise sat between the two proposals.

'All I ask,' she said, 'is that assistance supported by genuine receipts should continue to be distributed. Payments whose beneficiaries are unclear should be reviewed. Don't measure both by the same order.'

The chairperson ran a hand across the stamp on a paper. 'But what if our name appears in the press?'

'Accepting an improper expense to hide a name isn't protecting our reputation,' Elise replied. 'And stopping legitimate food distribution merely to protect a name is an injustice too.'

After the meeting, Nadia opened two statements. The first showed an approved grant for a medical assistance programme in India, accompanied by receipts for medical supplies, volunteers' signatures and an earlier report from the recipient organisation. The second showed a large sponsorship under the heading 'Civic Dialogue and Rehabilitation Assistance', whose payment seemed to have been entered three times through different accounts. That alone did not make the payment unlawful, but the accounts were incomplete.

'The same amount appears three times,' Nadia said. 'Was the money paid three times?'

'I don't know,' Elise said. 'One may be an approval entry, another a bank adjustment, and the third the actual disbursement. Match the dates and currencies first.'

Nadia took a ballpoint pen and drew three lines in her notebook. The total she had calculated earlier changed. One sum had in fact been counted

twice. 'If you hadn't insisted, I would have put that mistake into the article,' she said.

'And correcting a mistake once it is in print costs the trust of many families,' Elise replied.

At noon, Revati Karn telephoned. In Delhi, she was checking evidence for a new report. 'Has the name Janchetna appeared again in your relief expenditure?' she asked.

'A similar name has. But I don't have the original bank particulars of Prachi's genuine organisation in India. Send me the outcome of your independent inquiry into the dispute between the two Patna organisations. For now, I shall record a similarity in my papers, not a connection.'

Revati laughed softly. 'My editor won't like that caution of yours.'

'Your article hasn't been published yet; my grant hasn't been distributed yet,' Elise said. 'In both places a wrong name can have serious consequences.'

That evening, Nadia found a page of an old payment list that had previously been filed in the archives as a 'supplement'. Under the heading 'Local Coordination', a name was written clearly: Paritosh Jha. Beside it were the word Patna and the date of an event. A portion of the amount was still marked 'payment approved'; the page did not say whether it had actually been paid.

'Who is Paritosh Jha?' Nadia asked.

'I don't yet know who he is,' Elise answered. 'He might be a programme coordinator, or the name might have been entered incorrectly. First we need certified details of the person who received payment.'

Nadia turned another page. On an invoice headed 'Coordination Services', a scanned mark appeared where a signature should have been. The original paper could not be found anywhere. The telephone number on the company's particulars had been called several times by a former office assistant, but nobody had answered.

Elise prepared a letter requesting particulars of the authorised sender. The city's lights shone through the window as she worked. The two women could have gone out, had coffee, and left the burden of such papers behind for a day. Instead, Nadia took off her coat and sat down again.

'My father used to say,' Nadia said quietly, 'when giving charity keep your hand open; when writing accounts keep your eyes open. I thought it harsh when I was a child.'

Elise looked at her. 'And now?'

'Now I understand. But there's still the question of keeping poor people's plates from going empty because our eyes are open.'

Elise turned through Nadia's notebook. She separated the properly documented expenses of the assistance programme and marked them 'verified distribution'. On the file of doubtful payments she wrote 'further inquiry pending'. She made sure the shadow of the second file did not fall across the first.

At half past eight that night, Brussels time, a message arrived from Revati. 'The local police in Patna have issued a brief notice. A man has been found dead. The name in the preliminary identification document is Paritosh Jha. Official confirmation is pending.'

Elise's hand became still on the table. Nadia saw the name on her phone. 'Paritosh Jha is here too!'

'The same name,' Elise said. 'It hasn't been established that it's the same person.'

She wrote the time on the final page and replied to Revati: 'The name appears here on an approval list; whether payment was made and the person's identity remain unverified. I have no information about the cause of death.' The sentence was terribly difficult to type. Human fear caught at her hand, but it gave her no right to replace the unknown with a guess and hurt a grieving family further.

On her way home that night, she stopped again before the library's closed door. Food would be distributed there the next morning. There were coins rattling in the donation box for that programme, and, at the other end of the city, a name in accounts involving hundreds of thousands of rupees. Elise thought both belonged on a single sheet of paper, but it would not yet be true to make them part of the same story of crime.

Nadia's final message came: 'Paritosh Jha's name is on the approval letter, not on a receipt acknowledging payment. I've preserved a copy showing the distinction.' Elise switched off her phone. Tonight the unfamiliar death in Patna and the matching name in Brussels offered no answer. But one thing was certain: the next question could not be asked without first establishing whose identity it concerned.

CHAPTER 72

The Body Found in Daylight

The morning light in Patna was harsh. There had been a little rain the previous night, but the soil along a half-built road near the bypass was already beginning to dry. One of the labourers who worked there setting up posts first noticed a slipper beside the drain. A little farther away a man lay motionless. The labourer called out to him before summoning others. Before a crowd could gather, his supervisor notified the local emergency service.

By noon two kinds of news were racing from phone to phone across the city. One said, 'Witness in international gambling network murdered.' The other declared, 'Unknown man dies from intoxication.' Neither writer had been at the scene. What could be seen in a photograph suggested possible causes of death, not proof of any of them.

Local Sub-Inspector Shashibhushan Kumar first had the crowd moved back on both sides of the road. He did not hurriedly pick up the objects lying near the body with his hands. He had the condition of the scene, the clock time and the particulars of the personnel present recorded. He repeatedly asked people not to circulate unnecessary photographs of the dead man's face from their phones.

'There's blood on him,' a constable said.

Shashibhushan looked more closely. There was a dark stain on the clothing, but its nature could not be established without medical examination. He stopped the constable. 'Write down what you have seen. Don't name a cause you don't know.'

Arunima Rao happened to be in Patna that day for another official meeting. At the request of the local officer, she was given a short briefing; she did not become the independent officer in charge of the scene. She considered it essential to recognise that limit. Taking over a local death inquiry in the name of an economic investigation being conducted in Delhi would have been neither legally proper nor helpful to the truth.

Shashibhushan said on the telephone, 'We've found a wallet. It contains a copy of an identity card bearing the name Paritosh Jha. Independent verification of the original identity is still pending. A paper also seems to mention a business name from Surat.'

'Preserve the paper,' Arunima said. 'First let the medical examination, notification of relatives and the ordinary death-inquiry procedure take

place. A commercial paper doesn't justify calling this an economic murder at this stage.'

A woman came to the hospital waiting room. Her name was Anupama Jha. She said Paritosh was her elder brother, but before looking at his face, she kept staring at the old phone in her palm. The previous night her brother had sent a short message: 'If morning comes, we'll meet. The papers are safe.'

'Do you know why he came here?' the local officer asked.

Anupama shook her head. 'He was checking business papers, but all he told us at home was that something was wrong with an old account. He has a little daughter. How am I to tell her that her father didn't come home this morning?'

Arunima met her in the hospital corridor, but did not put every question from the inquiry to her. First she spoke to the local officer about the family's consent, medical identification and arrangements for secure contact. Anupama showed an old photograph of her brother. There was a preliminary match between the identity card found by the police and the family's details, but final confirmation from the records was still required.

'How did he die?' Anupama asked.

'The doctor's report hasn't arrived yet,' Arunima said. 'I won't redirect your grief by offering a guess.'

Anupama looked at her for a long time. 'Everybody says he was killed. Others say he fell by accident. Right now I want one thing: if his name is written wrongly in any document, I must have another chance to say so.'

'You will,' Arunima replied.

At noon, Revati Karn received the official notice about the death inquiry from a local correspondent. Her editor sent a proposed headline: 'Witness in the Five Percent Mystery Murdered?' Revati sent it back. 'What's the basis for calling him a witness? And what's the basis for calling it murder?'

'His name is in the Brussels file,' the editor replied.

'A name appearing in a file is one thing; the dead person being the actual beneficiary named there is another. There's no report on the cause of death yet. If I write "murder", his family will become caught in my article before I've even established the source of the paper.'

Revati's report said only that a death inquiry was underway in Patna concerning a person preliminarily identified as Paritosh Jha, and that an entry with the same name on a foreign assistance list was being verified separately. She did not publish the family's private photographs. Her editor was annoyed; this time, however, Revati was prepared to bear the cost of her decision.

As he returned from the hospital, Shashibhushan received a note on the preliminary observations of the forensic team. It was not a final post-mortem report. There were several possible causes for the injuries observed

on the body: a fall, a collision, or a blow delivered from outside. The officer withheld judgment. The question of whether construction work had been going on at the nearby road during the night also remained unanswered.

At the end of the day, the preliminary inventory of possessions listed a worn wallet, an old phone, a medical prescription, a train ticket and a folded paper cover. Inside the cover was a sheet resembling a copy of an export invoice. The word 'Sagarvastra' appeared at the top, but one digit in the business reference number was obscured by soil. This was not an original invoice. Its authenticity and its connection with Paritosh still had to be established.

Arunima gave Nilima in Delhi a brief official message: 'A copy of a paper resembling a Surat export invoice found among the dead person's possessions; verification pending.' Nilima opened her earlier note about the four-day discrepancy in Surat. 'I won't record any connection until I have seen the invoice number,' she said.

Arunima again asked Shashibhushan to preserve the records of the paper's original condition, the time it was received and every transfer during examination. She did not want an image sent directly to her for publicity. The more hands through which evidence passed, the greater the risk that its real history would be lost.

Towards evening Anupama returned home. Her brother's daughter was cleaning her school shoes in the veranda. 'Auntie, when is Papa coming?' she asked. Anupama could not get an answer out. She held the little girl close, but said nothing. On thousands of phones across the city, Paritosh's death had already become a news story; in this house it remained an unfinished question.

That night, while Shashibhushan was writing the next entry about the sources of information in his notebook, a labourer from the construction site returned. He said that the previous evening he had seen a man resembling Paritosh, not there but beside a small tea stall on the other side of the city. His memory was uncertain, but the man had carried a yellow paper cover on which blue letters seemed to spell Sagarvastra.

Shashibhushan did not take the statement as independently verified fact. He recorded separately what the witness had directly seen, his uncertainty about the time and the place from which he had seen it. He did not press the labourer to choose a photograph. He asked only, 'Tell us what you saw with your own eyes. Keep what other people have said separate.'

The labourer did not take a folded paper out of any drawer; he had nothing with him. But his final words made Shashibhushan's pen pause for a moment: 'That man was telling someone that the invoice was from Surat, but the accounts for the actual goods would be found here.'

Before sending a message to Nilima, Shashibhushan recorded the witness's exact words. It was impossible yet to say whether the Surat export invoice was merely something Paritosh had on his last day, or a key to

understanding his death. Outside, the first vehicles of the night were beginning to move along the road; the mystery of the body found in the harsh morning sunlight was passing into a new darkness.

CHAPTER 73

The Dead Man’s Unfinished Letter

Anupama Jha received the key to her brother's house on the third day. It was not a policeman who handed it to her, but a neighbour of her brother's. First he said, 'Everything in the house is just as it was.' Then he added at once, 'I haven't gone inside. If you need anything, I'll stand by the door.' Anupama found the second sentence more reassuring than the first. Her brother was no longer alive, but the decision about how anyone should enter his house still belonged to his family.

The night air was shut inside the room. The little clock on the table had not stopped; it went on ticking, as though only a clock could keep count of someone's absence. A child's drawing hung on the wall—a house, two trees and three people standing between them. The little girl had drawn her father's hands very large. Instead of taking the picture down, Anupama left it on the wall. She felt that the old cotton towel draped over the back of the chair must stay there, at least for that day.

Revati Karn arrived in the afternoon. Anupama let her sit inside the house, but on the condition that the recording function on her phone remain switched off. 'I'll allow my brother's death to become news, but not my brother's daughter's sleep,' she said. Revati placed her phone face down on the table. That morning her editor had again asked whether there was anything new about a murder. She had replied, 'We are awaiting the medical findings of the death inquiry.' She understood that the editor's impatience could provide no answer here.

'What work did your brother do?' Revati asked.

'All sorts of work,' said Anupama. 'At first he prepared copies of accounts in a textile office. Later he read out bills to small traders and explained them, because not every employee understood documents written in English. People took him for some important officer. He would say, “I only ask what the written words mean.”'

Anupama took an old notebook out of the cupboard. Her brother had a habit of recording the rice he bought, bus fares and his daughter's school fees on a single page. After the figures came little comments in his hand: 'The month isn't over yet'; 'A saving this time.' Revati thought the notebook important, because the handwriting of those comments might later be compared with that of another letter. But a notebook kept at home could not take the place of a forensic handwriting expert's report.

The last page of the notebook was blank. As Anupama turned it, a folded white sheet slipped out from between the pages. She picked it up in both hands. At the top was written 'Anu'. Then came the words: 'If I cannot return on time, first understand this: not every five per cent refers to the same money.' One corner of the sheet was torn away. After the unfinished sentence, only three words remained: 'withheld in workers' names'.

Anupama showed the paper to Revati, but did not let it leave her hand. 'Let me read it first,' she said, and looked again at the line. These days, whenever people heard 'five per cent', they thought of a gambling commission. Her brother had never spoken of such a thing at home. Whether the money withheld in workers' names was part of someone's wages, a security fund, or money paid in a fictitious name—the incomplete scrap of paper could not say.

'Must I hand this paper over to the police?' Anupama asked.

'If you think it may matter to the death inquiry, it would be right to give it to the authorised officer, with its condition and the time it was found properly recorded,' Revati said. 'I won't take it away for my report. I have permission to look at things in this house as a journalist; I have no right to remove evidence.'

For the first time there was anger in Anupama's eyes. 'Who listened when my brother was alive? Now that he is dead, will every piece of paper be taken seriously?'

Revati did not answer immediately. She remembered many long interviews from her years as a journalist in which the first question about a poor man's life had been asked only after his death. 'I can't promise you justice will come quickly,' she said. 'But I won't turn what he wrote in his own words into a misleading headline.'

Anupama called her brother's daughter in from the neighbour's house. Looking for her pencil, the little girl came inside. She opened the small box of pretty colours beside the cupboard and took out a favourite red pencil. 'Papa used to say, mark your mistakes in red, but don't tear the paper,' she said. Suddenly the torn corner of the white sheet in Anupama's hand felt terribly heavy.

Later that afternoon, local Sub-Inspector Shashibhushan Kumar arrived with the official receipt register. With Anupama's permission, he recorded the paper's present condition, the torn portion, the place where it had been found and the names of those present. He did not take away the household notebook; he recorded a request for its separate, secure examination. Revati reported that she had been present, but made no claim about where the letter had originated. It was not yet possible to say with certainty that the handwriting was Paritosh's.

Shashibhushan examined the reverse of the sheet. It was not blank. Three dates had been written there in faint blue lines; one had been crossed out and another written in its place. The sheet bore old fold marks, but

there was no way to identify who had written the dates. 'Someone may have used this paper for another purpose before writing a letter on it,' he said.

'He never threw away spare paper,' Anupama said. 'Accounts on the back of a sheet, a letter on the front.'

'Then we'll examine both sides,' Shashibhushan replied. 'Where there's actual writing, there may also be older impressions. For now, we won't alter the condition of the original paper by trying to bring out a line.'

That evening Anupama sat with the little girl to look over her school homework. As she drew lines, the child asked, 'How much is five per cent?' Anupama was startled. The girl was learning percentages at school; she had never seen her father's unfinished letter. Anupama drew a hundred little dots in the notebook and circled five of them. 'Who owns these five?' the child asked. 'Before you divide something,' Anupama said, 'you have to know who owns it.' She heard the sound of her own voice as she said it.

After leaving the house, Revati did not write her report at once. She first asked Shashibhushan about the current status of the medical examination. The reply was that the final report had not arrived. There was no direct reference to murder in the unfinished letter Anupama had found. Revati prepared a line for her editor: 'An incomplete letter found with a member of the deceased's family; authenticity and context under investigation.' She added no private family details to the report without their permission.

That night a limited description of the paper reached Nilima through official channels. She set the words 'withheld in workers' names' beside the copy of the five-per-cent bank agreement already under examination. The percentage was the same in both, but the base sum, the purpose of payment and the writer were not. In red ink, on her comparison sheet, she wrote: 'A matching figure is not proof of a connection.'

Then a new message came from Shashibhushan. The date crossed out on the reverse of the letter was four days before Paritosh's final journey. Beside it were several digits that resembled part of a shipment number for textiles from Surat. Testing of the ink and confirmation of the complete number were still pending. In the light of her phone, Nilima kept looking not at an image of the paper but at the written report. To understand Paritosh's death, perhaps they would have to examine not his last day first, but the four days before it.

CHAPTER 74

Weighing the Goods

Fine fibres of cotton had been drifting through the Surat warehouse since early morning. When Aditi Rane entered the yard, the first thing she noticed was not a truck but an elderly worker standing by the weighbridge. He was looking at the empty pointer on the scale. Work had not yet begun in the warehouse, yet yesterday's threads still clung to the workers' palms. Aditi had come to look for a defect in a document; all the workers wanted was for the day's wages to be calculated properly.

Shankar Paswan had returned after two days' leave. His daughter's school fees were once again overdue. Aditi knew this, but a show of sympathy in place of asking for his account would only make Shankar uncomfortable. So she said plainly, 'Tell me, in your own words, about the vehicle you saw. I don't want to suggest anything for you to remember.'

'I saw three vehicles,' Shankar said. 'The first had bales of cloth. The second had boxes. The third had...' He stopped. The owner's new car had pulled up outside the warehouse, and at the sound of it Shankar's expression changed.

Aditi stopped her questions there. She first asked what arrangements had been made to keep the worker's statement confidential and what had happened to his earlier complaint about threats to his family. Only after the security details had been recorded did the questioning resume in another room. Shankar said, 'I didn't see anything in the third vehicle. It came in the dark, and Mahesh was at the gate. Someone told me that counting it wasn't my job just then.'

'Can you say the vehicle was empty?'

'No. I never looked inside.'

Aditi recorded his answer exactly as he gave it. She already had a photograph in which the rear of the third vehicle was closed. It was impossible to tell from the photograph what it carried. Shankar had admitted what he did not know. That did not weaken his statement; it made it more reliable.

Harshit Mehta, the warehouse owner's representative, came with a new register. 'Every bill is correct,' he said. 'The weight of the goods matches the amount of cloth dispatched. The four-day discrepancy in the dates is nothing but an office delay.'

'It may be,' Aditi replied. 'But first tell me who wrote the original weighing register. Every entry in this new copy is in the same colour of ink, whereas the earlier register bears signatures from different shifts.'

A momentary look of irritation crossed Harshit's face. 'Why do you people go into such minute details?'

'Because sometimes a tiny error is merely a typing mistake, and sometimes it points to financial irregularity. I have to understand the difference before I decide.'

A good deal was perfectly clear about the actual consignments of cloth in the warehouse. One consignment of fifty bales appeared in the goods list, and its fabric sample, the workers' loading register and the customer's receipt documents agreed with one another. Aditi kept those records separate from the file marked in red. It would have been convenient to call goods that had genuinely come and gone fictitious; it would not have been true.

There was a problem with the second consignment. A page linked to one shipping number referred to boxes of machine parts; another copy bearing the same number described bales of cloth. The recorded weights did not agree. But if the weight of the goods and the gross weight of the truck were not properly distinguished, even an authentic consignment could appear suspect. Aditi sat with an old weighbridge employee and checked, page by page, the difference between 'empty vehicle' and 'vehicle with goods'.

The old employee was named Harish. Adjusting his large spectacles, he said, 'As far as I remember, the pointer got stuck that day. So the load was weighed twice.'

'Was the incident recorded?'

'It was in the notebook. I don't know where they put it after the new register was made.'

Harish's notebook had been kept not in his personal bag but in the office records room. The old pages were taken out under an authorised inventory. One date had been entered twice, and beside it were the words 'weighed again'. That provided an ordinary explanation for one discrepancy, but the contradiction between the two descriptions of the goods remained.

At noon, Aditi received a written response from Aarav Malkani in Mumbai. Aarav wrote that the payment records contained an item headed 'Service Contact'; it was not an original bill for transporting textiles. An attachment referred to 'staff movement and accommodation support'. This, too, could have been an ordinary service for arranging workers. To call it human trafficking, independent evidence would be needed concerning the actual travellers, their identities and consent, their accommodation and the payments made.

Aditi asked Harshit for the agreement mentioned in the attachment. This time he did not produce it immediately. 'That service doesn't belong to the warehouse,' he said. 'It belongs to the contracting company.'

'Then what is the contracting company's name?'

Harshit opened the file. The address inside was on the fourth floor of a new office building in Surat. Aditi noted it separately. Many companies could occupy the same building; a common address did not establish common ownership. But an official copy of the relevant agreement still had to be requested.

Shankar came back in the evening. In his hand was a small folded sheet—his personal calculation of that day's wages. 'Mahesh used to make me calculate it like this,' he said. 'I kept thinking that if I asked about the third vehicle, they might stop my wages. There's a line that says five-per-cent deduction. I never understood what it meant.'

Aditi's pen paused. Paritosh's unfinished letter had contained the words 'withheld in workers' names'; the resemblance might be no more than coincidence. Shankar's sheet was not an original company record but a private wage calculation. 'Keep this sheet with you,' Aditi said. 'If the inquiry needs it, a copy can be obtained through the authorised procedure. You have the right to ask for a written statement of your wages.'

'Who received the money taken off?' Shankar asked.

'I don't know yet,' Aditi replied. 'If it was called a security fund, there ought to be an account for the fund. If it was a wage deduction, its basis ought to be recorded. Merely calling something five per cent proves neither that a payment was proper nor that it was improper.'

The weighbridge that had been operating since dawn was now closing. Harish's grandson came to take his grandfather home. He placed his hand against the glass and asked why the machine's pointer moved. 'Because even after the weight settles, the earth keeps moving,' Harish said. Hearing him, Aditi looked towards the old register. The numbers on paper were motionless; the events behind them were still in motion.

Aditi sent a lawful request for the new contracting company's registration details. An initial public address listing showed two names on the fourth floor of the building: the Indian branch of 'Service Contact' and 'Samudrasetu Employment Assistance'. The dates during which they had operated there were different. She did not immediately assert a connection. She wrote down four separate details: building, floor, office number and dates.

That night she received a message from a victim-support officer in Macau: a young woman wished to read out the address on her old recruitment letter herself. The officer had not supplied her name. Aditi replied, 'Before sending a copy of the document, make sure she has given her explicit consent and that an official evidence channel is in place.' If that

letter led to the Surat building, a new inquiry would open; if it led elsewhere, that, too, would be a useful truth.

Outside, fine fibres of cotton were floating in the evening air. Aditi watched the final gate of the warehouse being shut. She still did not know what had been inside the vehicle whose entry in the register remained unclear. But this time a question arising from the weight of goods on paper had reached as far as the movement of human beings. She knew that between the two there must first be a question, not a conclusion.

CHAPTER 75

The Body and the Documents

There was no loud music playing at the support centre in Macau that day. Outside, tourists moved along the busy road; inside, a woman was practising saying her own name. She had a name written on a document, but she wanted the person asking questions to hear her voice first. 'Farheen,' she said softly. 'My name is Farheen. I am giving you this identity in my own voice.'

Mira was sitting two chairs away. She had no automatic right to hear another woman's testimony. Farheen herself had asked for her to be present as a support person. Months earlier, the two had crossed paths a few times in the same residential building, though speaking to one another there had been forbidden. Mira remembered the day of her own testimony, when for the first time she had been allowed to say which questions she would not answer.

At the beginning of the meeting, Joanna, an officer with the support programme, explained the options. 'You may take a break, change the interpreter, or stop the questions for today. Your statement will be recorded independently; you will not be shown Mira's testimony. Your safe accommodation and medical assistance do not depend on this decision.'

At first Farheen said nothing. She looked out of the window, where the sea shone white in the sunlight. 'Before coming here, I wanted to learn computers,' she said. 'I never dreamed of working in a casino. Back in my village, I used to keep the school's accounts. A job advertisement said there would be customer support work abroad, language work, a fixed salary.'

'How many times did you meet the recruiter?' came the question through the interpreter.

'Once. After that, everything was done over the phone. The first form I filled in had an address for the building. In the contract I was given later, the page was different.'

Joanna wrote, 'Claim concerning two different documents; original copies required.' Farheen raised her hand. 'I want to correct something. I'm not certain whether the page was changed or whether it was another document altogether. The copy I had been given was taken away. I'm telling you what I saw; what I worked out afterwards is separate.'

Tears filled Mira's eyes. In her own statement she, too, had made clear the difference in timing between seeing the red bracelet, the passport and

the vehicle. Hearing Farheen correct herself, she understood that freedom did not mean merely returning home. It meant having the right to determine the meaning of one's own words.

Farheen said that on arrival her passport had been taken for what was described as a temporary check, and had not subsequently been returned. Her working hours had been extended, contact with outsiders was monitored, and when she asked to leave her job, she was told she owed a large sum for travel expenses. She distinguished all this from the sums entered in an account book. 'When I asked for an account of what I had earned, they said my training, food and travel would be deducted first,' she said. 'I was never shown the paper setting out those deductions.'

'Did anyone physically hurt you?' Joanna asked.

Farheen looked down at her palms. 'What I want to speak about now is the financial pressure. I'll discuss other things during medical counselling.' Joanna nodded, and the questions stopped at that boundary. A victim's suffering was not something to be put on display for every spectator.

A little later, Farheen took an old paper from the small bag on her back. Her name was written by hand in one corner; printed across the top were the words 'Samudrasetu Employment Assistance'. Showing the paper, she said that she had been given a copy before she travelled. At the time, she had not understood part of the address on it: an office building in Surat, fourth floor, office number 407.

Mira did not react with surprise. She looked first at Farheen's face. 'Do you want the police to question someone else on the basis of this paper?'

'I want them to investigate whether the company named on this document is connected to the people I met,' Farheen said. 'But I don't want my photograph used in an advertisement. I don't want news of me to reach my family under my name.'

Joanna explained the meaning of the consent form in detail. Farheen asked further questions about her right to speak, the protection she needed and the interpreter's assistance. She authorised an official copy of the document to be secured; the original was kept in a separate protective cover in accordance with her rights. She did not permit its photograph to be sent in anyone's private message.

At lunch, Farheen was eating rice with vegetables. Mira asked, 'What smell from home do you remember most?'

'Hot rotis,' Farheen said. 'And the earth in the courtyard after rain. But I don't want to live all the time in fear and homesickness. Sometimes I want to listen to music without anyone asking me questions. You used to sing, didn't you?'

Mira smiled. 'Yes. I couldn't sing for a long time. Now I'm learning again.'

'Then teach me a song,' Farheen said. That day the two of them hummed a little tune. They forgot the words halfway through, but no

interviewer entered that fact into any testimony. Their ordinary lives existed beyond their statements as well.

In the evening, Samir Bose waited outside the support centre for Joanna. He was not permitted to see Farheen's entire statement. Joanna could provide only those particulars needed for authorised coordination: the name of the recruiting organisation, the existence of an earlier address and the possibility of a lawful inquiry in India. 'Does it match Mira's testimony?' Samir asked.

'Some experiences may be alike,' Joanna said, 'but each woman's story is independent. One will corroborate the other only when external records confirm it. We still have no final information about Sujata's situation, either.'

Mira heard those words. She remembered the bracelet with the red thread that Sujata had worn. She had asked Farheen nothing about it; it would not have been right to impose her own memory on another woman's. She merely asked Joanna that the earlier request to search for Sujata remain active. The officer confirmed only that the request had not been closed.

The office in Macau began preparing to send limited details to the relevant officer in Surat through authorised channels. Joanna looked at the name on the paper: 'Samudrasetu Employment Assistance'. She also wrote: 'Any link between the company registered at this address, the actual recruiters and the export-finance transactions remains unverified.' It was a cautious sentence, but behind it were the lives of three people.

All that reached Aditi Rane in Surat was the information that an old address on a recruitment document matched an office building under examination in her export inquiry. No names were passed on, to protect the worker's safety and privacy. Aditi compared it with the fourth-floor address she had already noted. The building matched, as did the floor; the office number differed by one digit in the earlier and later copies. She did not write 'match'. She wrote 'address verification pending'.

That night, Farheen wrote the name of her home in her notebook. Beneath it she wrote one sentence: 'I will choose my future work.' Sitting nearby, Mira added another line to her new song. Beyond the support centre, the colourful lights of the city burned all night, but in these two rooms light meant something else: no one could now sell their stories without their permission.

That night two copies of addresses lay separately on Aditi's desk. One came from a public list of an export contractor; the other from an official summary of the recruitment letter. The page numbers differed, the office number was incomplete and the dates were different. Even after allowing for all that, a question remained: if the two services were indeed separate, why was the owner's name missing from the old lists for the same fourth

floor? Such an omission was not proof of fraud. But it was no longer possible to leave that blank space unquestioned.

CHAPTER 76

The False Dream of a Job

On Howrah Bridge in Kolkata that morning, the sound of vehicles carried all the way down to the river. Sara stepped off the train and slung a small bag over her shoulder. There was a message from Isha on her phone: 'Write when you arrive. If you get a moment to talk, let me see your tired face.' Sara laughed, but before replying, her eye fell on an advertisement on the platform. Employment in a distant country. Free training. Safe accommodation. Beneath the three promises was print so fine that no one walking past could possibly read it.

This time she had not come to Kolkata as a tourist. Through Delhi's digital-records assistance programme, a local women's support organisation had asked her to examine a confidential recruitment record. The organisation was run by Sharmila Das. Sharmila had laid down two clear conditions: a survivor's name would be seen only with that person's own consent, and no image of a document was to be taken on a private phone. Sara considered these conditions not obstacles to her work, but its foundation.

The organisation occupied the second floor of an old building. The paint had peeled from the stair rail in several places, but the register on the table inside was clean. As soon as she entered the doorway, there was the smell of cooked rice and fresh tea. A woman was bent over a sewing machine on one side; another was teaching her child to write letters. Sewing was taught here alongside employment counselling. No foreign funding was needed as proof that the place existed.

Sharmila brought not one thick file but two separate envelopes. 'The first contains a placement that really took place,' she said. 'The second holds an offer that a young woman had been considering accepting before going far away. If we assume that documents bearing the same printed company name are all the same, we'll ruin the inquiry.'

Sara examined the first file. A student named Trisha Sen had been admitted to a legitimate training centre in Singapore for a short period. Her admission letter clearly set out the course, the training fees, the institution's confirmation and the terms for returning home. Trisha had come back to Kolkata after the course and now taught computers to other young women there. Several independent sources could confirm these facts.

The second envelope contained Nandita Ghosh's application. Nandita was twenty-three; her father worked at sewing, and she had taken a course in bookkeeping at a private computer centre. The documents promised an attractive salary and accommodation for a position called 'Overseas Service Associate', but the name of the designated office changed between the appointment letter and the draft travel papers. When Nandita asked questions, she was urged to decide quickly.

'Have you met Nandita?' Sara asked.

'I have. But I won't show you her private messages without her consent,' Sharmila said. 'She told me, "I'm not useless. I want work." All her distress is contained in that one sentence.'

Nandita came in the afternoon. She wore a plain sari the colour of ripening paddy and carried an old book. There was a watchfulness in her eyes that made it plain she had not come to offer her story for anyone else's entertainment. As soon as she sat down, she asked, 'If I give you this document, will my chance of getting the job disappear?'

Sara did not instantly say no. 'I won't decide about your job,' she replied. 'If you wish, you can ask for the offer to be verified independently. If the appointment is genuine, there should be evidence for it. But if something is wrong, I will have to tell you the truth.'

Nandita took a sealed envelope from her bag. It bore the company seal: 'Samudrasetu Employment Assistance'. Its date was some months apart from that on Farheen's old recruitment letter in Macau. The address gave the fourth floor of a building in Surat, but the office number was incomplete. The travel papers referred to an intermediate centre in another country. It was certainly unusual, but that alone did not establish trafficking.

'Did anyone interview you first?' Sharmila asked.

'Twice on the phone. The first time they asked about computers. The second time it was only about my passport and the people at home,' Nandita said. 'When I said I'd check the registered address of the employer, they told me that if I delayed, the opportunity would be lost.'

'Did you travel?'

'No. My younger brother said, if the job is real, it will still be real two days from now. So I waited.'

There was no regret in Nandita's voice, but a quiet anger. Passing up an opportunity meant financial difficulty for her; yet surrendering her freedom to someone without full information would have been difficult, too. Sara wrote in her notebook: 'Recruitment offer unverified; no actual travel; voluntary decision to defer.' Nandita's right to make her own decision was preserved in that brief line.

Sara had already seen a description of Farheen's document through authorised channels. For comparison she needed only the company's name, the dates, the authorised portion of the address and the job description—

not Farheen's entire personal experience. She saw that the office building was the same, but the printing and the place for signatures differed. A single entry could change in several ways: a company branch, a revised form, or a forged document. All three possibilities were recorded.

Nandita placed a small card on the table. 'The man who gave me this card called again the day before yesterday. He says he's leaving his job. He said, “If you want it investigated, put me in touch with an officer.”'

The card carried the name Nabin Pal. Below it was printed 'Recruitment Contact', not any government designation. Two old telephone numbers appeared after the name. Sara did not pick up the card; she first asked Nandita's permission. Nandita nodded, but added one condition: 'Don't lay a trap to catch that man. If he really wants to speak, let him have a safe way of doing it.'

Sara respected the request. 'I won't question him secretly myself,' she said. 'His wishes will be established in the presence of a locally authorised officer and a lawyer. All I have to do is pass on the formal information about this card.'

When Nandita got up, Sharmila handed her a small box of rice. 'For your meal,' she said. Nandita laughed and handed it back. 'I'm not hungry. But if you need a teacher for your computer room, call me.' For the first time, an ordinary wish for the future could be heard in her voice.

That evening Sara stopped outside a bookshop on the road. She called Isha. It was early morning in Arizona, and Isha's voice still had the warmth of sleep. 'So, how is Kolkata?'

'There's a girl here who came close to risking her whole future for the promise of a job,' Sara said. 'She asked questions in time. That's a victory for her, but I don't want those questions to close every road to employment for her.'

Isha was silent for a while. 'Don't take so much responsibility for saving other people that your own life disappears,' she said.

'And you still haven't told me what day you're coming to Delhi,' Sara laughed.

'The last week of this month,' Isha replied. 'I won't be able to change the date this time.'

After ending the call, Sara sent Sharmila the formal receipt list. The name on the card, the limits of Nandita's consent and the inconsistent address on the company's documents were entered separately. At eight that night, a reply came from the local officer: Nabin Pal had himself expressed a wish to give a statement, and arrangements for a meeting were under way.

Then another message arrived. It was no official letter. The number was unfamiliar. It said only: 'Don't call Nabin again. What he knows comes at a very high price.' Sara preserved the message in its original form and informed the authorised office. The identity of the sender would have to be investigated. But this time a human being had come forward of his own

will to be a witness. The question was whether his voice would reach the public at all.

CHAPTER 77

The Night of the Boundary Line

That night in Kolkata was unusually damp. Water kept dripping from the neem leaves outside the police station, although the rain had stopped. After arriving from Delhi, Arunima Rao first sat down with the local officer, Anirban Dutta. She did not spread the file of her earlier case across the table. 'The complaint here falls within the local jurisdiction,' she said. 'I want to cooperate, not take control.'

On Anirban's desk lay Nabin Pal's written petition. He had not yet met Nabin in person. Its first line said, 'There has been an attempt on my life.' The last said, 'I want to speak about an officer.' Between the two were five incidents, not one of which had yet been independently confirmed.

'Did he come of his own accord?' Arunima asked.

'He called in the afternoon. Before the appointment that had been arranged for the evening, his motorcycle fell at a crossroads,' Anirban said. 'He's in hospital. His hand is injured, but we have been told there's no immediate danger to his life. He claims a vehicle struck him from behind; he didn't see its full registration number.'

Arunima did not write 'attempted murder established' at the top of his petition. 'Keep three things separate,' she said: 'what was found at the scene, what was seen there, and what Nabin thinks happened.' Anirban nodded. He had already sent a request to preserve the road-camera recordings.

At the hospital, Nabin's wife, Mousumi Pal, sat a little way from his bed. In her bag was her son's empty school lunchbox. 'Even after this injury he's determined to name very powerful people,' she said as soon as she saw Arunima. 'If something happens to him, where will my child go?'

Arunima pulled up a chair and sat down, but did not make a display of reassurance. 'Your question is justified. His need for protection and his wish to testify have to be assessed separately. Today's incident will be investigated; he won't be pressured into making a statement.'

Nabin turned on the bed. His elbow was bandaged. 'I won't run away from being called an agent,' he said. 'I used to show people the company's advertisements and help them fill out the forms. I didn't know how many of the promises I passed on were actually true. Some people went abroad; others didn't. I received a commission.'

'How much commission?' Anirban asked.

'Sometimes three per cent, sometimes a fixed sum. It wasn't five per cent everywhere,' Nabin said. 'I had some receipts, but the papers I'm being shown now bear the seal of another company. I'm not telling you this to lessen whatever offence I committed.'

Arunima stopped him. 'If evidence of fraud or complicity on your part is found, that, too, will be investigated. Do you understand this and still wish to make a statement?'

Nabin looked towards Mousumi. There was fear, not consent, in her eyes. 'First I want to talk to a lawyer,' he said.

'That is the right thing to do,' Arunima replied.

Out in the veranda, Anirban showed her a preliminary medical document. The injuries were consistent with a fall from a motorcycle; whether it had been struck from behind or had suddenly skidded was still being investigated. Two small pieces of glass had been recovered from the scene; no laboratory had yet said what vehicle they came from. One passer-by spoke of a black car, another of a blue one. Arunima wrote: 'Conflicting descriptions preserved.'

At half past nine, the long hospital corridor began to grow quiet. Mousumi received a call from home. Her son wanted to know when his father would return. Turning towards the window, she said, 'The doctor says he needs rest. I'll let you see him tomorrow.' After the call, she said softly to Arunima, 'I have one request for the police. Don't write my child's name on more papers than are necessary.'

'I'll ask about the arrangements for protecting his identity,' Arunima said. 'Only what the investigation requires.'

Nabin was gripping the corner of the hospital sheet. 'The call I got,' he said, 'there was a habit of giving orders in that voice. He told me not to go to the meeting. I remember the words, not the name.'

'Did anyone tell you his name?' Anirban asked.

'No. He said, “The matter has been settled higher up. Don't meet anyone without the coordination officer's permission.”'

For a moment Arunima looked at Anirban. In government offices, 'coordination officer' was a designation used for many kinds of work; a private contracting company might use it too. That term alone could not establish the guilt of a government official.

'Were you familiar with the designation before this?' Arunima asked.

'One email accompanying a recruitment letter said “coordination officer”. But I don't know the name of the person who sent that email. I assumed he must be from the government.' Nabin stopped himself. 'But that was my assumption. Not evidence.'

There was a change in his outlook contained in that small correction. Once he had sold jobs by turning uncertainties into assurances. Now the consequences of a mistaken assumption might fall on the lives of his own family.

After leaving the hospital, Arunima asked for the original audio record of the telephone message, if it was legally obtainable. Nabin deferred his decision to hand his phone over against a written police inventory until his lawyer arrived. The officers respected that limit. First, an acknowledgement of his request was prepared.

At Anirban's office, information arrived about the still unidentified driver. The traffic lights at the crossroads had been faulty when Nabin's motorcycle fell; a complaint was already recorded in the municipal register. This did not disprove the claim of attempted murder, but strengthened an alternative possibility of an accident.

'Investigate both possibilities,' Arunima said. 'Don't wait for an accident to be proved before protecting a witness, and don't declare someone an accused merely because there is fear.'

In the last hours of the night, Nabin's lawyer, Deepa Chaudhary, arrived at the hospital. She asked for the right to speak to him alone. The police arranged a time consistent with his medical needs. When Deepa came out, she said, 'My client isn't bargaining to escape responsibility for his professional conduct. But he needs time for the papers he possesses to be recorded accurately.'

'He will have it,' Anirban said.

Deepa showed them a copy from her file, not an original. It bore only a designation: 'Regional Coordination Officer'. There was no person's name. At the top was an old seal reading 'Samudrasetu', but the printed date differed from the time Nabin had been recruited by two months. 'I'm not claiming the authenticity of this letter has been established,' Deepa made clear.

Before accepting the copy, Arunima had a written record made of its source, when it had become available and the limits of the lawyer's consent. Afterwards, only information about the designation and a possible link to an office was sent to Nilima in Delhi through official channels. Nowhere was the name of Nabin's child included.

Before going home, Arunima visited Mousumi once more. Sitting beside the bed, Mousumi watched the face of her sleeping husband. 'If he's guilty, the law will do its work,' she said. 'But no one has the right to silence him.'

Arunima made no reply. Outside, the first vehicle of the morning drew up near the hospital gate. A message from Vivek Sood in Delhi appeared on her phone: 'The words “coordination officer” also appear on two different pages of the first ledger. It may be a title attached to a service channel, not to a person.'

Reading the message, Arunima immediately wrote: 'A matching designation is only a lead. Comparison of original pages, dates and authority is essential.' Rain began falling again outside the hospital. In that rain, the first line of Nabin Pal's statement—'There has been an attempt on my life'—remained unproved. But the fear felt by a witness was entirely real.

CHAPTER 78

The Paper Mafia

Three files lay before Vivek Sood in an old office in Delhi. The first was the gambling-payment ledger; the second contained export-related documents from Surat; the third was an authorised summary received from the Kolkata recruitment records. All three were made of different kinds of paper, bore different writing and served different purposes. Vivek had an old habit: whenever several names appeared, he drew a diagram linking them with arrows. This time he sat for a long while without picking up his pen.

Nilima Jha opened the office window. The October air outside was mild. 'Are you going to make the same mistake again?' she asked.

'Which mistake?'

'Seeing the same mark on two papers and assuming both belong to the same person.'

Vivek did not smile. 'My first mistake was greater than that,' he said. 'I stayed alive while someone else was wrongly identified as dead. The family in whose home a death had occurred got its chance to hear the truth late. Now I see the cost of each assumption of mine falling on somebody's life.'

In the first ledger he pointed to a term circled in red: 'Service Contact'. There were references to certain payments, but no list of the people who had actually received the service. Similar wording appeared on the Surat invoices. The summary of the Kolkata recruitment letter contained a designation: 'Regional Coordination Officer'. The words seemed to be speaking to one another; the question was who had written the meaning of that conversation.

Nilima wrote three dates at the top of the papers. The page in the first ledger had been created before the initial inquiry into Amber-9 began. The export invoice dated from some months later. Nabin Pal's copy belonged to yet another period. 'It's possible that a permanent payment facility serves several customers,' she said. 'That alone doesn't establish that every customer using it belongs to a single criminal organisation.'

'And it's also possible the people providing the facility know what their customers are doing,' Vivek added.

'Possible,' Nilima agreed. 'But knowledge and criminal participation are two different questions. We have to find out who authorised each payment, what service was actually provided, and whether someone outside the papers confirms the account.'

Vivek set a clean sheet before him. At the top he wrote, 'What is certain'. Beneath it he listed a few sums confirmed by bank records, the existence of certain actual companies and several particulars from the recruitment letters. On a second sheet he wrote, 'What is inferred'. On a third, 'What may turn out to be wrong'. Looking at the third sheet, Nilima said, 'Don't leave this page blank.'

Just then Arunima called. She gave a brief account of the new case in Kolkata. The inquiry into Nabin's accident was continuing; the designation 'coordination officer' had appeared on a copy, not on an original document. Vivek said the same designation was in the first ledger. Arunima made it clear that the full personal statement from the Kolkata case could not simply be circulated within the Delhi financial inquiry. A separate lawful request would be sent for the necessary facts that could be shared.

After the call Vivek said, 'I remember an old colleague, Dhruv Narayan. He used to say, if there's agreement among the people concerned, write the designation on the paper, not a name. At the time I took it for ordinary office shorthand.'

'What's the source for that?' Nilima asked.

'My memory. There's no written record.'

'Then put it in the memory register, not among the evidence.'

At those words Vivek remembered Dhruv's face from long ago. Dhruv used to laugh and say that the most dangerous object in an office was not a gun, but an unread signature. Vivek had laughed then. Now he understood what that laughter had cost.

At noon a written response arrived from Aditi Rane in Surat. The particulars of one genuine textile consignment agreed with independent records; there was a difficulty with the description of the goods in the second consignment; and the underlying service said to justify the 'staff movement' payment had not yet been established. These findings could strengthen or weaken the possibility of fictitious exports, but they did not prove that the entire business was false.

Vivek placed the wage register of a genuine Surat business in a separate file. 'If every account transaction is frozen in the name of shutting down this business,' he said, 'the fires in the workers' kitchens will go out before the truth is established.'

'That's why we need targeted orders, recorded reasons and timely reviews,' Nilima said. 'In the effort to catch the guilty, an innocent person's livelihood must not be made into evidence against him.'

Later that afternoon came an independent auditor's preliminary observation. It said that the mark of the same outside document-preparation agency appeared on certain export-payment papers and invoices for recruitment services. The agency was called 'Madhyapath Records Service'. The observation was silent on whether this company merely prepared documents or also controlled the money itself.

'Being an outside scribe isn't a crime in itself,' Vivek said. 'An office can prepare invoices for a dozen companies.'

'And if the same scribe knowingly inserts false particulars, that becomes a separate question,' Nilima replied.

They examined the places reserved for signatures on two documents. On the first, the name of the person granting approval was unclear; on the second, there was only a designation. Without the original bank authorisation, no one's financial authority could be established. Vivek laid a finger on the first page of the old ledger, where a pencil line ran towards the margin. He had overlooked that mark before. This time he attached no name to it.

That evening Revati Karn called. 'One question for a news report,' she said. 'The name of the same service organisation has now appeared in records from three cases in three cities. Can I write that a single mafia runs them all?'

'No,' Vivek said. 'You can write that investigators are examining the possible use of the same service channel in three separate cases, and that evidence of a common beneficiary or criminal purpose is still lacking.'

Revati was quiet for a moment. 'There's no sensation in that sentence.'

'The truth it contains will last longer than any sensation,' Nilima said.

After ending the call, Vivek looked at a photograph of his old home—the house where a drawer had been shut because people believed him dead. He thought how many days a dead person's family had been denied its rights because a name was wrong. Then he looked at the brief update on Nabin Pal lying on the desk: 'Under medical supervision; statement procedure in progress.'

Just then Aditya, the office assistant, showed him a printed public post. It had a black border, the image of a candle and Nabin Pal's name. It said: 'Recruiting agent murdered before he could tell the truth.' Hundreds of comments were accumulating below.

'This is wrong,' Vivek said.

'How certain are you?' Aditya asked.

Vivek paused. The report that Nabin was in hospital was several hours old. 'Ask the local officer for his present condition. A social-media post doesn't amount to a death certificate,' he said.

A reply came through official channels: Nabin Pal was alive at that moment and under medical observation. The source of the public post was still unknown. Aditya immediately preserved a screenshot and wrote an update: 'Death claim false; original publisher unidentified.'

But there was something else in the post. Under Nabin's name, the designation 'Regional Coordination Officer' was printed. Nabin had described himself as a 'Recruitment Contact'. Whether someone had changed his designation or an anonymous promoter had simply made a mistake was not clear.

'Who is the source for that line?' Vivek asked softly. Aditya had no answer. Something resembling an office wall could be made out behind the figure in the post, but the blurred image could not establish where it was taken.

Darkness began to descend outside. Vivek closed the three files separately once again. Between them he left a blank sheet on which future comparisons with independent records would be entered. As Nilima closed the window, she said, 'How easy it is to kill a man on paper.'

'But if he's alive and his voice is being suppressed,' Vivek replied, 'the next question for the truth is how to protect him.' That night, for the first time, what lay at the top of Vivek's desk was not the name of a supposed common criminal owner, but the acknowledgement number for a request for security at a hospital. It remained uncertain whether Nabin's statement would be recorded independently the following morning.

CHAPTER 79

The Witness Who Became a Shadow

The light of dawn had not yet fully reached the windowpanes in Delhi when Nilima Jha received a short message from Kolkata: 'Nabin Pal will not give a statement.' It came not from the police but from the office of his lawyer, Deepa Chaudhary. Medical examinations had continued at the hospital until the night before; at that time, Nabin had been willing to speak openly about the risks he faced. In just twelve hours, he had changed his mind. Nilima read the message three times. There was neither a threat in its final words nor any explanation. It was only that another door to the future had closed.

Her first thought was to phone Nabin. Then she checked her own hand. She was not the officer directly investigating the complaint, and approaching a witness in Kolkata in that manner could compromise the integrity of his protected statement. Nilima informed Arunima Rao through official channels and laid Vivek Sood's three-part sheet on the desk: 'What is certain', 'What is inferred', 'What may turn out to be wrong'. In the first section was the official confirmation that Nabin was alive in hospital; in the second, the possibility that he had been put under pressure not to testify. The third was still blank.

At that hour, on the other side of Delhi, a video was sent to Revati Karn. A man who looked like Nabin faced the camera and said, 'Everything I said before was wrong.' The clip lasted just twelve seconds. Behind him were white hospital curtains; under his voice rose the sound of a television. Revati did not immediately turn it into a news report. Instead she asked, 'Who recorded this, when, and where is the full statement?' No answer came from the account that had sent it.

In the Kolkata hospital, Nabin Pal kept telling the nurse who was removing the dressing from his right hand, 'Don't let anyone in.' She said that no interview could take place without a doctor's permission. Nabin's wife, Mousumi, sat beside the bed. Their son's small schoolbag hung on the back of a chair; she had had it brought over that morning after spending the whole night away from home.

'I'm not afraid of your truth,' Mousumi said quietly. 'I'm afraid of the people who want to silence you. And our child says everyone at the school gate keeps asking his name.' Nabin looked at his wife for the first time. He remembered the forms he had filled out for dozens of young women during

his old recruitment work. The home addresses on those forms could now become instruments of fear.

'I gave all those people false hopes of jobs,' Nabin said. 'If I don't speak, their names will remain trapped in the papers.'

'Speak,' Mousumi said. 'But first tell me how we're all going to stay alive. I can't find the answer to that question alone.'

When Deepa Chaudhary arrived at the hospital, Nabin gave her two separate papers. The first said: 'At present I am not in a position to give a formal statement.' The second was a request for protection for his family. Reading them, Deepa said, 'It would be dangerous to treat these two papers as meaning the same thing. The first expresses your present wish; the second may indicate possible pressure. Your earlier petition has not disappeared from the record. It's the police's job to establish which parts can be independently corroborated.'

Nabin lowered his head. 'I never named any person. I gave only a designation—Regional Coordination Officer. Then how did this photograph reach everyone?'

'That's an important question,' Deepa said. 'But it doesn't prove the photograph was leaked from that office. The hospital visitor register, the phone records and the time of public release must all be examined separately. No private details will be given out without your consent.'

From the veranda outside, Deepa phoned Arunima. 'My client wishes to postpone his statement today. He has also submitted a written request for his family's protection. Please have the receipt of each recorded separately. Do not attempt to pressure him.' Arunima agreed at once, but a difficult question arose in her mind: if the mere presence of an officer frightened a witness, how could the truth of his testimony be protected?

At noon Nilima could learn from Deepa, within the limits of her authority, only that the statement had been postponed; there was as yet no final sworn withdrawal. By then phrases such as 'Nabin admits he lied about everything' were spreading on social media. In the Delhi office, Aditya the assistant grew angry when he saw the reports. 'They're protecting the guilty,' he said.

'Who is guilty?' Nilima asked.

'Whoever threatened him.'

'I can accept that he's frightened. But we haven't yet identified anyone who threatened him. If we invent a name today, no one will believe Nabin's truthful statement tomorrow either.'

Aditya fell silent. He showed Nilima the video playing on his phone. The hospital curtain in the picture appeared to be the same as the one in the background of an official photograph, but the beginning of the words had been cut off. A subtitle below declared, 'I lied.' What could actually be heard was only, 'What I said before', after which a loud sound made the words

indistinct. Aditya wrote: 'Possible editing of video; original copy not yet obtained.'

At that moment Nilima remembered Amresh. In the five-hundred-rupee game, Amresh would admit his losses, but what shamed him was how long he had lied to his mother. Nabin's situation was different: he might himself have taken part in a dishonest recruitment process, and now his family might have to pay the price of his telling the truth. The two fears were not the same. But silencing either voice would not create the truth.

In the evening Arunima called an official meeting. Anirban Dutta joined from Kolkata by video link. Deepa confirmed only that Nabin would make an independent decision once his medical condition and security arrangements had been attended to. A temporary security assessment for the family had begun, but no date had been fixed for providing its written outcome. Arunima said, 'The statement has been postponed; the inquiry has not. Independent bank records, appointment letters and hospital registers will be examined in their proper sequence.'

During the meeting, a short message came from Aditi Rane in Surat. The designation 'Regional Coordination Officer' had also been found on an old copy of an export-assistance agreement. Nilima immediately marked it separately. 'One expression appearing in three places means three separate questions for now. Don't put further pressure on Nabin because of it.' Arunima said that no connection would be drawn with the Kolkata incident without the original of this new record.

After the meeting, a new paper arrived at Arunima's office. There was a government registration number along the top and officials' designations at the bottom. A letter from the secretariat asked for particulars relating to administrative postings for the following week earlier than usual. Such lists could also be part of ordinary year-end adjustments. But the name of Arunima's own case was circled in blue ink, and the receipt time on the page was in the evening.

'Why am I on this list?' Arunima asked her assistant.

'Ma'am, these are preliminary particulars. It's not a transfer order,' the assistant said.

Arunima looked at the date. The list had gone out from the secretariat on the same day Nabin's statement had been postponed. It might be a coincidence. She did not touch the blue circle around her name even with a pencil. She placed the original in the receipt register and said, 'Preserve separate evidence of what paper arrived at what time.'

After returning home that night, Nilima read one publicly available line from Deepa before switching off her phone: 'My client has exercised his rights concerning his safety.' She thought that a witness's silence was often dishonesty, but at times it was also a last attempt to claim the right to stay alive. That night, two papers were closed in two different offices: one

postponing a statement, the other a list of possible transfers. Whether the two were connected was still unknown.

CHAPTER 80

The Export of Lies

When the iron gate of the Surat warehouse opened at dawn, cotton fibres floated out into the air. Aditi Rane had not arrived shouting about a raid. In her hand were three receipt lists: actual entry of goods, release from the port and payments recognised by the bank. On seeing Shankar Paswan, she first asked, 'Is everything all right at home?' Shankar nodded, but his eyes were on the new camera installed behind the gate.

'Nothing can go unseen here any more,' Shankar said.

'Does the camera see everything?' Aditi asked.

'The camera was off for three hours on the last night. They say it was being repaired.'

Aditi did not immediately treat his reply as evidence. She asked for the maintenance register and the electricity department's service log. Only what Shankar had actually seen was recorded; it would have been unfair to ask him why the camera had stopped working. Shankar concealed an old scar on his hand. He wanted work, not sensational news.

Inside the warehouse there were real sacks of cloth. Some smelled of old stock; others bore the colour of a new factory. Aditi knew that hundreds of workers earned their living from this trade. If one person's invoice proved false and every textile consignment was therefore declared imaginary, the work of real labourers would also disappear from the records. She called for an independent examiner to count the goods and had every consignment marked separately against the warehouse ownership register.

The particulars of the first consignment were clear. The factory's production record, the weighbridge certificate and the port's outward movement record fell in the same sequence of dates. Payment for that consignment had arrived late, but the quantity of goods, customer's name and invoice reference matched the bank's receipt entry. Aditi wrote in the margin: 'Ordinary trade; no indication of falsity in this consignment.'

The second consignment looked equally complete on paper. But the warehouse's original register listed bales of cloth where the port documents described machine parts. There was another discrepancy involving time: four days before some boxes were shown as arriving at the warehouse, the port's digital record referred to their outward clearance. That looked impossible. Yet Aditi knew that an electronic system could record advance permission separately from the time goods actually left.

'What time does this indicate?' Aditi asked the port officer.

'The time an entry was accepted, not necessarily the time the goods were loaded onto a ship,' he replied.

'And the proof of actual loading?'

'That's in a separate list. It would be a mistake to assume goods went aboard merely because an advance entry was made.'

For the first time, Aditi breathed more easily. A possibly innocent reason had emerged for the four-day difference, but the question of who had changed the description of the goods remained. The officer asked for time to obtain a certified copy of the separate authorised loading list. Aditi treated that time as an ordinary requirement of the inquiry, not a sign of deliberate delay.

A warehouse employee, Praveen, said that invoices for the second consignment were sometimes prepared by an outside accounting office. He could not say the office's name clearly. 'The paperwork was prepared in one place and signed in another,' he said. Aditi suggested no name to him. 'Say only what you saw with your own eyes,' she told him. Praveen could recall a small blue square mark on some copies, but not the letters written within it.

At noon a message came from Nilima in Delhi. A reference number from one of Aarav Malkani's original service invoices had also been found on a copy of these export records. Near the number was printed 'Madhyapath Records Service'. Aarav had previously described the company as an outside document-preparation agency, not the owner of the funds. Aditi replied: 'Name and number require verification. Actual authorship, approval and source of payment to be confirmed separately.'

Shankar Paswan came back hesitantly. He held an old wage receipt. 'I told you before about the five-per-cent deduction. Now everyone at home says the money for gambling came out of my wages.' There was shame in his voice, not anger. 'Have I received money from a crime?'

Aditi read the receipt. Beside the deduction, in small print, were the words 'Group Security Arrangement', but the pages concerning the worker's consent and the fund's account were missing. 'That doesn't make you a criminal,' she replied. 'If the deduction was improper, its investigation concerns workers' rights. I won't say this deduction went into the gambling business merely because people call both amounts five per cent.'

'Then who got my five per cent?' Shankar asked.

'You deserve an answer about your wages. And there must be a record of whoever received the money. That's a separate inquiry, but I won't dismiss it as a small question.'

That evening Aditi joined Arunima Rao and Nilima by video in the Delhi coordination room. She showed them three separate columns. The first confirmed actual goods; the second set out discrepancies between invoices and shipping lists; the third raised questions about the approval of payments. 'If the description of the second consignment was changed

knowingly, there may be grounds to investigate an offence of fictitious export,' Aditi said. 'But first we must establish who had authority to change the original entry.'

'Is it linked to the ledger in the first financial investigation?' Arunima asked.

'We've found the same name for a document-preparation agency,' Nilima said. 'But there's still no continuous, verified banking trail linking the original payments in the first ledger to the funds in this consignment. If the same hands moved the money, proof will come from bank authorisations and the actual beneficiary, not from a blue mark alone.'

Aarav Malkani was not present at the meeting. His written response arrived officially. He had verified certain bills for Madhyapath's service fees, but physically inspecting ship cargo had not been his responsibility. Alongside accepting responsibility for his own part, he gave a different legal interpretation of certain agreements. Arunima noted: 'Partial admission does not automatically prove the remaining offences; cross-examination and original records required.'

Suddenly the connection in the room failed. Aditi's face froze on the screen and the sound stopped. The assistant did not immediately open another channel. After a few moments, the connection returned. Aditi said the power at the warehouse had gone off again, although her mobile network was still working. The timing was odd, but no conclusion could properly be drawn about whether this was an accidental fault or deliberate interference.

When the meeting ended, Aditi reviewed local information about Mahesh, an old warehouse employee. Mahesh had previously been absent on several nights; now it was reported that his home address had changed. Shankar did not insist that Mahesh was guilty. He remembered only one thing: 'He didn't touch a single box that night. He just kept looking at the papers.' To verify such a memory, the attendance register for that night was needed.

The following day, a certified extract from the actual ship-loading list arrived. The advance digital entry and the time at which the goods were actually loaded aboard were different. Part of the earlier four-day contradiction was explained. But the certified list described the second consignment as 'textiles', while a bank service invoice recorded a purchase of 'mechanical equipment' against the name of that very consignment. Not one item, but two different commercial claims using the same reference.

Aditi laid down the documents and wrote: 'Date discrepancy partially resolved; goods-description discrepancy remains.' For the first time, she had a documentary basis on which a transaction-specific audit and a lawful investigation into a possibly false description could proceed. This was no announcement that an entire mafia had been caught. But it was the first

clear crack through which it might be possible to trace an approval signature.

Then Arunima's assistant called from Delhi. 'Ma'am, a letter has arrived from the secretariat. Will you be at the meeting today?'

'What's it about?'

'Administrative posting. The sealed original is being entered in the register now.'

Aditi put down the phone. Amid the accurate weighing of goods, workers' efforts and conflicting papers, the first firm basis for the inquiry had been established. But the officer who would have to read the findings might soon be sitting in another chair. She immediately entered her conclusions in the official register, with a name, date, attached copy and the recipient's signature. Officers might come or go; the papers would not stop asking questions.

PART FIVE

The Darkness of Democracy

CHAPTER 81

The Day of Transfer

The envelope addressed to Arunima Rao at her Delhi office was white. The government seal was blue, and the red receipt number ran along the edge. That day the employees carrying files through the office corridor spoke less than usual. Arunima opened the letter. Its first line was ordinary enough: 'For administrative reasons'. The second named her new posting. The third gave the date on which the order would take effect: five days later.

She did not lean back in her chair. The sound of Delhi traffic came through the window. On her desk lay the newly received comparative list from Surat, Nabin Pal's request for protection and several permission papers from the inquiry into Paritosh Jha's death. Her signature appeared above them. The authority of law ought to remain within an institution, independent of the individual who signed. Yet Arunima knew that much could be lost while knowledge of the papers passed to a new officer.

Nikhil, the office assistant, asked softly, 'Ma'am, did the order come suddenly?'

'I've seen the date. Calling it sudden is how I feel,' Arunima said. 'The stated reason for the order is an administrative requirement. If anyone alleges pressure, the actual reason will have to be examined. My disagreement with the order doesn't make it unlawful.'

Nikhil said nothing. He had a copy of the earlier list on which Arunima's name had been circled in blue. In his mind, he had already attached another meaning to it. Looking at the copy, Arunima said, 'The two documents were created at different times. The first was only a list of possible postings; the second is an authorised order. We can ask the department in writing about their connection and the grounds for issuing the order. But a blue circle isn't evidence for an accusation.'

Arunima's personal phone rang. It was her mother. 'Will you have to move again this time?' she asked. 'My posting has changed,' Arunima replied. 'My place of work will change, not the meaning of the work.' Her mother could still recognise tiredness in her voice. 'Where is your home?' she asked. Arunima could not answer. For years her home had existed somewhere between two suitcases and a half-empty bookcase.

A little later Nilima Jha came to the office. Arunima did not give her a certified copy of the order; the process of its official announcement was still pending. But she informed her that preparations might be needed for handing over the work. For the first time, Nilima asked in a sharp voice, 'At

precisely this moment? The Surat papers are beginning to establish something solid. Nabin's family is frightened. Is this a coincidence?'

'It may be, or it may not,' Arunima said. 'If I claim without evidence that criminals have removed me, I'll destroy the restraint with which I conducted this investigation. Our first duty now is to secure the documents we have.'

Nilima softened her voice. 'I'm afraid that on the first day, the new officer will find messages from three countries, records from four different banks and the fears of two witnesses completely unconnected.'

'That's why the officer needs a sequence, not a story,' Arunima said. 'Where each paper came from, whose signature it carries, who saw it, what has been proved and what hasn't. I must make a register of those things for the new officer, not a list of my own opinions.'

They opened the files one by one. The first contained applications from gambling victims in Darbhanga, some of which concerned the first case. The second concerned the Kolkata recruitment matter, in which the local police were conducting the principal inquiry. The third concerned discrepancies in the Surat exports. The fourth held the available legal summaries received from Brussels and Hong Kong, some still awaiting authentication. Arunima wrote: 'It would be improper at present to turn all these into one combined charge.'

Nikhil brought three different coloured covers for the records into the room. Arunima asked him to take them away. 'Changing the colour doesn't change their legal position. The original page order, receipt dates and seals are what the files need.' Nikhil laughed. 'Ma'am, I'll remember that even after you've gone.'

At noon she had the scheduled meeting with the department's administrative officer. He said courteously that most postings formed part of periodic changes and that detailed reasons could not always be made public. Arunima submitted a written representation asking for clarity about outstanding requests to preserve evidence, the name of the newly appointed investigating officer and the formal date of handover. She did not seek a personal bargain to cancel her posting.

'Do you object to the order?' the officer asked.

'I want to ensure that complying with it does not interrupt anyone's statement, any preserved record or any date fixed by a court,' Arunima replied. 'I want written arrangements for that. The administrative decision can be examined through its own procedures; the immediate risk for me is a break in the chain of custody of evidence.'

On returning from the meeting, she saw a message from Revati Karn: 'The news of your transfer is out. Will you tell the press that you were removed under pressure?' Revati had disagreed with Arunima more than once during the inquiry, but this time she understood that a sensational headline could damage both an officer's reputation and an ongoing case.

Arunima wrote: 'Verify the copy of the order. A transfer has taken place. I have no independent evidence concerning its cause. I have asked for arrangements to ensure institutional continuity of the case.' Revati found no dramatic revelation in this answer. She deleted her proposed headline, 'Honest Officer Removed', and wrote instead: 'Officer Transferred During Investigation; Questions Over Handover of Records'.

That evening an official message came from Deepa, Nabin Pal's lawyer. A threat assessment for the witness's family had begun; detailed security arrangements had not yet been settled. 'Nabin was frightened again when he heard about the transfer,' Deepa wrote. 'He believes his earlier statement will carry no weight as soon as a new officer arrives.' Arunima offered no private assurance. She sent written instructions to the authorised office to ensure continuity in the witness-protection process, without improperly interfering in the local investigation.

At home, Arunima sat down at her desk. A half-packed suitcase stood in the corner of the room. During earlier transfers she had spent her time changing the clothes packed in that case. Now she was drawing up a list for the secure handover of papers. Her mother had tried to call again. This time she sent a short message: 'It will be late tonight. I'll talk tomorrow.' She knew that telling the people she loved 'tomorrow' could also become a postponement without end.

At nine that night Nilima returned to the Delhi office for a final reconciliation of the records. Vivek Sood sat opposite her. 'If Arunima won't be here, where do we go?' he asked. 'Justice was never her private property,' Nilima replied. She was silent for two minutes, then added, 'But now we'll find out how firmly an institution can stand without the person who held it together.'

Meanwhile, Arunima checked the total number of entries in the receipt register with her assistant. One copy listed a document called 'Surat: Goods Description Correction Letter'. The entry was absent from the second list. 'It may be at another department's head office,' Nikhil said. Arunima did not immediately raise a dispute. She asked for a copy of the original acknowledgement and wrote: 'Discrepancy between pre-handover lists; verification required.' The difference did not prove theft, but it became the first question the new investigating officer would have to answer.

Before going to bed, Arunima read the final line of the order again: 'Relieved of duties from the prescribed date.' The signature appeared valid, the issuing officer's designation matched and the receipt particulars were correct. The question was not whether the order was genuine, but its timing and the reasons behind the decision. She accused no one without evidence.

Before dawn, a new message from Nikhil appeared on Nilima's phone. 'The original document register has been found. The entry for the correction letter is there, but the box for the receiving person's signature is empty.' Nilima looked at the light beyond the window. For the first time

she understood that Arunima's transfer was not merely a question of power and pressure, but a test of a very small empty square on a form. The list named the person who would occupy the new officer's chair the following day; no one yet knew who should have signed that blank box.

CHAPTER 82

The Empty Chair in the Office

The new officer's name appeared on the official list, but the chair was still empty. In the Delhi office that morning, Raghu, the cleaner, was wiping the desk with care. After Arunima Rao's pen stand had been removed, it had left a round mark on the wood. He went over it several times with his cloth, but the mark would not disappear. Raghu had no need to understand the reason for such marks; he had simply been told to prepare the room for the new officer.

Nilima Jha entered her name at the gate. Obtaining permission to go inside took as long as usual, but for the first time she did not hear the familiar voice at the door of Arunima's room. Two registers lay open on Nikhil's desk. On one page, someone had written that morning: 'Updated Handover List.' The other page bore a red stamp with an earlier date. Nilima asked, 'Where is the Surat goods-description correction letter?'

'It's on the list,' Nikhil said, 'but the acknowledgment signature is still blank.'

'And the original letter?'

Nikhil adjusted the arm of his spectacles. 'The reply from the records room says, "Dispatch advice received; actual acknowledgment of receipt awaited." What courage is a reader supposed to draw from such a reply?'

Nilima looked at the empty box. If someone put a name in it, the paper trail would be complete; without a name, there was only conjecture. It would be easy to say that the document had gone missing in the night. In her mind, Nilima struck out the word. The register should not yet say 'missing'; it should say 'receipt unconfirmed.'

During the five-day handover period, Arunima had prepared a list of every document, one by one. On the final day she had handed the sealed packet not to Nilima but to the institutional records room. As an external adviser, Nilima was not entitled to keep a copy of everything. The restriction irritated her, but Vivek's mistaken identification as a dead man had taught her that good intentions did not create authority where none existed.

The new investigating officer, Mansi Verma, arrived seven minutes later than the appointed time. A faint line of travel dust marked her plain sari. She carried three thick files and a small notebook. On entering the room, she did not sit in the chair. First she studied the receipt-register list pinned

to the wall; then she asked Raghu, 'Was a separate inventory made of everything that was on this desk before?'

Raghu grew nervous. 'I only wiped it, madam.'

'I'm not accusing you. I want to know what was there.' Raghu asked, 'Should we include the pen stand?'

'Yes. If someone had placed it behind a stack of papers, even that might matter.'

Surprise crossed Nikhil's face. It seemed to Nilima that the new officer was less eager to prove her integrity on her first day than to preserve the office's practical memory. It was a small sense of relief, not proof that she could be trusted.

The meeting began. Before examining three copies of Revati Karn's published report, Mansi asked about the limits of the office's authority. 'Which office is conducting the principal investigation in Surat? Who is responsible for protecting the witness in Kolkata? On what specific order does this office's role rest?'

Nilima did not turn the answers into one continuous story. She gave the separate dates, case numbers and names of the issuing officials. Nikhil checked them against the receipt numbers of the original orders. On the left-hand page of her notebook, Mansi wrote 'My authority'; on the right, 'The authority to which a request must be sent.'

'If the same name appears in five files,' Mansi said, 'we must first find out whether it belongs to a person, an institution or merely a commonly used service name. Otherwise this office's next order will collapse under its own weight in court.'

Nikhil raised the Surat correction letter again. One page of the register carried a stamp marked 'Received,' but there was no signature from the person to whom the paper had actually been handed. At the edge of her notebook Nilima wrote: 'A receipt stamp establishes a procedure, not a person.' Mansi did not immediately order a police complaint for theft. She wanted lawful verification of the original register, the log of doors being opened and the records-room entry list.

After the meeting, Nilima called Arunima from the verandah. Arunima had reached the city of her new posting. Traffic could be heard behind her. 'The new officer understands,' Nilima said.

'Me?' Arunima asked.

'The papers. That's better.'

For the first time in many days, Arunima laughed openly. 'Then write her name in your notes, not my shadow.'

After ending the call, Nilima saw Revati Karn standing in the corridor. She had no camera in her hand, only a printed draft of an article. 'I wrote that the file went missing after the transfer,' Revati said. 'But I heard your answer and held it back. What's the accurate wording?'

'Receipt of the original is unconfirmed. It has not yet been established that this was a consequence of the officer's transfer.'

Revati lowered her eyes. 'A truthful headline is often very short. It takes a good deal of courage to print it.'

That afternoon Mansi received a written representation from Deepa Chaudhary, the lawyer in Kolkata. Nabin Pal wished to clarify certain parts of his first statement; his family's safety was still uncertain. Mansi did not want Nabin summoned to Delhi at once. She wrote to the investigating officer concerned that any statement must be voluntary, lawful and taken independently, and that the family's private details should remain within a limited circle of officials.

Nikhil opened the inner door of the records room to put away a sealed receipt packet. In the entry register, one line had been written in black ink during the night: 'Inspection of copy — Surat correction letter.' Only two letters of the officer's name could be read; ink had spread over the rest. The time of inspection was before Arunima had been relieved of her duties, but after the list had been prepared.

Mansi was silent for a long time when she saw the entry. 'It would be premature to say someone removed this paper,' she said. 'But I need to know who inspected it, what lawful authority they had and why they entered.' Nikhil wrote out an order to have a secure image made of the relevant original register.

Mansi now occupied the empty chair. The round mark remained on the desk. The blank square for a signature, which until yesterday had seemed no more than an unfinished procedure, now stood beside a second fact: the time at which another document had been inspected. The two facts did not establish a single incident, but the number of questions had risen from one to two.

CHAPTER 83

A Copy of the Missing File

It was a quarter to eleven at night in Arizona. Isha was standing beside the mirror in her room when a message arrived from Sara in Delhi: 'How much longer will you use an incomplete record to avoid talking to me?' Isha read the words on the screen and set her phone down. Whenever questions of love and professional confidentiality arrived on the same evening, she usually ended up being unfair to both.

Isha's technical institution had received only a limited request from an authorised laboratory in Delhi. A discrepancy had been found between the secure copy of the Surat goods-description correction letter and the time entries in the digital record. The laboratory wanted Isha's scientific observations on possible ordinary causes involving date formats, time zones and the process of making copies. Isha had neither the original seized file nor anyone's private data, and no authority to present evidence in court.

She called Sara. 'I want to answer you, but there are details I can't share.'

Sara spoke after a long silence. 'I'm not asking for details. I only want to know whether you're all right.'

'I'm not,' Isha said. 'But even saying that has seemed difficult.'

Sara fell silent at the other end of the call. For the first time, Isha felt the difference between confidentiality needed to protect her independence and the distance she had created from the person closest to her. She said, 'Tomorrow I'll give you a whole hour without explaining my work. The demands of my job are real; they don't mean I've stopped caring about you.'

In the Delhi laboratory sat Mansi Verma, Nilima Jha and the authorised digital examiner, Naman Singh. Three items appeared on the display: the sealed entry for the original paper, the office's secure digital copy and the inspection register that Nikhil could identify. Naman first explained that the time a scanned image was copied was not necessarily the time the original paper had been received.

'Are you saying the file was altered?' Mansi asked.

'I'm saying that two recorded times are different,' Naman replied. 'There are several possible reasons: the device's time zone, the office clock, a later re-archiving, or a copy actually made afresh. If the original data was changed, that requires independent evidence.'

Nilima asked, 'Does every letter in the image match the original paper?'

'The original paper is not available in this laboratory at present. Some pages appear identical in the available certified image and the other secure copy; but that alone does not establish the integrity of the entire original.'

Mansi kept her hands on the table. 'Then begin by writing down what we have and what we don't. "Missing file" is, for the present, only an expression being passed around the office.'

Just then Isha's preliminary advisory note arrived. It dealt only with the general difference between time zones. Naman showed them a page: figures entered in Indian time on the office copy, and figures in Coordinated Universal Time in the technical archive. If the two were compared without conversion, a difference of five hours and thirty minutes arose automatically.

'Then the problem is over?' Nikhil asked.

'Partly,' Naman said. 'We can explain the difference in this pair. But another page still shows a discrepancy of seventeen minutes. That question was there in the original request, and it needs a separate technical explanation.'

Seventeen minutes. Nilima thought she had heard that number somewhere before—in an earlier conversation between Isha and Sara concerning a difference in time. But she did not add a legal conclusion based on her memory. Her task in this office today was to understand the authority attaching to the papers before her, not to expose a friend's private life overseas.

Nikhil gave the laboratory an authorised copy of the records-room entry register. It contained the words 'Copy inspected,' but the ink had spread where the visitor's identity should have been. The line above clearly bore the name 'Mohit Sahay,' with a different time and date. On hearing the name, Mansi called in a member of the staff. Mohit Sahay had maintained the records register and had been on leave for the past two months. Mansi asked for a comparison of the handwriting and ink, but no one was called guilty.

At noon the authorised records room reported that the location of the original paper was recorded as being inside a sealed bundle. The correction letter's serial number appeared on the inventory attached to the outside; the pages inside had not yet been counted by opening it in the presence of a competent officer. For a moment Nilima felt relieved—there was now less basis for saying that the original had vanished altogether. Yet a name on an inventory and the correct document inside a bundle were two separate facts.

Isha joined the meeting by video. An Arizona night lay beyond the window behind her. She spoke only about general limits of technical methodology. 'The figures on a secure copy do not authenticate themselves. When was it made, by whose permission, and in whose custody was the original? Without answers to those three questions, a digital image is only an indication.'

Mansi asked, 'Will you certify the authenticity of the original image?'

'No. I don't have the original, and I have no authority as the competent examiner in this case. I'll provide a written note on general methodology; Mr Naman will verify the local records.'

Hearing Isha's answer, Nilima smiled faintly. How many people had the courage to set limits on their own work? Amid the turmoil of recent months, a 'no' of that kind could offer considerable protection.

Before the meeting ended, Naman provided one further detail. The copy's archive register contained two versions of the same document. The first was of an ordinary size; the second was much smaller. The entry for the second was seventeen minutes later. It might have been a reduced display copy, but there was no authorisation in the register for issuing a copy of that kind.

'What's the difference in their contents?' Nilima asked.

'The first copy shows an image of the reverse page of the correction letter,' Naman said. 'The second contains only the first page. But we cannot declare what that second page means until the original bundle has been opened.'

Evening was falling over Delhi when Mansi prepared an order for examination of the original bundle under the prescribed procedure. She included one condition: the presence of the person responsible for keeping the original record must be entered separately, and photographs of the earlier receipt inventory must be taken during the examination.

In Arizona, Isha shut her laptop. There was a new message from Sara: 'I'm all right today. I'll remember tomorrow's hour.' Isha replied, 'So will I.' She knew that one day they might also find the reason for the seventeen-minute difference in the technical record. But time lost in a personal relationship could not be accounted for by a machine alone.

When Naman studied the outside image of the original bundle more closely, he noticed that the words 'Second Copy' on the inventory were in a different colour of ink from the original stamp. They might have been added later, or written at the same time with another pen. Both were possible. The actual answer lay inside the sealed bundle.

CHAPTER 84

The Editor's Silence

The sea off Mumbai was grey that day. Revati Karn was looking out at that greyness from her hotel window when a message arrived from Vidya Deshmukh, the magazine's editor: 'Pre-publication meeting. The status of the writer's original records is unresolved. Come to the office immediately.' Revati's proposed headline was 'One Transfer, Two Registers and Nabin Pal's Silence.' She herself was unhappy with one word in it. She did not yet know whether silence was his own choice or the result of fear.

Old magazine covers hung on the office wall. Beneath a report from several years earlier was an editorial declaration: 'A person under investigation is not guilty merely by being investigated; the question of evidence is a matter of public interest.' Vidya sat directly below those words. Two copies of Revati's article lay before her, with one sentence ringed in red pencil: 'The Surat correction-letter file is missing.'

'I can't print this sentence yet,' Vidya said.

'Why?' Revati asked. 'There's an obstruction in the records room.'

'There's an obstruction, but calling something missing requires a different basis. New information may have come in about where the original is kept. Print exactly as much as you know.'

In the margin of her article Revati wrote Nilima's wording: 'Receipt unconfirmed.' She accepted the correction. But what Vidya said next was a different matter. 'We'll hold back the whole section on the Malta relief fund and the Mumbai advertising agreement this week.'

'Whose orders?' Revati's question was sharp.

Vidya looked towards the window. 'A board member has expressed concern. There is to be a legal review.'

'Is that legal review in writing?'

'Not yet.'

Revati turned to the third copy of her article. 'Then is this an editorial decision, or the wish of an advertiser?'

For the first time Vidya looked Revati in the eye. 'I have no evidence at present of a connection between the two. But I do know that a call came from the advertising department yesterday, and two hours later a board member spoke of holding the article. That's a sequence, not a cause.'

Revati went quiet. The distinction Vidya was making was one Revati had adopted as a standard in all her reports. The trouble was that when a

journalist encountered the same boundary inside her own institution, she felt more alone.

The new report had three strands. The first concerned the handover of work following the transfer of an officer, now under Mansi Verma's leadership. The second concerned the judicial inquiry into the death of Paritosh Jha in Patna, which newspapers had begun calling a murder although the medical findings were not complete. The third concerned a Brussels relief-expenditure entry and a possible similarity of names involving advertising support in Mumbai. Revati was not calling all three parts of a single conspiracy.

Vidya picked up the red pencil. 'The first two strands are of sufficient public importance. In the third, we need to verify the actual ownership of the company named and the basis of the payment. Publishing without that could destroy the reputation of a legitimate institution.'

'I've written that in the article,' Revati said. 'Receiving support does not mean guilt.'

'Then why does this sentence assert that the institution's payment was made to influence journalism?' Vidya put her finger on a line.

Revati read it. She realised that, for a moment while writing, she had turned her suspicion into an assertion. She struck out the sentence. Vidya removed one of her red marks. For the first time, something of the trust the two women had shared in earlier years seemed to return.

Just then the office's finance assistant brought in a sealed envelope. Before opening it, Vidya had the time of receipt entered in the register. Inside was an advertising agreement with a company whose name matched one on Revati's list of possible connections: 'Navkshitij Seva-Sampark.' The agreement concerned visual publicity for a literary conference. The payment terms appeared ordinary, but an attached schedule mentioned two unpublished events, one of them a conference whose date had been changed in the letter printed that day.

'Where did this paper come from?' Revati asked.

'From our employees' internal records,' Vidya said. 'It isn't going outside without permission for now. We'll establish the lawful procedure for inspecting it.'

Revati stood up. 'Then we should ask whether the real reason for holding my article is a proper legal review, or whether someone wants to prevent discussion of this paper.'

'Ask,' Vidya said. 'But if there's no answer, don't write a criminal's name into the blank space.'

That afternoon Revati shortened the reliable portions of her report. Arunima's transfer order was verified; the new officer had been appointed; discrepancies in the handover register were verified. Everything else called for caution. No one was to turn the question of Nabin Pal's safety into a colourful illustration for the news. Consent had not yet been obtained to

publish the name of Anupama, the dead man Paritosh's sister, so Revati removed it.

An hour before the publication deadline, Vidya called Revati back into her office. Three messages lay on the desk: a note of the advertising department's oral request, written questions for legal advice, and an anonymous message that said only, 'If this story is published, the magazine's next issue may not be possible.' The anonymous message suggested a threat, but the sender had not been identified.

'I'm frightened,' Vidya admitted for the first time. 'Forty people work at this magazine. Their livelihoods depend on it.'

Revati stopped for a moment. She had had many chances in her life to write courageous headlines, but she had never seen a monthly payroll covering forty families. She said to Vidya, 'First prepare the article on the strength of the evidence. Give the publication decision in writing. Preserve the threat separately. I'm the reporter; you're the editor. Our disagreement should be part of the record, not a secret bargain.'

Vidya opened her computer and wrote: 'The authorised handover has been confirmed. The relevant section is being withheld pending verification of specific pages of the original record. Other verified details are approved for publication.' She then directed that a copy of the anonymous threat be preserved. The note did not name the advertiser; it was merely a record of the reasons for the decision.

A shortened version of Revati's article appeared that evening. Some readers were disappointed: there was no final name for a global mafia, no sword-like flourish of sensational revelation. But it did publish the real questions concerning witness protection, the receipt register for documents and the transfer of an officer.

Before the magazine's printing press shut down, Vidya quietly opened an old notebook. On one page she found words written years earlier: 'There are two kinds of editorial silence: one protects the truth, the other suppresses it. Do not give both the same name.' She closed the notebook. She was not yet able to decide for herself which kind today's silence had been.

When Revati left the office, the sea breeze was damp. A message from Pranay appeared on her phone: 'The venue for my art exhibition is fixed. Kabir says you must come.' For the first time that day she felt a wish to get away from its harsh weight. She was about to write a reply when another message came: a signed receipt from the magazine's finance department. It showed that payment from 'Navkshitij Seva-Sampark' had been received three weeks before the anonymous threat.

The receipt established the payment, not the identity of whoever had sent the threat. But on its reverse was a short handwritten note: 'Not advertising; special cover production.' Who had written it, and what was the 'special cover'? Revati decided to call Vidya and ask for the original source of the receipt. Perhaps the real test of the editor's silence had only just begun.

CHAPTER 85

Pranay's Painting

The air was warm in Delhi that evening, but inside the art gallery people moved so carefully that it was as though a glass dish were filled with water and nobody wanted to spill it. Pranay's first solo exhibition was called 'What Cannot Be Seen'. Some visitors laughed when they read the title; others called it philosophical. Pranay was concerned only with what his mother would think when she stood before his paintings for the first time.

The painting at the very centre showed two chairs. Light fell on one, while behind the back of the other was a small square mark in blue, which a viewer had to approach closely to notice. Its title was 'The Space Between Two Men'. Standing before it, Kabir said, 'This doesn't look like our home.' Pranay replied, 'If I'd painted a picture of our home, people would see a house. I want them to see the waiting.'

Kabir's phone vibrated again. It was a message from the Delhi journalist Akriti Jha: 'Be careful in the crowd. I still haven't had a reply from the person I asked for the original advertising paper after the attack.' Akriti had recovered and returned to work, but she had not yet found a final answer about the page torn from her notebook and lost on the day of the incident. Kabir read the message and put his phone away. That evening he wanted to be known by Pranay's name, not by the name of his own report.

The gallery manager, Jaya Mathur, was checking the visitor register. She handed Pranay an anonymous parcel that had arrived at four o'clock. It contained no picture, only a thick envelope stamped by a printing firm whose mark was already familiar. Three weeks earlier, a firm called 'Drishti Art Printing' had sent a similar proposal: it wanted to use an image of Pranay's painting at an upcoming civic event in Patna, in return for a fixed fee. Pranay had replied, 'I won't give permission without seeing the purpose, the editing rights and the original presentation.'

On the new envelope were the words 'Acknowledgment of Receipt'. Jaya asked, 'Is it something important?' Pranay said, 'Perhaps an answer to the old letter. I'll look after the exhibition.' Jaya put it in a small locked drawer in the office and noted the time of receipt. No one then knew that such an ordinary entry might later matter.

Pranay's mother arrived at the exhibition, a fine streak of vermilion in the parting of her hair, a plain sari on her body and a small cloth bag in her hand. She could not read the titles of the paintings; she had left her

spectacles at home. Pranay explained the subject of each one. 'Why these two chairs?' she asked. Pranay looked towards Kabir. Following his gaze, his mother said quite naturally, 'If you've made two chairs for two people, why have you left so much empty space between them?'

Kabir was about to answer, but Pranay spoke first. 'For many days I was the one who left it empty, Ma.' His mother stood looking at the painting for a long time. Her only answer was, 'Then fill it, little by little.' For a while after that brief sentence, Kabir forgot the fear associated with his phone. The relationship between the two men was part of their private lives; no one's threat could turn it into evidence of a crime.

In another corner of the gallery, a young man began taking photograph after photograph of 'The Space Between Two Men'. On his third circuit he went behind the painting to examine its frame. Jaya stopped him. He showed his ticket but hesitated to give his name. When Pranay came closer, the young man suddenly asked, 'Where's the letter that came with this painting?'

'Which letter?' Pranay's voice was quite natural.

'The one that came from the printing firm three weeks ago. You've put it inside here. I want it back.' The young man pointed towards the wooden back of the painting. Pranay could not understand how he possessed such specific information. The artist had said nothing publicly about the proposal he had received.

Kabir stepped between them. 'Who sent you? If the letter belongs to you, put your name and your authority in writing.' The young man did not smile. Fine white dust clung to the nail of his right hand, as though he had recently touched a wall or a wooden frame. 'You people are journalists,' he said. 'You're very good at asking questions. Sometimes you have to answer them too.'

Just then came the sound of breaking glass from the back of the gallery. People turned. The frame of a small painting had fallen to the floor. A guard ran towards it. The young man hurried in the opposite direction; a security officer tried to stop him at the door. In the scuffle Jaya fell, and a small drop of blood appeared on her palm. The young man escaped through the crowd. Rather than pursue him, Pranay helped Jaya to her feet.

Kabir felt the old, automatic response of a crime reporter stirring in him: a fleeing man, a camera, an image, a story. But he saw Pranay's eyes. There was no reporter's excitement in them, only concern for Jaya. Kabir used his phone to call the security office, requested emergency help and wrote down the time of what he had witnessed. Jaya herself decided to close the exhibition.

The broken frame belonged to Pranay's painting 'The Closed Door'. There was no paper behind its backboard. Some in the crowd began saying that the attack had been meant to humiliate the two lovers; others claimed that criminals were looking for money hidden inside the painting. Pranay

tried to stop both rumours. 'Say only what you saw. Don't say what you didn't see in my name.'

When the police arrived, Jaya had the available CCTV footage preserved. In one camera's view the young man's face was partly obscured; in another he could clearly be seen beside the exhibition's opening register. In the space for a signature the name 'Vineet' appeared, but without identification the name remained unverified. Some frames were unclear because security staff had obstructed the view. Kabir did not try to create his own copy on his laptop or seize other people's phones to examine them; the original recordings remained preserved for the authorised officers.

When the exhibition closed that night, Pranay stood once more before his painting. The empty space between the chairs now seemed larger. His mother said, 'Come home with me today. Don't stay here tonight.' Holding her hand, Pranay said, 'I'll come, but first I'll collect my papers. If I abandon my work out of fear, whoever did this will get what he wants.' Kabir did not stop him.

Jaya took the new envelope out of the drawer. The outside bore the old firm's stamp, but in one corner a peculiar red mark read 'Return Original Copy'. Pranay studied it and asked Kabir, 'Tell me, why did a man who wouldn't give his name demand a letter from three weeks ago, and not my painting?'

For the first time, instead of giving an answer, Kabir changed the question. 'The letter came in your name. It's your decision whether to open it, preserve it or give it for a lawful examination.' Pranay took the envelope in his hand. The edges of the papers within had been kept remarkably neat, but one corner bore a faint impression of the same blue square mark that had appeared on several records in recent months. The same mark did not establish the same offender. But that night's intruder had known about the letter, and the question could no longer remain inside the gallery.

CHAPTER 86

The Preserved Letter

Pranay did not wait for Kabir before opening the envelope that night. He wanted the decision to be his own, not that of a leading figure in an investigation. After seeing his mother safely home, he asked the gallery manager, Jaya, for a certified copy of the receipt register. Jaya had a bandage around her injured palm. 'You handed the envelope to me,' she said, 'and I recorded the time. I don't know what's inside it.' Pranay replied, 'That's precisely why your statement is useful.'

Two old notebooks belonging to Kabir lay on a little table at home. Pranay did not even want to touch them. The envelope addressed to him had reached him personally by post. First he copied its outside stamp, date and the printing firm's name onto a sheet of paper. Then he opened it carefully. Inside were a two-page proposal, a short attachment and one handwritten line: 'Treat the previous permission letter as cancelled; accept the revised visual rights.'

The proposal asked to use three paintings for a Patna programme called 'Open Civic Dialogue'. Its themes were protection from digital fraud, unemployment and civic amenities. There was nothing inherently improper in that. Asking permission for commercial use of art was quite ordinary. But a public advertisement for an earlier event still bore the date printed on the first page, while the new page added the name of a different meeting scheduled for the following week.

One service item in the attachment read 'Special Cover Production'. Pranay paused. The phrase could mean a visual covering for an advertisement, the printing of a picture, a backdrop for a stage, or even a false identity prepared for fraud. Without the writer's authorisation, its meaning could not be fixed. Beside the amount, the payment was marked 'Approved', but there was no bank acknowledgment that money had actually been received. There was a blue office mark, and only a designation where the signature should have been.

When Kabir called, Pranay said, 'I'll show you the letter. But first let me understand what decision I've made about my own paintings.' Kabir was silent for a moment. 'You have the right to decide without telling everyone. I have questions, not orders.' Pranay had not quite expected that reply. Instead of sending an image of the paper, he said, 'In the morning I'll take it myself to the authorised investigating officer.'

Pranay woke in the middle of the night. He could hear the glass breaking in the gallery again. If the letter contained solid evidence of a crime, why had he kept it out of mind for three weeks? He had answered the first proposal, but had put off looking at the later envelope until the exhibition was over. This might be ordinary carelessness, not a fault; yet what the intruder had known made it frightening.

At dawn he went through his old messages again. He still had the original of the proposal the printing firm had sent three weeks earlier. The new, revised proposal bore a different date, the date on which the firm's registered address was recorded as having changed. Comparing the old and new versions showed an alteration in the scope of picture-use rights. Pranay also retained a copy of his written refusal. These documents made it clear that he had given no permission; whether anyone had actually used his paintings at a public event would require separate confirmation.

At Mansi Verma's office, Pranay entered his full name in the security register. Kabir accompanied him, but Pranay presented the letter himself. 'I haven't come to accuse anyone of a crime,' he said. 'Someone demanded this letter at my exhibition yesterday. I can give a statement about what I saw. It came through the post addressed to me. I'm no expert on its meaning.'

Mansi first asked, 'Are you providing this document voluntarily? Permission to make it public is a separate question.' Pranay answered clearly. 'Yes, for the investigation. My private paintings, Kabir's name and my family's address should not be disclosed beyond what is necessary.' Mansi had that limitation recorded in writing.

Nikhil entered the time the original envelope was received, the recipient's name and the external markings in separate registers. An officer of the department issued a lawful acknowledgment for taking the original into secure custody. Nobody asked for private pictures or a complete collection of messages from Pranay's phone. It was agreed that if a particular conversation was needed, both his consent and the legal basis for obtaining it would be examined.

'Shall we connect this to the web of false exports?' Kabir asked. Mansi looked at him. 'You're a journalist; I'm conducting a preliminary investigation. A shared name, a shared colour and a shared designation may justify inquiry, not a conclusion.' Kabir smiled. 'That's the answer I needed to hear myself give today.'

Pranay then mentioned the handwritten line. On the reverse, in small letters, were the words: 'Send a second set of visual material on the day of the meeting; public cover and internal presentation to remain separate.' This might mean no more than a difference between a public advertisement and a private draft. But the intruder's insistence on getting the 'original letter' made it impossible to treat the matter as wholly routine.

That afternoon Mansi prepared a letter requesting the lawful permission for the event and the available public-expenditure records from the

competent office in Patna. She did not demand attachments concerning internal accounts without judicial authority. On the first call to Prachi Jha's genuine 'Janachetana Manch', the organisation was not named as a criminal institution; the caller merely sought confirmation of its participation in that day's public civic meeting. Prachi said the organisation's health and fraud-awareness volunteers might attend, but it was not responsible for the event's entire financial arrangements.

'Pranay,' Mansi asked once more, 'have you seen your paintings used at this event?' Pranay answered, 'No. I haven't given permission. If one has been displayed somewhere, that's a separate fact.' He offered to make no public accusation against anyone. By his consent and his refusal alike, he remained an independent person; being Kabir's lover neither diminished nor enhanced the value of his testimony.

As they left the office, Kabir said to Pranay, 'I've spent too much of my time with you acting like a journalist.' Pranay laughed. 'Sometimes someone becomes a reporter even in love; sometimes a painter hides behind colours for fear of telling the truth. We can both improve.' They stopped beside the road for tea. For the first time since dawn, Kabir laid his phone face down.

In the evening Mansi received an initial reply from Patna. The subject stated on the public permit was civic grievances and protection against financial fraud. A separate service arrangement had been named for stage decoration, but the permit did not directly mention the firm whose address appeared on Pranay's art proposal. Resolving the discrepancy would require lawful particulars of the service contractor.

The next line contained something more surprising: an item in the proposal's attachment read 'Special visual use on the eve of the meeting'. It might mean an ordinary rehearsal, or unauthorised publicity. Beside it was a payment-identification reference for a different bank, whose complete particulars Mansi did not yet have. While she waited for a reply, Revati called from Patna. 'Two different publicity campaigns are going on here. One advertises a meeting about citizens' problems. The other carries bitter messages meant to turn people against one another. Both posters bear the same date.'

Mansi's first concern was not the identity of an offender but the safety of the people attending the meeting. She sent information to the relevant local officer, stating the limits of the evidence. Pranay's original letter would remain secure; it would not be used to accuse any individual without a proper basis. Yet something new had emerged: the proposal for the 'special cover' associated with images whose use the artist had refused pointed to a new destination for money connected with a public meeting. Whether anyone had actually received payment at that address was for the following day's inquiry to establish.

CHAPTER 87

The Meeting and the Crisis

At dawn in Patna, two kinds of posters had been pasted along opposite sides of the road. The first said, 'A Hearing for Citizens Harmed by Digital Fraud.' The second carried, in very large letters, an angry appeal against someone. Revati Karn stood between them. The daylight was the same, but the tone of the words could not have been more different. She wanted to describe that distinction accurately in the opening line of her report.

The organising committee for the first meeting included teachers, retired bank employees and representatives of families harmed by fraud. They disagreed politically, but their public demands were that complaints should be heard, the procedure for removing unjustified restrictions on bank accounts should be explained, and progress on recovering money lost to fraud should be reported. Those demands were not, in themselves, a crime. Revati put that point first in her notes.

Prachi Jha was writing down the names of the health-service volunteers. Her organisation was not the main organiser; it was only helping provide water and first aid to affected families. 'Are you paying for this event?' Revati asked. Prachi answered firmly, 'I'm ready to show you the receipts for our medicines and medical care. I don't have the bills for the stage sound system or the publicity.' It pained her that some news websites were already describing her organisation as a foreign-funded political group.

Revati was waiting for Naman's call. Mansi Verma's office had asked for publicly available details of the service contract for the meeting, but no original banking trail had yet been obtained. In Revati's private notes was a line: 'An address in common does not establish a conspiracy in common.' It would have been easy to replace it with an attractive headline; she was deliberately making that harder for herself.

Shivshankar Mishra stood at the edge of the gathering. His daughter Madhavi said, 'Babuji, you don't have to speak on the stage. Don't feel pressured to tell people about your experience.' Shivshankar said, 'Until yesterday I couldn't look anyone in the eye. Now, if another father gets such a call, he should understand that the real police never lock a person inside a room over the telephone.' He wrote down a brief sentence about his experience and fell quiet.

Rani Devi had not come to Patna. She was responsible for opening her shop in Darbhanga. But she had sent Prachi a short message: 'Explain the

value of five hundred rupees earned by hard work, not the promise made by gambling.' Amresh had thought for a long time while typing it. Once he had dreamed of winning back his losses with those five hundred rupees; now he knew that warning others through his own mistake required a different kind of courage.

Before the meeting began, the volunteers gathered for a briefing. A local officer gave general instructions about keeping public routes clear, first aid and lawful conduct. The chief organiser made it plain that violence, damage to property and threats against any community were not the purpose of the event. There were reports of a small group continuing to shout different slogans, but it would be wrong to condemn the entire crowd without checking the group's members, their intentions and any connection with the organisers.

Revati called her colleague Akriti Jha. Akriti was standing two lanes away in Patna, back at work after treatment for the attack. 'I'll preserve the original footage from today separately,' she said. 'An edited video of the previous meeting is circulating again. This time I'll note the exact time and place of what I'm seeing straightaway.' Revati added a warning: 'Don't stay alone. Don't put a source in danger for the sake of the camera.'

The demonstration remained peaceful until noon. Elderly women handed over copies of their complaints, students read posters warning against fraud, and some political speakers expressed their different views. A journalist's job was not to select among those opinions but to describe the events correctly. Kabir called from Delhi and asked, 'Have you found where the second set of posters came from?' Revati said, 'So far I have only the account of someone who was seen holding one. The printer's name can't be read. Without firm evidence, I won't call it a payment by the organisers.'

An elderly man objected when Revati took a photograph of part of the public meeting. 'I can speak about how my daughter was cheated,' he said, 'but I don't want my face on the internet.' Revati lowered her camera. 'Your photograph won't be published without your permission.' Quietly she added, 'A sensitive story doesn't turn everyone standing here into public property.'

At three o'clock a threatening message reached the local help desk. It contained a vague warning that violence would follow the meeting. When, by whom and how—none of this was confirmed. The officers did not ignore it, but neither did they spread unverified fear among the public. The message was preserved according to procedure, and a possible-risk assessment began. Revati was given only such official information as could be published without endangering public safety.

At about the same time, Prachi noticed that another version of the meeting's actual declaration was circulating online. Violent words had been added to its final line, words that did not appear in the original register. Prachi opened the original of the text she had approved and showed it to

Revati. 'My signature is on the first version. What appears in the second isn't mine.' Revati checked that statement against the original page available to her; the person who had produced the altered document was still unknown.

In the middle of the meeting, Shivshankar came forward to the stage. He had intended to say a great deal, but when the microphone was put in his hand, he said only, 'When I was caught in the fraud, they frightened me. If we frighten one another here, how will we be different from the people who cheated me?' Silence fell over the crowd for a few moments. His words were not a slogan drawn in a ring on some false poster that evening; they were the plain appeal of a victim.

Revati noticed a movement in the shadows: an advertising board fixed to the wall behind the meeting was being taken down suddenly. Some workers said that after an event ended, the contractor normally collected the equipment. That could have been perfectly routine. But the image on the board looked like a cheap reproduction of Pranay's 'The Space Between Two Men'. The empty space in the middle of the original painting had been filled in and turned into the slogan 'Citizens' Decision'. Revati remembered Pranay's written refusal of permission.

She did not call the workers criminals. She photographed only the part that was publicly visible, recording the time, and requested the lawful details of the stage-decoration contract. The workers said they had been paid only to remove the equipment; they knew nothing about the rights to the image, any grant or the writer of the poster. At first their answers sounded insufficient, but their limited responsibility deserved to be respected.

By evening the peaceful meeting had ended. Some participants went home; others gathered their complaint papers amid the final microphone tests. The officers investigating the criminal threat did not place the same mark of guilt upon the whole event. Prachi was tired, but relieved that there had been no major emergency at the health-assistance desk.

Revati prepared her report: 'Peaceful Meeting of Citizens Affected by Fraud Concludes; Misleading Publicity Needs Separate Inquiry.' The headline was restrained and consistent with the limits of the facts. Vidya Deshmukh approved it by email. But just then Akriti called. 'Revati, an online report is showing a picture of the meeting and claiming violence has begun. The smoke in the picture isn't from today.'

'Are you certain?' Revati asked.

'There's no smoke in today's original video,' Akriti said. 'But we must first check which earlier date this photograph belongs to. I'll find the original source before publishing anything.'

Revati looked out of the window. Patna was full of the ordinary noise of evening crowds. Two newspaper headlines glowed side by side on her phone: one said 'Peaceful Meeting', the other 'City Gripped by Violence'. Both used a picture of the same gathering, but the colour of the sky differed in one

image. Revati decided to investigate the reason. A false report could itself lead to violence—but first she had to establish the date on which the photograph had actually been taken.

CHAPTER 88

Two Newspapers, Two Truths

Two newspaper headlines glowed side by side on Revati Karn's phone. That evening the traffic in Patna was normal, shopkeepers were gathering up the fruit left from the day's trade, and the chairs had already been removed from the meeting ground. Yet on the front page of one newspaper the city was burning. Behind the smoke in its photograph stood a crooked electricity pole. The moment Revati saw it, she remembered: before the meeting began that day, a new pole had stood at that very spot.

She called the journalist Akriti Jha again. 'Did you see the pole in your original footage?' Akriti said, 'It's straight in my first recording. But that alone doesn't prove the photograph is old. It might be a pole somewhere else.' Revati felt relieved to hear her caution. All day they had been trying to get away from reports of fear; now, if they were to say anything clearly, they needed patience rather than haste.

Editor Vidya Deshmukh called from Mumbai. 'Are the photographs in the two reports actually the same, or merely similar?' she asked. Revati replied, 'The sky is clear in the original photographs of the meeting. The image in the other publication appears to have smoke added to it. But I'm still checking its actual source.' Vidya said, 'Write a correction when the investigation is complete. In the meantime, don't write that we're right and the other side is lying.'

At a quarter to nine that night, Akriti arrived at the hotel with Bipul Mishra, a local photographer. Bipul agreed to show them the original files of the photographs he had taken with his camera, but laid down one condition: 'Write only what I've shown you. Don't publish my collection of old private photographs.' Revati agreed. The three of them set a laptop on the table and looked at pictures of the same ground at three different times: midday, evening, and a cultural fair held the previous year.

Bipul's expression changed as soon as the old fair appeared on the screen. 'There's the smoke,' he said. During the previous year's event, smoke had risen from a temporary cooking hearth outside the stage area. Once the photograph was cropped, it looked as though the smoke was coming from behind a crowd running across the ground. But in the original frame the cook's large pan, two neem trees and the flags of the fair organisers were plainly visible. For the first time so late that night, Revati smiled.

'Have we proved now that the photograph is old?' Akriti asked. Bipul said, 'My original collection has the sequence of this image, its date and photographs taken continuously around it. To compare it with what you're calling a false report, we need the actual version printed by the newspaper. We must also say whether its colours were changed or it was cropped.' The point was ordinary, and all the more important for that. Revati wrote a tentative heading on her paper: 'One Event, Two Visual Sources'. She crossed out the word 'lie', which she had already decided upon.

An elderly shopkeeper closing his tea stall near the meeting ground recognised them. 'Have you come back with your cameras today?' he asked. Revati told him about the old cooking hearth. The man said, 'During last year's fair, smoke filled the space by my shop. My child developed a cough. But yesterday's fair and today's meeting are not the same thing. Even I was frightened when I saw the newspaper.' His words revealed the social cost of the report: a wrong photograph was not merely an image, but a misuse of living memory.

Revati opened the newspaper's online page once more. In small letters beside the photograph were the words 'Representative Image'. The main headline, however, declared that the city was surrounded by violence. Calling an image representative did not, by itself, make the event described in the headline true. Vidya said, 'Ask the publisher what the headline was based on. Give them an opportunity to respond. We're not writing a report about an attack yet.'

The first reply from the digital newspaper's editorial office read: 'The image was taken from the archive of an advertising partner agency.' There was no photographer's name, no permission and no mention of the original event. A few hours later a second message supplied the agency's name: 'Lokdarpan Publicity Service'. Revati circled it in her notes. The two words seemed familiar from earlier advertising contracts, though 'Lokdarpan' could also be an ordinary name used by unrelated firms.

In Delhi, Kabir had spread a printed copy of Pranay's painting across his desk. Reading Revati's message, he understood that the unapproved reproduction of the painting on the Patna stage board and the smoky image used in the misleading news report were two distinct matters, even if the same publicity worker might have been involved in both. Pranay, drinking tea, asked, 'So will you connect my painting to this report?' Kabir said, 'Only if we find the original records and a link to the agency. Your painting doesn't automatically become the property of my investigation.'

Pranay looked out through the open window. A boy in the street was drawing on the blank back of an old poster. 'Change an image and you change its meaning,' Pranay said softly. 'But guessing at the purpose of the person who changed it is another matter.' Kabir admitted that he needed that sentence more in his own home than on the first page of his report.

Kabir checked the publicly available contact information of the printing businesses. Part of the address of 'Drishti Kala Printing' matched part of the online address of 'Lokdarpan Publicity Service'. The similarity of names and addresses occurred together, but without checking the actual offices and contracts the connection remained uncertain. Kabir sent the company written questions: 'On whose authority was the artist's painting printed? For what purpose was last year's fair photograph supplied?'

At dawn in Patna, Akriti went to see the organiser of the previous year's fair. She found an old permission letter authorising publication of the event's photographs. The permission had been given for social and cultural reporting, not for use as if the photograph showed current political violence. The organiser said that seeing the old picture of smoke without its context had made him fear that his event would be disgraced. The suffering caused by the false report had reached more than one person's life.

Revati sent the first draft of her report to Vidya. It contained five solid points: independent footage showing the end of the meeting, the original photograph of the old fair, the portion cropped from the published image, the news organisation's written answer about the agency, and the questions still unanswered. She had found no evidence supporting the headline 'City Gripped by Violence'; nor had the agency's criminal intent been established. Vidya approved. 'It's distinctions like these that keep journalism alive.'

An hour before publication, Revati received a call from an unknown number. The voice said, 'You're showing the wrong image. But what will you do if the real video turns up?' Revati replied, 'We'll check that too. Your name and the original source?' Silence followed at the other end. Then came only this: 'The papers for the original upload don't show the date. Look at the agency's marking.' The call ended.

Revati did not turn the remark into news at once. She sent Vidya a message saying that an anonymous source had made a claim about the upload records. The source's identity was unknown, and there was not yet a shred of evidence to support the claim. But that night, for the first time, she began looking beyond the newspaper's mistake: who had made the misleading photograph, who had spread it, and who stood to benefit from it?

When the next day's report appeared, readers saw the two original images—the old fair and the present meeting—side by side. Many thanked her; some abused her too. One man wrote, 'But there was danger in the neighbourhood last night.' Revati did not dismiss his statement outright. Whether the photograph was wrong and whether the neighbourhood had been in danger were separate questions. She called Shivshankar Mishra.

Shivshankar said, 'Messages are going around in my neighbourhood telling people not to let their children leave the house. One person says the police are coming with batons, another that the market will close. Nobody can tell me where the information first came from.' Revati asked, 'Are you

safe?' Shivshankar answered, 'For now. But when somebody runs down an empty lane at night, every old fear wakes up in an old man's mind.'

After the call, Revati looked again at the published records of 'Lokdarpan Publicity Service'. Beneath one sample advertisement was a four-character marking resembling a mark on a copy of the receipt register for Pranay's painting proposal. The full reference numbers were different. For the first time Revati drew not a red line but a question mark in her diary: 'Shared agency, or shared imitation?' There was no certainty she would find the answer before the following night.

CHAPTER 89

The Warning at Night

In Patna, the lane where Shivshankar Mishra lived was much narrower than the neighbourhood's name made it appear on paper. If two bicycles approached from opposite directions, one rider had to press close to a wall. Among the evening smell of khichdi, clothes drying on rooftops and the laughter of children returning from school, messages of fear were travelling unusually fast that day. Shivshankar kept looking at his phone screen; an unknown voice on that very phone had once trapped him in a fraudulent digital arrest.

His daughter Madhavi said, 'Babuji, don't forward every voice message someone sends you. Hearing something first doesn't make it true.' Shivshankar said quietly, 'I'm not afraid people will call me a fool. I'm afraid somebody else will shut himself inside his house because of me.' Madhavi took the phone from her father's hand and read the message passing across the screen: 'All shops closed by ten tonight. Children must not go out.' There was neither a name nor any official mark beneath it.

Anushka, a teenage girl who lived opposite, was returning from the shop. 'Uncle, has a curfew really been imposed?' she asked. Instead of ordering her to stay inside, Shivshankar said, 'I haven't received any such government notice. I'll verify it. Go home, but not out of fear—it's getting late.' 'Everyone's saying it in the school group,' Anushka replied. There was no certainty in her voice, only a wish to find something she could trust.

Shivshankar called the public information number of the local ward office. The line was busy the first time; on his second attempt, an employee said no curfew notification had been issued so far. People were, of course, being asked to take normal safety precautions. Shivshankar wrote the date, time and the employee's name in a small notebook. 'Why do you need to write all that down?' Madhavi asked. He laughed. 'A man who's once paid for his mistake ought to remember his sources.'

Ghulam Ali, the neighbourhood grocer, had pulled his shop shutter halfway down. His younger son Rashid was sitting at the counter. 'I'd have closed before ten in any case,' Ghulam Ali said, 'but people are asking questions as though the city is going to war.' Shivshankar told him what he had verified. Ghulam Ali seemed somewhat relieved, but added, 'When so many people start saying the same thing, it's difficult to believe they can all be wrong.'

Shivshankar remembered the day of his digital arrest. The fraudster's voice had sounded convincing because it claimed that 'all the officers are saying the same thing'. That night he had sat in silence at home, unable to meet his daughter's eyes. Now he did not want to imitate that voice himself. At a small gathering in the neighbourhood he said, 'I'll tell you only what I've checked. If anyone has another official notice, show us the original source.'

Some young men laughed at his caution. 'Babuji, you're trusting the government again? What if it's wrong?' Shivshankar said, 'Trust the information, and question what you're told. Government information can be wrong; so can an anonymous message. We'll check both.' Nobody applauded his answer. But three people put away their phones and began to listen.

Two lanes away stood Prachi Jha's health-assistance centre. Volunteers returning from the peaceful meeting earlier that day were counting bags of medicines. Someone had reported that outsiders were collecting donations that night in the name of 'Jan Chetna Manch'. Prachi made it clear that her organisation was conducting no such campaign. Sapna, a volunteer, held up an old receipt book and asked, 'Why do people blame us just because they see a paper with the same name?' Prachi answered, 'It's easy for names to be alike. Keeping proper accounts of the work is harder.'

Madhavi told Prachi over the phone that her father was carefully passing on verified information in the neighbourhood. Prachi did not summon him at once; instead she asked, 'Isn't he tired?' Madhavi laughed. 'He is, but for the first time it's because he's doing something useful, not because he's frightened.' Prachi advised them not to go out unnecessarily at night and to seek help through official channels if anyone received a threat.

The first new message arrived at nine: 'The photograph of the old fair was false, but tonight something real will happen.' It was accompanied by a blurred picture of a road; there was no way to tell which city it showed. A friend from Shivshankar's village had forwarded it too. Shivshankar called him. 'Did you see this place yourself?' he asked. 'It came to me from another group,' the friend replied. 'Then don't forward it,' Shivshankar said. 'If there's danger, inform the proper authorities.'

At that moment two boys came running into the lane from the south. 'Two men on a motorcycle were asking the name of the village meeting,' one said. Hearing the boy, Ghulam Ali pulled his shutter down. But Shivshankar asked, 'At what time? Where? Did anyone see their vehicle?' The boy lowered his head. He had not seen the men himself; he had heard about them from a cousin. Shivshankar did not humiliate him by calling him a liar. That night even second-hand stories had become somebody's real fear.

When Madhavi returned indoors, her mother was gathering papers into an old metal box. 'Why are my certificates in there?' she asked. Her mother

replied, 'In case we suddenly have to leave.' Closing the box, Madhavi said, 'We're not going anywhere just now. We'll stay with Babuji. If there's a real emergency, we'll ask for help.' Her mother did not smile. But she put the box back in the cupboard.

At half past nine, without reopening the records of the fraud committed against him, Shivshankar wrote a brief message: 'The public office I contacted has not confirmed any curfew order so far. Anonymous reports of violence remain unverified. Please do not circulate them without an original source.' He asked Madhavi to read it again. 'What words should I add about safety?' he asked. 'Contact the authorised emergency number if there's an emergency,' Madhavi said. 'But don't name anyone a criminal on our own authority.'

After he sent it, some people thanked him; others wrote that Shivshankar was 'hiding the real crisis'. He sat in his chair with his phone's flickering light still on. For much of his adult life he had been in the habit of believing whatever he heard. But he did not want to distrust everything either. It was hard to walk the narrow ground between the two.

A little before eleven, the sound of a small quarrel came from the lane behind Ghulam Ali's shop. Two young men were arguing about removing a poster. Shivshankar initially heard only their voices from a distance, but from the window he could make out a gathering of two or four people, not widespread violence. 'Babuji, don't go outside,' Madhavi said. 'Inform the local security personnel.' He agreed. He had outgrown the illusion that trying to be a hero would somehow repay the debts of his earlier life.

The quarrel subsided when security personnel arrived. One young man said the poster had been put up without his group's permission; the other said he had merely been paid to paste it. Shivshankar watched from a distance. It would have been easy to call them both members of the same gang without any evidence. He wrote down only the name of the officer present and the time in his notebook. Such a note might prove useful one day; that was reason enough.

At a quarter to midnight there was suddenly a tremendous noise. The windowpanes trembled, two pigeons perched on the roof flew away, and for a moment everything in the lane went still. Someone shouted, 'A bomb!' Someone else said, 'An electrical machine has burst!' For several moments the words circled in Shivshankar's ears in different voices.

Without drawing the curtain aside, Madhavi asked, 'What can you see outside?' Shivshankar's mouth had gone dry. 'So far I've heard a noise; I haven't seen what caused it,' he said. 'We mustn't erase the distance between those two things.' He called the official emergency number, gave the location and time as he knew them, but did not have 'explosion' recorded as an established cause.

A neighbour's child began to cry. Ghulam Ali had turned off his shop lights and called from inside, 'Is everyone all right?' From behind the

window Shivshankar answered, 'We're safe. Let them investigate.' The night breeze began to move again. Half the neighbourhood was soon giving its own explanation, but for the first time that night Shivshankar refused to turn fear into news.

A little later the local help desk reported that a malfunction had been reported in an industrial electrical device near the railway line. Official confirmation of the cause was still pending. Shivshankar included that limitation in his message. Some people grew angry: 'You're still being cautious at a time like this?' He did not answer. Until the cause was investigated, even relief could only be partial.

Before dawn, Madhavi sat beside her father. 'There was a time when you were ashamed to tell me about the fraud,' she said. 'Today the whole neighbourhood listens to you.' Shivshankar's eyes filled with tears. 'They should listen not to me but to the method of verification,' he said. 'If they begin to trust my voice blindly again, how will I be different from the fraudster who deceived me?'

Just then the phone rang again. This time the call came from Shashibhushan Kumar's departmental number. The officer was asking about the times Shivshankar had written down. 'Another incident has occurred,' was all he said at first. 'A person has been found lying motionless by the roadside. We need the time of the noise heard near your lane. Please tell us what you heard, not what you think happened.' Shivshankar opened his notebook. The fear of the night was about to become possible evidence.

CHAPTER 90

Murder or Accident

At dawn in Patna, a white cloth had been hung a short distance from Shivshankar Mishra's house. The silence there came not from the crowd, but from the empty space formed within it. A young man had been found motionless beside the narrow road, near the back wall of an old printing press and a drain from which the rainwater had dried. The first instruction from local Sub-Inspector Shashibhushan Kumar was, 'Don't disturb the scene. Inform the family, but confirm the name first.'

Two explanations were already on the lips of the people nearby. Some said the young man had been killed; others said he had fallen in a panic at the loud noise during the night. No testimony was yet complete. Shashibhushan had the shadow near the body, the broken edge of the road and a raincoat lying beside it recorded. He was not prepared to declare a cause of death before the medical team arrived.

According to the address on an identity card, the young man's name was Naresh Kumar. He carried bundles of paper at a small printing press and sometimes helped close the office at night. But the card they found was dated some time ago. Shashibhushan had 'provisional identification' entered in the first statement. He remembered the records of the mistaken identification of Vivek Sood as dead; this time the family had to confirm the identity first.

When the dead man's sister Kusum arrived at the hospital, she sank to the floor. The words used in the official register were as remote to her as if they belonged to another language. 'My brother came for tea last night,' she said. 'He said he would go in the morning to collect some old dues for paper.' Shashibhushan asked gently, 'Did you see him yourself?' Kusum nodded. 'With my own eyes. I'm telling you what I saw, not something I read in a written note.'

'Are you going to tell the newspapers that he was a man of the gambling mafia?' Kusum asked. Shashibhushan replied, 'My first duty is to establish his identity, the circumstances of his death and the facts of any possible offence. Working at a particular place doesn't prove a person's guilt.' He offered Kusum no groundless assurance. Both understood that a promise of an impartial investigation and the difficult outcome of such an investigation were different matters.

Mansi Verma in Delhi received news of the incident because the old printing press's name had also appeared in the records relating to Pranay's disputed permission letter. That did not automatically give her authority over the local death investigation. In writing to Shashibhushan, she said only that a limited record of the related publicity contract was being lawfully preserved in Delhi. 'Your investigation will remain independent,' she told him. 'A common name doesn't establish a chain of crimes.'

Arunima Rao's new posting was not in Patna. After her transfer she had been working in a new office. Mansi sent her a public and lawfully shareable account of the sequence of events. Having read it, Arunima advised, 'Keep the earlier mistaken identification of a death in mind; our assumptions must not override the conclusions of the local team examining the scene and the medical experts. If interstate records are needed, obtain them through the prescribed administrative channel.' Her voice was calm, but the value of her past experience was clear in such a sensitive death inquiry.

A preliminary written note from the electricity department arrived concerning the sound heard in the night. A fault had been reported in a piece of equipment beyond the railway tracks, and staff had sent a night service team. The note did not, however, say whether the sound of that fault could have travelled as far as Shivshankar's lane. The residents' claim of an 'explosion' and the department's record of an 'equipment fault' did not automatically cancel each other out. An independent comparison of the times was necessary.

Shivshankar came to the police station with his notebook. He had written down the times, but the clock on his phone showed a difference of two minutes. 'Was your time completely accurate?' the officer asked. 'I wrote what the clock showed when I looked at it,' Shivshankar replied. 'I won't claim it was correct.' Kusum heard the old man's voice from a little distance away. She began to understand that telling the truth could also mean admitting what one did not know for certain.

Ratan Agrawal, the owner of the printing press, was called in. He acknowledged that Naresh had worked that night. 'He was there until half past ten,' the owner said. But the departure-time space beside Naresh's name in the workers' attendance register was empty. 'The employees fill in the register themselves,' Ratan said. 'A blank space doesn't mean he was locked in there.' Shashibhushan recorded the statement; the actual sequence of entries, the locks and the entry records needed separate examination.

Some members of Prachi's health-assistance group arrived to help Naresh's sister. They arranged food and access to her family, but did not make Kusum's photograph or statement public. 'Will I get my brother's wages for last month?' Kusum asked Prachi. 'We'll put that question to the owner and the competent authority,' Prachi said. 'Just now your first need is to be with your family.'

As soon as Revati Karn heard of the death, she also received a message from her editor in Mumbai, Vidya Deshmukh: 'Don't rush to state the cause of death.' Revati remembered the misleading photograph from the previous night. A newspaper had already run the headline 'Murder After Peaceful Meeting'. The headline suggested a sequence in time, but there was no proof of the cause of any crime. Revati wrote 'Investigation into Another Death' in her draft; she did not connect it without evidence to the earlier investigation into Paritosh Jha's death.

At midday, local experts carried out a preliminary examination. The nature of the injuries, the height of the road and the possibility of a fall all required separate tests. The doctor made it clear that estimates of the time of death had their limits; it would not be right to decide on murder or accident from a single wound. The answer brought Kusum no relief. Yet, for the first time, an official had not offered her manufactured certainty.

Harinarayan Sah, an elderly worker who had worked with Naresh, gave a brief account. 'Yesterday evening Naresh said that a consignment of paper had gone to the wrong address,' he said. 'Did you hear a name?' Shashibhushan asked. Harinarayan thought for a moment. 'I don't remember a name. He said "the second envelope".' The remark might refer to a publicity contract, wage papers or an entirely ordinary piece of post. The officer did not turn it into a sensational claim in his notes.

Naresh's old bag was found in a wooden cupboard inside the office. The outer lock was intact; written permission to open it and the presence of witnesses were ensured. The bag contained a cotton gamchha, a small tiffin box and wage papers. The 'second envelope' was not found. Ratan Agrawal said he knew of no such envelope. That was a statement of denial, not a final verified finding.

Shashibhushan returned to the scene. Near the edge of the road lay fine sand from fresh plaster, which did not appear to have been washed away by the night's rain. The sand could just as easily have come from construction work. He asked the specialist team to take photographs and test samples, without giving his own visual impression the status of evidence. The city's smallest things suddenly seemed eager to speak in the story, but only examination would give them a language.

In Delhi, Mansi Verma looked again at the limited details of Pranay's seized letter. The full address of the printing press given in the publicity services contract was different from Ratan's shop, though two digits in the auxiliary telephone numbers were the same. It could not be assumed that the two belonged to one network. 'Raise a question about the match, not a conclusion,' Mansi told Naman. 'The rights of the family in the death investigation come first.'

Kusum returned home in the evening. The afternoon light was falling across Naresh's bed. She told her daughter that her uncle would not be coming home now. 'Why?' the little girl asked. Kusum had words from the

courts, from medicine and from politics, but she had no answer to that question. She drew the child close beside her. In grief of this kind the mystery of crime seemed very small, while the reason for seeking justice seemed very great.

That night a message from the local forensic laboratory said the secure receipt register for Naresh's mobile phone had been prepared. The phone had been found at the scene, but authority to open all its contents was a separate matter. Within the scope of the permission obtained, one notification already visible on the screen was recorded: 'Payment request received'. The amount was unclear and the recipient's name incomplete. This need not have been a payment Naresh had sent; it might have been a request directed to him.

Shashibhushan sent Mansi only an official summary of the visible notification. Mansi replied, 'The source and time of the request and the actual control of the account require independent verification.' Arunima too received limited information through the legal channel. 'Finding a payment request and a death connected with the same phone doesn't prove causation,' she said. 'But we mustn't overlook it either.'

A new message flashed on Revati's phone. The sender was unknown; the message did not mention Naresh's name. It contained only one line: 'When payment doesn't arrive, the account is closed.' Such words could have been deliberately written to create fear. Revati preserved the message in its original form and informed the officer, but did not publish it in her report. The message identified no offender, though it certainly raised a new question about a possible connection between a threat and the incident.

Shashibhushan sat in an empty room at the office. Before him lay two pages: the preliminary medical note on the death and the details of the payment request received on the mobile phone. Looking at the blank space between them, he remembered Shivshankar's words: write down what you heard; do not invent what you do not know. He decided to await the laboratory's and the bank's lawful responses the following day. But a question had taken hold of him: who had demanded payment from Naresh a few hours before his death, and was the timing of that request a coincidence or a key to what had happened?

CHAPTER 91

The Hire Order

The morning had not yet fully brightened in Delhi. Aarav Malkani stood at his office window looking at the street below. Children standing on a yellow strip to wait for the school bus reminded him of his daughter. On his desk lay three papers: an original notice from the bank, a copy of an order and an approval letter bearing his own signature. The dates on all three matched; they did not all say the same thing.

The previous night Aarav had received news of Naresh Kumar's death in Patna. Until then, Naresh's name had meant no more to him than a line in a wage account; now he was Kusum's brother and a little girl's uncle. Aarav knew that his old papers did not establish a connection between them. But he also knew that he could not go on pretending forever that he did not understand the real nature of his own work.

Without turning on the light, he listened to an old voice message on his phone. Three weeks earlier Anurag Bedi had said, 'Enter the cost of the special event separately. The office will take care of the remaining papers.' At the time Aarav had treated it as an ordinary marketing expense. Now the phrase 'special event' led him towards the contradictory headlines in Patna's two newspapers. The voice message did not establish what the order meant, nor Anurag's actual authority.

Aarav told his wife Shreya that he might be late that day. 'Why won't you give a name at home to the thing you're afraid of?' she asked. Aarav did not answer. For several months he had hidden his decisions behind words such as 'service', 'coordination', 'cover' and 'commission'. That day it occurred to him for the first time that words, too, could testify against a man.

At ten o'clock Aarav arrived at Mansi Verma's office with his lawyer, Savita Ghosh. He wrote his name clearly in the register outside. The man who had hidden an envelope with a blue stamp a few weeks before now carried the original receipt for that very envelope. Savita had warned him in advance: 'Cooperating and admitting guilt are two different things. Say only what you know; don't add guesses about what you don't.'

Mansi did not begin by asking whom the money had been meant to have killed. She asked, 'Why did you sign this order?' Looking at the paper, Aarav said, 'A list of approved expenses came to me. I didn't see proof that the services had been delivered. Under the rules, checking was my

responsibility.' Mansi replied, 'Your negligence and evidence of somebody else's violent intent will remain separate matters. Don't turn them into one.'

The approval letter contained three items: stage decoration, publicity translation and regional support. Sample invoices were available for the first two. Against the third were the words 'hire-based arrangement'. Aarav admitted that he had written those words himself. A local employee had told him that vehicles and light equipment were to be hired for the day of the meeting. But he had not asked for records of the items hired, their number or how they were actually used.

'If this was vehicle hire, what does it have to do with Naresh's death or the false report about the meeting?' Savita asked. 'There is no established connection at present,' Mansi said. 'We're examining the boundary between the approval entry and the payments actually made.' She explicitly refused a suggestion that the witness statement should contain words such as 'hire for violence'. Aarav felt not relief but the weight of his ignorance.

He then handed over a bank confirmation letter from his office. The approved amount and the sum actually debited from the account were not the same. One payment had been returned, and the recipient's name had changed for another. 'I was informed that day that the beneficiary organisation had opened a new branch,' Aarav said. 'By whom?' Mansi asked. After thinking for a moment Aarav named Anurag, but he had no written instruction beyond the phone conversation.

At Naman Singh's request, Aarav confirmed that the sheet was not a photocopy but a page from the original approval register issued by his office. In the margin were two letters in blue ink, 'P' and 'Q'. Aarav had previously assumed they were Anurag's personal marks. Instead of offering a guess at their meaning, Naman arranged for a secure image of the page and recorded its serial number.

At midday Nilima Jha heard a limited summary of this information. 'Does it connect with the old five-percent contract?' she asked. 'I haven't seen every page of that contract,' Aarav replied. 'My approval is for a separate service expense.' Nilima made two sections in her notebook: 'Earlier Contract' and 'New Expenditure'. She left the line between them blank for the time being.

An old message remained on Aarav's phone: 'Send the public result once distribution is complete.' The sender's number was now disconnected. The payment request found on Naresh's phone seemed to use similar language, but the dates, recipients and purposes of the two messages were different. Mansi arranged for written authorisation for a technical examination; a resemblance between phrases alone would not determine guilt.

Savita told Aarav to pause and drink some water. Holding the glass, he said, 'I thought the man who got me to sign the papers was the owner.' 'Who?' Mansi asked. Aarav gave the name of a company: 'Sarang Trade

Consultancy'. There was more exhausted faith than certainty in his voice. 'That was the name on the invoices. I assumed all the decisions came from there.'

Mansi checked the available company register. Under the name Sarang Trade Consultancy were regular tax receipts, some genuine service contracts and salary payments to employees. It did not appear to be merely a hollow entity set up on paper in the name of crime. The person named as owner supervised the company's everyday services; his appointment letter did not clearly authorise him to issue special payment orders.

'The name you've given may belong to an account holder or a party to the contract,' Mansi said, 'but that person need not have issued the actual instructions.' Aarav's hand trembled. For so long he had seen a few people as criminals within a single story; now, for the first time, he understood that a business name might also have served as a means of defending his own decisions.

Shreya called as he left the office. 'Are you coming home?' she asked. 'I am,' Aarav said. 'But I have to give another statement tomorrow.' He had never been able to tell his child that some of his father's work consisted of wrong decisions. Now he stood at the door of his home and thought: the truth may save someone, but first it demands that a man break down the lies he himself has made.

That evening a copy of the company register lay on Mansi's desk beside Aarav's statement. Between two names Naman drew not a red line but a question mark. The registered director of Sarang Trade Consultancy was not the person who had accepted responsibility for ordering the special hire expenditure. The man Aarav had thought was the master of every decision might have been only the first visible face of the orders.

CHAPTER 92

Another Reckoning of Two Thousand Crore

Four sheets of paper were pinned to one wall of Nilima's room in Delhi. The first said 'New Deposits'; the second, 'Total Stakes Placed'; the third, 'Withdrawals'; and the fourth, 'Service Payments'. Even after many months of investigation, she still needed to write these four categories separately. In the newspapers, one phrase stood for them all: 'two thousand crore'.

When Mansi Verma entered the room, Nilima showed her the first presentation. 'The same money appears again and again in this list,' she said. 'Someone deposits a thousand rupees and plays five times. The recorded turnover might then be five thousand, but it would be wrong to say five thousand rupees in new funds had entered the company.' In the corner of the paper Mansi wrote, 'Frequency of transactions is not income.'

Before Nilima lay a copy of Amresh's small notebook. On one evening he had deposited two hundred rupees, staked his modest winnings again and finally lost what remained. The number of moves shown on the game screen revealed little about the real expense borne by his household. Nilima did not treat the domestic account as a model of the entire gambling system; she kept it there to show the human cost of faulty arithmetic.

Independent auditor Sharad Mishra arrived with his colleague Trisha Banerjee. They had a limited, verified copy of the original records seized in the investigation; the complete Hong Kong ledger was not yet available. Sharad asked first about the period covered by the data, then about the identity of each account. 'One customer may have several sessions,' he said. 'It must also be examined whether a single session has been recorded under several customer names.'

Nilima wrote a hypothetical calculation on the board: 'Suppose there are four lakh active accounts, and each account receives one thousand rupees in new deposits in a month. Total new deposits would be forty crore rupees. If that money is staked fifty times, recorded gaming turnover might reach two thousand crore.' Trisha immediately added, 'This is only an illustration of the arithmetic. Four lakh, one thousand and fifty are not verified figures in this case.'

'So the old claim of two thousand crore was false?' Mansi asked. 'We haven't established what calculation that claim referred to,' Sharad said.

'Before calling it true or false, we need its source, period and definition.' Nilima looked at an earlier journalistic presentation. Where it should have said 'monthly turnover', the page said 'monthly income'. That single word had led readers into a false equation between the losses of lakhs of families and the criminals' gains.

Revati Karn joined by video call. She asked for her earlier draft and said, 'I'll change my headline. But I won't say that the suffering of a small gambler is small.' Sharad agreed. 'Correcting the arithmetic doesn't erase anyone's loss. A victim's actual losses and estimated turnover belong to different categories.'

Trisha then lifted the fourth sheet: 'Service Payments'. Some entries bore descriptions such as gaming software, cloud storage, translation, publicity and customer assistance. There was evidence that some of the services had actually been delivered; for others, the time or price appeared inconsistent. Those payments could not automatically be called unlawful profits. But the accounting for one amount suddenly appeared outside the figures for gaming transactions examined earlier.

A limited extract from the approval register signed by Aarav was also brought into the examination. The item called 'hire-based arrangement' appeared in this table of service expenses, but the sums and dates in the two sets of records did not match exactly. 'Is this discrepancy an error or something deliberately created?' Nilima asked. 'Don't choose either conclusion before examining the records again,' Trisha replied.

Mansi made it clear that Aarav had given a statement, but it could not be treated as the final truth. Sharad wrote a request for independent reconciliation of the contract, the actual bank debits and the recipient account. If a sum had been returned, figures on paper could not establish that the payment had been completed. If proof of a service existed, neither could every payment be labelled fictitious.

Nilima called Rani Devi. 'Some separate inquiries into the funds frozen in your account have moved forward,' she said. Rani's question was, 'When will I get the money held up from my shop?' Nilima did not promise a date. She had an illustration involving forty crore and a dispute involving two thousand crore, but still no answer about the small sum frozen at Rani's home.

After the call, Nilima wrote in her notebook: 'Numbers versus lives'. She remembered Amresh struggling with his addiction, Shivshankar now teaching citizens to verify rumours, and Kusum, Naresh's sister, asking first not about compensation but about the truth of his death. If the meaning of large calculations concealed these lives, the investigation would remain incomplete.

At midday a message arrived from Meghna in Hong Kong. 'I'd like to reconcile the item that appears a second time in your service-expense table,' she wrote. 'But some confirmations can't be obtained from abroad without

the original documents.' Nilima responded with definitions of the four categories, not details of individual accounts. The scope of authorised cooperation was restricted for the protection of evidence.

Trisha raised another problem. Some customers' winnings had been shown as immediately staked again within the game; in other cases, the remaining balance had actually been withdrawn. Whether money in the second category had later been counted again as a new deposit was still unclear. This confusion could inflate turnover and distort the accounting of victims' losses as well.

Revati's revised headline finally read: 'The Two-Thousand-Crore Claim: Income, Stakes or Repeated Turnover?' Vidya Deshmukh looked at the draft and said, 'It reduces the sensationalism, but it gives readers the real question.' For once, Revati did not feel that correcting her own mistake in print was a defeat.

As evening fell, Nilima looked again at the four sheets. Some reconciliation had advanced under the first three categories. In the fourth, a service expense seemed to have been paid from a source separate from customer gambling transactions. The item included the words 'regional presence'. Whose region, whose presence, and who had authorised the payment? The auditors did not yet have an answer.

In his concluding note Sharad wrote, 'On the available records it would be improper to treat two thousand crore as net profit. Nevertheless, a separate chain of service expenditure requires examination.' Nilima sent a copy to Mansi. Later that night, according to Hong Kong time, a second message came from Meghna: 'The first entry for the item you're treating as new is six months old in my records.'

CHAPTER 93

Darkness on the Money Trail

After the rain, Hong Kong's glass buildings shone as though no stain could ever cling to them. Meghna Sen went up to the seventh floor of an old commercial building. She carried her notebook, filled with names, dates, amounts and the notation 'source incomplete' in small rows. She knew that the most dangerous places on a financial map were often not dark patches but perfectly white, empty boxes.

Her first meeting was with Julian Chan, a former accounting associate. Julian's job had been to reconcile legitimate service payments for different clients. 'You're looking at a table with discrepancies,' he told Meghna. 'But two contracts belonging to the same customer may serve different purposes.' 'That's why I've come looking for the original invoices today,' Meghna replied, 'not conclusions.'

Julian moved his cup of tea aside and placed three copies before her. The first concerned an actual payment for storage services; the second, translation and customer assistance; the third, consulting services under the name 'regional presence'. Proof that the work had been completed accompanied the first two sets of papers. The third contained only a signed monthly summary in place of evidence that the service had been received. Meghna set that page apart.

'This entry goes back six months,' Julian said. 'When the first payment was made, the present investigation in India hadn't even begun.' 'The source?' Meghna asked. Julian showed her an intermediary bank receipt. The name, date and recipient matched, but the receipt did not confer the means or authority to identify the ultimate beneficial owner behind the payment.

Meghna remembered Tara Lama's disappearance. Tara had sometimes visited this same commercial building, but her name was absent from the security register for the day in question. Meghna did not read a meaning into the absence. She merely asked Julian whose accounts Tara had helped audit. 'Several clients,' Julian replied. 'It would be wrong to pick one name.'

Outside, the rain began again. Meghna asked Julian about the lawful procedure for preserving the original records. Some of the papers, he said, were covered by clients' confidential contracts; he could not hand over private copies without a proper request or authority. Meghna agreed. Taking

photographs secretly would have been easy, but it would endanger both the credibility of the investigation and the witnesses' safety.

At a second meeting, she obtained a certified extract from Sofia Vella's legal observations. Registration in Malta, a service contract in Hong Kong and the statutory powers of authorities in India were three separate matters. Some company names appeared repeatedly in the papers, but sharing an office address did not prove common ownership. Beside 'same address' on her list Meghna wrote, 'ownership unverified'.

At midday an invoice bearing the name of Lin Yu's organisation came to light. It made no explicit mention of gambling; it described ordinary technical work in customer support for games. Meghna knew the service might be lawful, and that a connection to a handful of suspicious intermediaries would not make all the organisation's work criminal. Yet the date of the payment was close to a particular 'regional presence' entry. She treated the proximity as a clue about timing, nothing more.

Nilima called from India and explained her new calculations. 'I'm more concerned with the service entry for which there's no proof of work than with all the talk of two thousand crore,' Meghna said. 'We've found an earlier recurrence of that entry here too,' Nilima replied. 'But there's no basis for calling it funding for a violent event.' They agreed that without independent original bank records the entry would remain a mystery.

At her third meeting, a woman was waiting in the building's small library. Her name was Irene Lo. She had previously worked on a local audit of a legitimate consulting contract connected with Viraj Sahni. Meghna did not know her. Julian had arranged their meeting through a lawful introduction.

Irene began with a clear condition: 'I'll testify only about what I saw. My purpose is neither to remove an accusation against anyone nor to add to it.' Meghna wrote those words on the first line of her notes. Irene said that during a specified period the 'consulting translation' service delivered by Viraj's authorised company had actually been completed. She had been part of the team that examined samples of the work, employees' time records and the client's acknowledgement of receipt.

'Are you establishing that the service was completed,' Meghna asked, 'or that all the money paid for it came from a lawful source?' 'The first,' Irene answered without hesitation. 'I know nothing about the second.' She set out the limits of her testimony separately on paper. Meghna found this modest precision important. Where many accusations collapsed the distinction into one line, a witness was keeping it in two separate sentences.

Irene also recalled an earlier meeting. Viraj's signature was not on the acknowledgement of receipt; an employee had authorised it. Irene could not say for certain whether Viraj had been present. But she said that an expense charged under his office's name, which had later been described as entirely 'fake', had involved some real work. That did not prove Viraj

innocent; nevertheless, the theory that every expense was fictitious could no longer be sustained.

Meghna acknowledged that Irene's original testimony could become important in court only when the documents' admissibility, the jurisdiction and the opposing side's opportunity for cross-examination had been addressed. 'I'll be available,' Irene said, 'but don't turn my statement into publicity material.' Meghna assured her that she would not send her private details anywhere without permission.

That evening Meghna received word of a sealed envelope at Tara Lama's old office. Whether Tara herself had deposited it or someone else had written her name on it remained to be verified. Meghna told the office that proper procedures for preserving records must first be completed. She did not insist on opening the envelope herself without an entry in the register. The question of whether Tara was alive still kept her awake at night.

In her hotel room Meghna wrote a brief factual summary of Irene's statement. She sent it to Nilima and Mansi through an authorised contact channel. She made it clear that the original certificate had yet to be obtained. With it she gave the context: a real service, an unverified source of funds, and the separate question of who had exercised actual control.

Nilima's reply arrived late at night: 'This testimony may change part of our earlier interpretation of the evidence against Viraj.' Meghna read the sentence twice. For so long they had been following money concealed behind lies; now a small piece of truth was obliging them to change the limits of their own accusations.

Meghna looked out through the window at the lights of the city. The lines of bank accounts glowed brightly, though the lives behind those lines could remain in darkness. On the last page of her notebook she wrote a short reminder: 'Examine evidence against a person; preserve evidence in that person's favour as well.' Then a message from Mansi flashed on her phone: 'Viraj's lawyer has applied to produce the original of this service contract tomorrow.'

CHAPTER 94

The Rights of the Accused

Birds were chattering beneath the old banyan tree at the Delhi courthouse. Inside, Viraj Sahni sat on a bench, folding a piece of paper between his palms. His daughter had written the date of her school art exhibition on it. He had not replied to her; on his lawyer's advice his phone had been switched off for several days. Viraj looked at this small sheet more often than at the documents for the day's hearing. He knew that life at home could not be separated from a public accusation, but that did not make the accusation true in itself.

His lawyer, Shamita Mehra, placed four pages before him. 'Listen to every word,' she said. 'I'm not asking the court to give you a certificate of good character. I'll ask it to admit evidence that a service was actually delivered. If other transactions are suspicious, I'm not asking for their investigation to be stopped.'

'So I'm not a criminal yet?' There was more impatience than relief in Viraj's question.

'You're accused, not convicted. But that doesn't give you the right to conceal the truth,' Shamita replied. 'Do you know who signed the consulting-translation contract?'

Viraj's thumb stopped at the corner of the page. 'The office's deputy manager authorised it. I attended one meeting. I didn't see every invoice.'

'Not having seen every invoice doesn't free you from the question. I need to know which invoices you did see.' Shamita did not raise her voice. For the first time Viraj understood that his own defence lawyer was testing his convenient silences too.

Elsewhere in the courthouse corridor, Mansi Verma was checking documents with a prosecution officer. The factual summary Meghna Sen had sent from Hong Kong had been added as the last page, but above it, in large letters, were the words 'Original Records and Lawfully Admissible Testimony Awaited'. Mansi would not allow the warning to be struck out. She knew that accepting a valid point from the defence would not weaken the investigators; it would help them define the limits of their claims.

When the hearing began, Shamita sought permission to present three things: a service contract, samples of translation work actually carried out, and certified extracts from the workers' time registers. One part of what the contract called 'special consulting' involved clarifying insurance-related

documents for an overseas client across Maithili, Hindi and English. The court saw that the work samples included dates, revisions and the client's acknowledgement of receipt.

'Does this sample establish that the entire payment was lawful?' the prosecution officer asked.

'No,' Shamita said. 'But the earlier sweeping claim that the entire payment was made without any service does not stand. Let work that was done be recognised as work. Let the questions about the source and recipient of the remaining money be examined separately.'

Viraj's face brightened for an instant. Then Mansi's side opened another document: a summary of expenditure entered under 'regional presence' in the office's name during the same period. There was an approval, but no concrete description of the work, only a monthly signature. Irene Lo's testimony supported the first item; she knew nothing about the second. Viraj kept looking at the empty box behind the page that formed his defence.

The judge observed that the admissibility and authenticity of the defence documents would be examined; their production did not automatically acquit the accused or automatically weaken the rest of the prosecution evidence. Both sides were given time to produce specified original records and details of the relevant employees. In the court's record, it was a small direction. But in the crowd outside people were already declaring that 'Viraj has got away' or that 'everything has been exposed'.

Outside, Revati Karn stopped a colleague from her newspaper. 'Don't write a headline calling it a verdict. Today evidence about one part of a genuine service has been presented, that's all.' The colleague was irritated. 'Who will read such fine distinctions?' 'It matters to the person whose household account has been frozen,' Revati said. 'It matters to someone whose name has been dragged into a false accusation. And it matters to the person whose guilt will eventually be established on sound evidence.'

On the way back from court, Viraj looked out of the window. A little sign for a translation office shone at the roadside. He remembered his former employee Manoj, the young man who worked late into the night correcting papers for overseas clients and had once asked for extra pay because his mother was ill. Viraj could not now remember whether he had paid him on time. On the map of his business empire, the names of people like Manoj had always been kept on the last line of the documents.

'Should we make Manoj a witness?' Viraj asked.

'He will give evidence about what he knows,' Shamita said coolly. 'You will not teach him what to say. And any contact with him will be made through the lawful procedure.'

Viraj shifted in his seat. 'I've been given a single face for every accusation against me. Gambling, fraud, violence, every foreign company...'

'The accusations against you will be examined separately,' Shamita said. 'But because the public's anger has gathered around one name, don't take the opportunity to hide your own share of responsibility in the darkness as well.'

That evening Nilima Jha came to Mansi's office. The first part of Irene's account corresponded with genuine evidence of the translation work. Nilima examined an old working paper on which 'paper-only' had been written in red beside the whole service expenditure. Because of that description, payment for actual labour had also been treated as suspicious. 'We need to change this word,' Nilima said.

'Do you think Viraj is unquestionably innocent?' Mansi asked.

'No. I have grounds to say some work was done under this item. I have the right to keep questioning the other entries, but no right to deny that this work was done.'

Nilima drew two separate lines in her notebook: 'Work Completed' and 'Source of Funds'. She left a blank space between them. That blank space was now the next ground of her investigation.

That night Shamita received, through an authorised channel, an old receipt acknowledging a service. The receipt had not been included in the list of samples presented earlier. The signature of the person who received the work was different, and in small letters below it were the words 'Second Approval—Regional Office'. Which office? The first contract had no condition requiring any regional approval.

Shamita did not call Viraj immediately. She prepared an application to obtain the original. In the very act of defending him in court, a new question had arisen: why did the contract that disproved an unfair generalisation against Viraj bear a mark of approval by another person? Whether the remaining truth worked for him or against him, the second signature on the receipt seemed to be waiting to become a witness.

CHAPTER 95

The Small Error of Blame

The new office to which Arunima Rao had been transferred smelled of paper on its first morning. After the transfer she no longer had authority over the daily conduct of the old investigation, but she had not lost responsibility for the findings she had signed during it. On one side of her desk lay a request for review sent through an authorised channel. The subject was small: three invoices for translation services. Her experience told her that an error revealed by three invoices could sometimes affect three hundred accounts.

Mansi Verma said over the phone, 'I'm not asking you for an informal order. On the basis of an independent expert's observations, I need you to verify one sentence in the summary you signed earlier.' 'If the sentence I wrote is found to be wrong, I'll issue a written correction,' Arunima replied. 'But the new investigation is within your authority. That boundary must not be crossed.'

The sentence to be corrected read: 'All consulting services submitted during the period under review were merely fictitious covers for moving money.' Arunima had written it when some portions of the original material were unavailable. Newly translated documents, employees' time registers and certified acknowledgements from clients now showed that at least some services under two contracts had actually been delivered. The word 'all' was wrong; so was 'merely'.

In her notebook Arunima wrote, 'Wrong conclusion, right concern'. Then she crossed out the phrase. No one had established whether the concern itself had been justified. She was not prepared to make an error sound smaller by giving it an attractive name.

Mansi, Nilima, the expert Trisha and an authorised representative checking documents for the defence were present at the approved meeting. Three colours of paper lay on the table: original payments, acknowledgements of services and notes of objection. Trisha asked a simple question. 'When the client's acknowledgement bears this date, how did we describe the payment as "without services"?'

'We saw indications of possible service fraud and turned the first negative sign into a conclusion about everything,' Nilima said. 'But I don't want the correction of that mistake to become an excuse for closing the investigation into the other suspicious items.'

'Then we need not two orders, but two entries in the record,' Mansi said. 'First, withdraw the mistaken generalisation. Second, independently examine the accounts where discrepancies remain.'

Trisha checked the list of facts. The earlier report had combined payments for 'consulting translation' and 'regional presence' in a single group. Evidence of services was now available for the first; actual control of the recipient of the second remained uncertain. An aggregate of payments in one group was being labelled criminal on the strength of the evidence about the other. Once the entries were separated, the total changed. Whether the estimate of criminal activity rose or fell was not the main question at that moment. What mattered was which figure belonged to which event.

In her written correction, Arunima identified the paragraph number of her earlier summary. She did not say that someone else had made the mistake. She wrote that, in light of the new original evidence available, the previous all-embracing statement was being withdrawn. The competent authority would review the status of accounts to which an additional mark of suspicion had been attached solely because of that statement. It was also proposed that the correction be placed before the court according to procedure.

At midday an employee asked, 'Won't the newspapers laugh at the investigation team for this?' 'A household whose wages have been held up by a wrongful accusation needs bread more than laughter,' Arunima said. 'If we can't correct our own words, how can we expect citizens to tell the truth?'

At that moment Mansi received a written reply from a bank compliance officer. The officer had examined details of two accounts removed from the first review group. One account had made actual salary payments to translation workers and had been affected by the earlier sweeping observation. The other belonged to a small printing-service business whose transactions fell outside the limits of the earlier suspicious summary. Its payment might have been legitimate, but the donor and ultimate client named on the receipt did not match.

'A small printing service? What evidence of crime is there?' Mansi asked.

'We're not claiming any crime yet,' the officer said. 'There are simply two different names on the papers. The original invoice suggests that authority to print the work came from an educational institution, while payment came from a third company. That could be lawful intermediation. But our internal check found a telephone number we couldn't identify.'

No confidential bank details were given to Revati at this stage. Only a limited summary of the lawful record reached Nilima. It contained the phrase 'special cover production', the very words that had appeared in the proposal to use Pranay's painting without permission and in Revati's earlier advertising receipt. The words matched, but the dates and sums did not.

Nilima could hear Revati's earlier remark: 'A resemblance between ordinary words doesn't identify a criminal.'

Trisha asked that the printing-service business be given an opportunity to explain itself in writing. 'If a real poster, book or public-service notice was printed, a service was delivered,' she said. 'To determine whether an order was given to print publicity for a crime, we need to examine both the contents and the authorisation.'

That evening Arunima sent a signed copy of her correction. She had reproduced the exact words of her earlier sentence and then explained why they had to change. It was a kind of courage no photograph on a newspaper's front page would ever show. As she signed, she remembered something an old training officer had said: 'Authority faces its finest test on the day it must admit its own mistake.'

At night Nilima received a message from Rani Devi: 'When will my shop's account be reviewed again?' The smile faded from Nilima's face. The victory represented by an official correction was still invisible to that family. She did not promise Rani a date, but explained the current stage of the written procedure and gave her the contact for the necessary records.

Meanwhile, at Mansi's office, copies of the printing company's old receipt and the permission letter for the art exhibition were being compared separately. Along the edges of the two papers was a mark of the same shape. The original seal had not been authenticated; the papers came from different sources. Mansi did not draw a red circle of conclusion around the mark. She simply folded the paper and put it in a secure file.

Inside that file was a small bill paid from an account previously described as 'outside the scope of the accusation'. The sum was ordinary, but below the invoice were the words 'grant publicity translation' and, in the recipient field, a correspondence address in Brussels. It seemed to Mansi that correcting a wrongful accusation had preserved the dignity of an innocent account. Yet among that account's lawful transactions a path had emerged that their earlier blind assumptions had prevented them from seeing.

On her way back, Arunima sat on a bench at the station. A child was asking his father what the red mark in his examination notebook meant. 'Understand the mistake, then correct it,' the father said. Arunima watched darkness fall outside. She could hear in that simple sentence the work of her whole day. Then the next message from Mansi arrived: 'The Brussels correspondence address also appears in the older grant records.' A small mistake had been corrected; a new question hidden behind it had awakened.

CHAPTER 96

The Anonymous Source of a Grant

In Brussels, the winter sunlight slanted between two buildings. Elise Vander had placed a small box of papers by the window. It held receipts for blankets, details of medical assistance, signatures of local volunteers and a grant summary whose donor field said only 'Group of Individual Supporters'. Elise was troubled by the anonymous entry. But she could not look at that one paper and declare false the relief work whose beneficiaries had stood before her.

Nadia brought in two cups of hot tea. 'Were you at the office late again last night?' she asked.

'When the papers say "civic dialogue" and a publicity service is attached to the payment, we need to understand what both expressions mean,' Elise said. 'But I won't call the protest meetings of Indian people a crime on that account.'

Nadia opened a register. The organisation's public programmes had budgets for peaceful dialogue, legal assistance and translation facilities. Many participants criticised their own governments' policies. That was within their civic rights. The question here concerned only one particular entry, a payment described as 'local presence' with no individual's name in the beneficiary description.

The phrase 'local presence' reminded Elise of 'regional presence' in an earlier relief report. She placed the two documents side by side. Different words, different languages, different sums. Her mind was quick to imagine a common meaning, but the first word she wrote on the page was 'Different'. It was her way of disciplining her own curiosity.

Iman Duran, a real volunteer, arrived at the office. She had been helping families from South Asia reach the city's health clinic. 'Some of the people whose lives are being debated as "foreign funding" can't even afford a bus ticket,' Iman said. 'I have receipts for all the money I received. But I don't know what happens in the offices above us where donors are approved.'

Elise respected Iman's testimony. 'You're giving truthful evidence about the work you did. Examining the offices above you is my responsibility.' Iman left that day without having her photograph taken. Elise thought that one of the hardest questions in the world arose when small, genuine acts of kindness and the unclear accounts of a large organisation met on the same table.

At midday the financial officer Pierre Laurent arrived for a meeting. 'The sources of donations are sometimes kept confidential,' he said. 'Confidentiality isn't improper in itself.'

'Agreed,' Elise said. 'But whether the organisation keeps the real donor's identity in its regulatory records is a separate question. Not printing a name in a public report and refusing information during an authorised examination are not the same thing.'

Pierre acknowledged that the place for the original donor's identity appeared blank in a copy of an old grant, but some authorised part of the file might have been preserved elsewhere. Rather than blaming an employee, he had a written request for a records search registered. Elise valued the caution. Finding an empty box and writing a whole crime story around it would have been easy; finding the actual source was harder.

At that moment a message arrived from Revati in Delhi. A limited piece of information shared lawfully by Mansi's office showed a correspondence address in Brussels. Revati wanted to know whether a genuine translation-service office or printing-grant office had ever operated at that address. Elise explained that several organisations used the building for correspondence; a shared address was only a contact point, not proof of ownership.

'But an important payment did pass through this building,' Nadia said. She showed Elise an attached receipt. 'Up to the day of the relief programme, it's recorded under "special participation".'

'Was it paid on the day of the Patna meeting?' Revati asked on their video call.

'I can't say without converting the dates from the two countries into the same calendar and time reference,' Elise said. She noted the date, time zone and type of payment register separately. 'And the Patna meeting was peaceful. A similarity of names associated with that meeting cannot support an allegation of violence.'

The two women were writing the same distinction in their notebooks in different languages. For Revati, the issue in the news was a misleading publicity image. For Elise, the issue in the grant was the use made of the money. To build a bridge between them required the original contract, the payment receipt and the actual recipient. Without that bridge there was imagination, not truth.

Pierre placed an old list on the table. It showed three instalments of a grant: the first for educational support, the second for transport, and the third for 'special dialogue arrangements'. The recipients and descriptions of work matched for the first two. Part of the third instalment appeared to have been returned, but the bank record of the return had not yet been received. Elise asked Pierre in writing, 'Was the money returned, or was there merely an accounting adjustment?' Pierre gave no answer. His silence was an unanswered question, not an admission of guilt.

That evening a representative of an Indian diaspora organisation requested a meeting. He was worried that one unidentified donation might lead to accusations against all peaceful policy protests in Brussels. 'We're not investigating anybody's views about a protest,' Elise said. 'We're examining a specific entry in the funding, the contract's terms and the work actually paid for.' Some ease returned to the representative's face, though he remained concerned for the safety of certain anonymous supporters. Elise placed that concern in the file too.

Late in the evening Nadia found a specimen of the organisation's old correspondence stamp. On an internal page relating to the anonymous grant, a date of authorised approval was printed immediately below a signature. In Pierre's published summary, the numerals of that date appeared in the reverse order. At first it looked like a minor clerical mistake. Nadia pointed out the differing conventions of day-month and month-day; but one of the dates, read the two ways, would become a different day.

Elise listed the discrepancy between the two dates. The second matched the day on which the official transfer order for Arunima Rao had been issued in India. The coincidence felt suddenly uncomfortable. 'Do you think this grant was used to arrange her transfer?' Nadia asked.

'Certainly not on the evidence we have,' Elise said. 'All we have at present is a date on a paper. I don't know the administrative reason for the transfer, and the actual beneficiary of this grant is also unknown. If I put them on one line, somebody will turn my question into evidence.' Instead of drawing a thick line between the two dates, she left a blank space.

Just then she came across an old security register for the office. During the week the anonymous grant was deposited, an outside visitor had come in to submit 'proof of authority'. The space for the visitor's name contained only a partial signature. The company name resembled that of an old correspondence office in Malta. Elise already knew that several people could use a single building address, and did not treat the mark as conclusive. But where was the original letter of authority under which the visitor had been admitted?

As the building was closing for the night, Elise arranged for a copy of the register to be securely preserved in the authorised records room. She told Revati only that verification of the grant now required another document. No name was made public. As Nadia cleared the desk, she found an old receipt trapped inside an envelope. On its reverse were three different hands: the first belonged to a recipient, the second to an office approver, and the third consisted only of someone's initials.

Elise turned the receipt over. A date written in one hand was the day of Arunima's transfer; the date in another was two weeks earlier. The third hand bore no name, only an instruction: 'Original letter of authority with Sofia'. Sofia Vella, the lawyer in Malta, had so far said nothing about this

grant. Elise picked up her phone, then stopped when she saw the time. Tomorrow she would put the question to Sofia through an authorised channel. For now the truth was divided among three different handwritings—and they might belong to three different people.

CHAPTER 97

The Third Hand Behind the Signature

In Valletta, Malta, the morning breeze rising from the sea was not strong enough to scatter papers, yet the old window of Sofia Vella's office rattled steadily in it. On her desk lay a written request from Elise Vander: three different hands on the receipt for an anonymous grant in Brussels, and on the reverse just one line, 'Original letter of authority with Sofia.' Whether she possessed such a letter was a question that should have been easy to answer with yes or no. What made it difficult was that two different documents bearing the same title had been preserved in her files.

Sofia opened a drawer. The first document was a draft legal opinion, a general questionnaire on compliance requirements for civic-assistance grants in European countries. It bore her signature, and there was also a copy of the advice supplied to the client. The second paper carried a similar heading, but an additional line had been inserted under 'Authority of Representative'. It purported to authorise a change in the route through which a grant was paid on the donor's behalf. Sofia had given no such authorisation in the original draft she had prepared.

Her assistant Elina brought in two cups of tea. Sofia asked, 'Who filled in the receipt register on the day this second document arrived at the office?'

'Not me,' Elina replied. 'I was on maternity leave then. A temporary employee had been engaged. But the signature beside that employee's name isn't an ordinary staff signature.'

'Don't put that in writing just yet,' Sofia said. 'First we'll examine the register, the correspondence and the original document. Memory can deceive all of us.' She took the cup in her hand, but the tea went cold.

By noon, a sealed envelope from the archive had been opened at Sofia's authorised request. The office receipt number on its outer cover was correct, and the document of authority inside carried the same number. But the printed code in the lower corner of the paper differed in its next digit from the first draft. The difference could simply have arisen in making a copy. Without drawing any conclusion, Sofia arranged for secure images and serial numbers of the two documents to be recorded.

Then her former colleague Magda Borg telephoned. Magda had once worked in the building's shared reception room. 'Are you looking at that grant again?' she asked.

'Who told you that?' Sofia asked.

'A man came near my house yesterday. He said I should treat the old letter as routine office business and forget it. I don't know who he is, but he knew the name of my daughter's school.' Magda's voice trembled.

For a moment Sofia wanted to shut every window in the office. Instead she said, 'Stay somewhere safe. If you wish, ask the competent authorities and an independent lawyer for help. I won't give your name to anyone without your consent. What I write about this call will be exactly what you have told me, not a sentence declaring someone guilty of a crime.'

Magda was silent. Then she said, 'A man came to collect the letter. He introduced himself as an "authorised representative". I still remember the organisation named on his identity card: Ujas Civic Cooperation. But two organisations with the same name exchanged correspondence through that building. I can't tell whether I made a terrible mistake that day.'

Sofia searched the authorised register for 'Ujas Civic Cooperation'. There were two entries. The first organisation was a genuine client seeking advice on relief work; the second was an entity that received only a correspondence facility. The first had a permanent member of staff present. The contact person for the second changed repeatedly. A shared address did not establish common ownership, but it certainly gave her a reason to check the representative's authority.

Speaking to Elise by video, Sofia said, 'The third hand on your receipt points towards this letter of authority. But the question remains: on whose behalf, and for which person, was that authority actually valid?'

'Do you recognise your own signature?' Elise asked.

'On the first draft, yes. On the second, my name is printed, but the signature might be copied from the first, or it might have been made on some approved office copy. It needs expert examination. Writing down something I do not know as a fact would be no less dangerous than an offence.'

Nadia sent a sample of the third person's handwriting from Brussels. Sofia examined the bottom edge of the letter. The initials looked like 'S.V.' The resemblance to her own Roman initials frightened her. It might be an attempt to implicate her; but without an expert's assessment, even her belief that the writing was not hers could not serve as a conclusion.

That afternoon a records-examination officer came to her office. Rather than opening all the original envelopes herself, Sofia had the seals, serial numbers and history of their custody recorded. 'There is a lawful basis for my keeping the documents already in my possession,' she said. 'But the evidentiary copies must be preserved independently. Seek the court's direction on the boundary between client privilege and potentially criminal documents.'

'Is a person named Magda Borg a witness in this matter?' the officer asked.

'She is a former employee, and what she has said remains unverified. I shall make a separate application for her protection. Her name must not be made public.' At that moment Sofia understood that the truth held in a sheet of paper could change not only the life of the person who wrote it but also that of the person who kept it.

By evening people were returning to their ordinary routines along the seafront. Sofia did not go home. She continued comparing the first draft with the second copy, line by line. The language of the new 'Authority of Representative' clause differed slightly from the English legal terminology ordinarily used in her office. One word appeared in an old Maltese registration form that had earlier been examined in connection with Viraj Sahni's trust. The resemblance might have come from copying. She recorded it on a separate page, only as a question.

At night a second message came from Magda: 'A car stopped outside my house again today. I'm moving somewhere safe with my daughter. Ask me before using my name.' Sofia accepted that express condition in writing. She then requested witness protection and preservation of the original receipt register in her formal application.

As Sofia folded the envelope again, she found a thin sheet inside that had escaped the first examination. It looked like correspondence for a different client. The last line read, 'Acknowledgement of receipt in Malta; authority to execute upon confirmation in India.' Who was to confirm it in India? There was no name below, only a reference to a correspondence section in Delhi. Sofia did not send a photograph. She prepared an application for the lawful preservation of the original sheet. Whether the third hand had used her name as a cover might now be answered by records in Delhi.

CHAPTER 98

Behind the Transfer

Outside the gate of Arunima Rao's new office stood a peepal tree whose shade reached the entrance. Fewer visitors came here than to her previous department, but there were no fewer documents. That morning, the first instalment of certified copies from the administrative file on her transfer arrived by official post. She herself had applied for them, not to discover why she had been transferred, but to see which notings and approvals had been lawfully recorded before the order was issued.

The file contained a list of postings for the prescribed period, vacancies in the office, employees' service particulars and the competent officer's approval. At first glance, everything was ordinary. In the margin Arunima noticed the words 'in the interest of work'. It was a phrase of everyday administrative usage. To declare it evidence of conspiracy would cast doubt on thousands of lawful orders.

Her former assistant Nikhil telephoned. 'Madam, have you received the file?'

'The first part,' Arunima said. 'Don't ask any questions yet. Once the complete sequence of the copies I've requested arrives, I can raise questions through the proper channel.'

'People in the corridors are saying you were sent away to keep you quiet,' Nikhil said.

'Let corridor talk stay in the corridors,' Arunima replied. 'The transfer order is genuine. It is fair to examine the actual administrative reason for it, but I won't substitute my feelings for evidence by declaring myself a victim.'

The third page of the file mentioned an office representation. Its date was one day before the transfer order, but the receipt stamp on the attached copy showed a date two days after the order. Two dates on a single document, one of writing and the other of receipt, could be perfectly normal. Yet an earlier note in the file said the representation had been considered before the order was issued. That sequence called for separate examination.

Arunima drew three circles in her notebook: the date of writing the letter, the date it arrived by post, and the date of the official decision. She put no red circle around anyone's name. She wrote to the personnel department requesting the original mail register, the internal entry record and verified particulars of the decision time. She also specified the limits of

her authority; she was not asking for confidential personal details of employees without cause.

At the same time Nilima was at Mansi Verma's office in Delhi. A limited portion of Sofia's lawfully communicated message had arrived from Malta: a copy of the letter of authority was said to depend on confirmation by a correspondence section in Delhi. Mansi said, 'Delhi is the only thing the two files have in common. On that basis, I won't say Arunima's transfer was the result of a foreign grant.'

'But we ought to examine the history of the page that appears to have been added later,' Nilima said. 'Sometimes the truth emerges when a mistaken conclusion is corrected.'

Mansi prepared a separate question for examination. The Indian administrative file and the private consultancy agreement in Malta belonged to different jurisdictions. A comparison would be possible only through competent authorities and proper requests. She did not seek photographs of the documents by an unauthorised route.

In the evening Arunima reached her room at a government guest house. In her bag was her daughter's application to her former school. The transfer had unsettled the rhythm of the household. Her daughter asked over the telephone, 'How many more days before you come back?' Arunima looked out of the window before answering. 'I'm not certain, but I must find time to look at your examination timetable,' she said. Behind every order issued by an office, some family's calendar changed. The pain was real; turning it into an accusation without evidence was something she could not accept.

The next day, during an authorised meeting, a clerk from the section said, 'Sometimes a letter comes by email first and is entered in the postal register two days later.'

'Was there such an email in this file?' Arunima asked.

'There may have been. I have no proof.'

'Then don't write "may have been" as an answer. If there is an email, we can obtain its original receipt record. If there isn't, that is a fact too. The copy of the paper shows a difference in time, not its cause.'

Meanwhile, it was proposed that Revati's news report should carry an unconfirmed tip concerning Arunima's transfer. Vidya Deshmukh asked over the telephone, 'If money influenced the order, the story will be in the public interest. But what do we write now?'

'The government order, the administrative process and the questions on record,' Revati answered. 'Not "a transfer bought with money". We won't publish details of her private home either. That information isn't proof of corruption.'

At an office meeting that evening, Arunima examined the official list of duties from her previous department. It provided for two kinds of transfer: routine transfers and special transfers in the public interest. Her order had been filed in the first category, not the second. But an unusual

representation attached to it contained the phrase 'urgent public dialogue'. The wording resembled 'special dialogue arrangements' in the Brussels grant. It would be wrong to join the two events merely because the language was similar. She marked it separately.

Nikhil contacted her again. 'The space for a missing signature in the receipt register of your old office still hasn't been filled in.'

'That is a matter for Mansi's examination,' Arunima said. 'I have no authority to issue directions about it. But I will provide a certified copy of the handover note I signed.'

After a brief hesitation Nikhil said, 'It looked to me as though some pages in the file had been bound again. There are fresh holes along one sheet's edge.'

'Write down the physical condition of the paper, not an employee's guess,' Arunima said. 'There is nothing wrong with rebinding pages if it is done and recorded according to the rules. The main question is when it was done and under whose authority.'

Late that evening a second bundle arrived from the authorised section. Arunima opened the envelope. It contained pages numbered twelve through seventeen; there was no contents entry on the back of page fifteen. Page sixteen carried a representation marked 'For urgent consideration', whereas the associated sequence register listed it as incoming item eighteen. So the page order in the file and the order in which representations had been received were not the same. That might simply reflect administrative compilation, but examination of the original binding and its digital history had now become essential.

She sent a formal question: 'Was representation number eighteen before the decision-maker at the time of the decision, or was it added afterwards as an associated record?' Writing that small sentence reminded her of what a teacher at her old school had taught her: ask for the reason; do not invent a criminal's name.

While waiting for a reply that night, she received an anonymous message: 'Stop looking behind the file. A transfer order can be changed again.' It might have been a threat or a fool's joke. Arunima preserved the message and informed the appropriate officer. She did not waver, but the safety of her family had now become a real concern.

At the same time, a limited extract from the authorised digital register reached Mansi. The entry time for representation number eighteen was recorded as four hours after the transfer order had been issued. The register also carried a note saying 'received earlier', but the original email behind that note was still unavailable. Had the decision already been made, or had a later addition been used to justify it? Arunima wrote in her notes: 'Time established; cause outstanding.' A small corner of a page had become a large question about a decision of the state.

CHAPTER 99

The Final Campaign

Kabir's morning in Delhi began with the light of his mobile phone. He had not slept all night. Since the attack on Pranay's art exhibition, he had treated every unfamiliar message with care. This time, however, the words on the screen had nothing to do with his private life: 'One truth across the country today.' Below them was a short film made to resemble a news report. It opened with a demonstration in one city and ended with images of a fire in a second city and police in a third.

Pranay made tea and brought it over. 'Do you have to watch every video?' he asked.

'Not every one,' Kabir said. 'But if a million people see a false image, the person whose photograph was used has a right to answer.'

Pranay did not take his phone. 'My painting was used without my consent,' he said. 'I know how helpless it feels when someone's work is stolen. But you must look after your own safety too.'

Kabir paused the video. In the third second, a flag from the Patna meeting appeared. In the seventh, there was a very old street scene from another state. The two scenes could not have been from the same day, but he would publish no conclusion before verifying their original sources. He telephoned Akriti Jha.

'The same material appeared this morning in two newspapers, on five social platforms and on a few independent pages,' Akriti said. 'The headlines differ in places, but the images are identical. There's a trace here that resembles an old receipt from Lokdarpan Publicity Service, though somebody could have copied that too.'

Kabir asked his colleague Shaival to preserve the times shown in publicly available advertising-transparency records, the declared names of sponsors and the evidence relating to the promotional images. He gave no instruction to enter anybody's account or break confidential access codes. The news report was to go no further than what could be seen and verified lawfully.

In Mumbai, the YouTuber Nihal Chaudhary's phone had been ringing without a pause. Footage from an old educational programme of his had also been inserted into the new campaign. Kabir requested a direct conversation. Nihal was angry at first. 'I am not party to this lie!'

'I won't report what you're saying without checking it,' Kabir replied. 'If you are willing to provide your original approved film and the relevant pages of your contract, I can establish the differences on that basis.'

Nihal remained silent for a while. Later he sent a lawful written response: the approved subject of his campaign had been financial literacy; a short piece of his voice had been added to the new film and had not appeared in the approved original. His statement required verification; it was not in itself proof of innocence. Kabir recorded both distinctions.

A message came from Revati in Patna. 'The organising committee of the meeting has clearly said it had nothing to do with calls for violence. They've inserted a photograph of an injured citizen in the new film, but the circumstances of that person's actual injury were different.' Kabir asked, 'Who is doing all this to condemn people before anyone has examined the facts?'

'That is what we have to find out,' Revati replied. 'But don't turn your headline into a contest between "anti-national" and "patriot" just yet. We need the family's permission to use the victim's photograph too.'

At noon, Kabir, Akriti and Shaival sat around an editorial table. They made separate lists of the publication times of the films. Some advertising records from within the same wave said the advertisements had been paid for by one organisation; other posts appeared to be ordinary users sharing the material of their own accord. The displayed views ran into the millions, but the number of distinct actual viewers had not yet been verified. An estimate of a campaign's impact and a record of its real audience were different things.

An old programme letter arrived on Pranay's phone. He showed Kabir that the 'special cover production' under which permission to use his painting had been requested included a reference to final approval of the video published that day. Pranay had not signed that approval. Nevertheless, a scanned copy carried a faint crooked line beside his name.

'Are you going to publish that line as my signature?' Pranay asked.

'No,' Kabir said. 'The original first. And I won't publish quotations from your private correspondence without your consent.'

Pranay took the original letter refusing consent out of his office file. An invoice for production of the advertisement had been raised even after the date of that refusal. The question was no longer merely one of an artist's rights; it was also whether a service had been provided, or an invoice prepared, without the client's permission. But independent information was needed to establish whether the invoice had actually been paid.

Shaival found an entry for an old advertisement in the public campaign register naming Navkshitij Seva-Sampark as the payer. The entry was dated two days before the wave of publicity that day. But the original campaign title had been 'Civic Assistance'. The record did not say whether the new

call for violence had been edited in later or had formed part of the plan from the beginning.

At midday a journalist's question reached Mansi Verma's authorised office. Mansi replied in writing that the narrative editing of public events and legal proof of money laundering belonged to different fields. The competent authorities were examining the allegedly unlawful payments; it would be wrong to classify citizens' lawful dissent and demonstrations as crimes. Kabir decided to put this response at the heart of his report.

Then another call came. Kusum, from Patna, said, 'My brother Naresh's photograph is in this film. He is no longer alive. People keep calling to ask whether he was killed in a riot. The inquiry into his death is not yet complete.' Kabir asked, 'Would you like us to make a public request to have the photograph removed?'

'Yes,' Kusum said. 'But please don't kill my brother a second time for the sake of your story. I want to know how he really died.'

Kabir noted the family's request without pressing her with more questions. It was decided not to print the dead man's photograph in that night's report. The image was retained securely as evidence, not displayed on the public cover. Kabir realised that sometimes the hardest test of fact-checking was the decision not to show something at all.

By evening some versions of the false campaign had disappeared and others returned under new names. Kabir put five limited findings in his article: which original images belonged to which older events; for which artist's work no written permission was available; which published advertisement named a payer; which claims lacked evidence; and what public correction the victim's family wanted. He included Nihal's response as well. After reading the published article, Revati wrote only this: 'When a dispute stands on evidence, sensationalism has a shorter life.'

That night Vidya Deshmukh called Kabir. 'There are anonymous messages after publication. Someone says you have the original order for the publicity operation. Is that true?'

'I have the public register and Pranay's written refusal. I don't have any confidential original order,' Kabir replied.

'Then what does the person who believes you have the original order want from you?' Vidya asked. Kabir did not know the answer.

Pranay had gone to secure a painting kept in another building of the gallery. Kabir set out to collect him. The streetlights were working as usual; a paan shop was open, and a man cycled past carrying milk cans. A voice came to Kabir from beside a car: 'Kabirji, the editor's car is here.' He stopped. He had no idea whether Vidya had sent a car.

His phone rang. Pranay's name was on the screen. 'Where are you?' Pranay asked.

Kabir was about to reply when two men approached him from the far side of the car. One tried to seize his arm. Kabir wrenched himself free,

stepped backwards and called loudly to the people in the street. His phone fell to the ground; Pranay's voice burst from its speaker. People turned to look. The car door remained half open, then slammed shut.

Kabir could not see clearly whether the two men ran away or got into the car. His shoulder hurt, and he was breathing hard. The shopkeeper hurried over. Pranay was shouting into the phone, 'Kabir, answer me!' Kabir tried to pick it up. On the ground lay a small card marked 'Editorial Meeting', but it named no editorial organisation.

Kabir managed to say only this to Pranay: 'I'm alive. Call the police. Don't let anyone touch the card.' He could not tell at that moment whether it had been an attempted abduction, violence disguised as a false appointment, or some other kind of assault. But information circulated in his own name had brought him to that particular place in the street, and for the first time a scene beyond the screen of news was being written upon his own body.

CHAPTER 100

The Darkness of Democracy

Patna, at dawn. Rainwater left by the night still glistened on the veranda of Shivshankar Mishra's house. Across the road two young men were reading aloud a sentence on a phone: 'Foreign money paid for the meeting.' Shivshankar knew that once a sentence like that entered people's ears, it was difficult to bring it back to the papers on which it should have been tested.

He went over and asked, 'In which record did you read that?'

One of the young men showed him the phone. It carried the image of a news item, but there was a blank where the source ought to have been. The other young man said, 'If you people are in the right, why are you so frightened?'

'Fear and guilt are two different things,' Shivshankar said. 'I lost money in a fraud. Holding a meeting to ask for my money back is not a crime. Anyone who wanted violence was not at that meeting with me.'

Madhavi came outside just then. She did not want to pull her father back into the house; she wanted him to use his voice without fear. She told the young men, 'What is written on that phone has no date. If you want to know the truth, watch the entire recording of yesterday's meeting. Cutting out two minutes doesn't change what happened in the world.'

In Delhi, Revati Karn had learned of the attack on Kabir during the night. He was alive and in hospital, but it was not yet clear who had tried to seize him. In the draft of her report, she wrote 'kidnapping conspiracy' and stopped. The police's preliminary record described an attempted assault in the street; eyewitnesses differed on whether the shopkeeper had seen an attempt to drag Kabir towards the car.

'What are you going to print?' Vidya Deshmukh asked over the telephone.

'That Kabir was attacked, what was seen, the hospital's confirmation, and the fact that an investigation is under way. I can't identify the perpetrators just because I call them criminals.'

'But what will you do with the other story behind this one?'

On Revati's desk were two advertising contracts relating to the Patna meeting, a list of relief expenditure and a limited bank receipt. The approved title of one advertisement was 'Civic Assistance'; the video circulated later contained a voice calling for violence. The receipt established payment for publicity services, not an instruction to instigate

violence. The two papers lay together, but no one's signature filled the gap between them.

Revati wrote, 'Finding where a payment went and proving the purpose of the payment are two different conclusions.' She did not strike out the sentence. This time she made it the opening of her report.

In a secure room at the Patna police station, Mansi Verma was watching a newly obtained original recording of the meeting. The local station chief, Shashibhushan, had brought signed statements from two witnesses. One said two men had quarrelled outside the meeting. The other said the men had been standing near a vehicle before the quarrel. Only two characters from its registration number matched in the two accounts.

'Shall I issue an order on this basis?' Shashibhushan asked.

'Act on what has been independently confirmed,' Mansi said. 'Treat the remaining details only as leads. Accusing an entire group of citizens is not an investigation.'

Another paper on the table was from a bank. A payment for sound facilities at the event had been made from an account belonging to an intermediary called 'Lokdarpan Publicity Service'. The same account also showed transfers to two different people on the following day. The bank's details included the beneficiaries' names but not the actual purposes of the services. Mansi directed that each recipient's work and contract be verified separately.

At midday Arunima Rao was working at her present post, having left her old office behind. Mansi had asked her only for a certified copy of the handover note. Arunima did not offer a diagnosis of the case over her personal telephone. She sent the written copy through the authorised channel and said, 'Your case is yours. I can tell you which paper I handed over and when; anything beyond that is my opinion, not an order for you to follow.'

The discrepancy in the timing of representation number eighteen in her transfer file was still unresolved. The date on that inconsistent document was the same as the date of the Patna publicity payment, but without reconciling the clocks and procedures of the two offices, no one could treat the events as arising from a single cause. Arunima understood that much. Yet the threat that had arrived at night had taught her very clearly what fear for one's family meant.

In the evening Revati reached the civic-assistance room. Prachi Jha was preserving a copy of a receipt for medicine for an injured young man. Inside, a woman sat with a small child. Her husband had fallen into debt after the fraud, and a date had been fixed for testimony in court about that debt. 'Will your newspaper report solve my problem?' she asked.

Revati had no answer. 'A report can't do everything,' she said. 'But if your testimony is being falsely described, we can show how it has been misrepresented by referring to the original records.'

Prachi put away a closed notebook. 'The accounts of our work are open to public examination. But the private addresses of women who have suffered, written in this book, are not public. Transparency and privacy must remain different things.'

Through his lawyer, Aarav Malkani sent a written proposal from Mumbai to Mansi's office. He was willing to provide an internal account prepared after his earlier approval of payments. According to him, an item headed 'local presence' in a special proposal had been entered under service publicity, but the full details of its intended use had not been supplied when approval was sought. His statement did not remove his own responsibility.

After reading the letter, Mansi said, 'We cannot rely only on Aarav's interpretation of those words. We need statements from everyone who received payment. And if somebody paid for violence, we need independent evidence of the payer's intention.'

At noon on the third day, a preliminary record of a second complaint was placed before the Patna court. The first case concerning gambling fraud and unlawful payments continued on its own course. The new complaint separately identified deliberate alteration of publicity material, unauthorised use of private images and the threatening of a witness. No political opinion or attendance at a peaceful meeting was treated as a basis for criminality.

Anupama Jha met Revati in the courthouse veranda. In her bag were her brother Paritosh's unfinished letter and the papers relating to the inquiry into his death. 'In everybody's talk, my brother becomes a man connected with gambling accounts one day and with violence the next,' she said. 'I want them first to find out how he died.'

'His death will be investigated independently of all those claims,' Revati replied. 'I won't turn your brother into evidence for a headline.'

Just then Mansi received written information from Deepa Chaudhary in Kolkata. Nabin Pal had raised concerns about his family's safety. After threats came naming Mousumi and the children, he had been asking about the possibility of staying somewhere safe outside India for a time. Deepa had written that this was only a matter of the witness's wishes and legal advice. It would be wrong to assume such travel was possible without the court's permission, a lawful basis for travel, continued availability to testify and an assessment of the family's safety.

Mansi sent the letter not to Arunima but to her own legal cell. 'First examine the protection available within the country and the witness's freely given consent. Travel abroad can be considered only if the law permits it,' she wrote.

Revati's report was published that night. Its headline read 'The Voice of a Meeting and the Silence of Payment'. It carried Shivshankar's account, Prachi's figures and Aarav's limited claim, but nothing connecting

Paritosh's death to the publicity operation. The care taken over those distinctions did not make the report less effective.

Ten minutes after publication, however, Revati received an image of a document from an unknown number. Inside a cover marked 'Witness Protection' was Nabin Pal's name, with the name of a city abroad below it. She did not know whether it was a copy of an authorised proposal or a forgery. The most disturbing thing was not the city's name. The application date on the paper was earlier than the day Deepa had written her authorised proposal.

PART SIX

The Final Five Percent

CHAPTER 101

The Voice Returned

The first sound Kabir heard at dawn in the Delhi hospital was not his own voice. First came the distant clink of a metal tray being moved, then a nurse's gentle question: 'How bad is the pain now?' Kabir opened his eyes. His shoulder felt heavy. He could breathe. An ordinary breath seemed worth more to him today than any news headline.

Pranay sat in a chair beside the bed. He had been awake all night, but when Kabir looked at him he concealed his weariness. 'I can still hear the last sound your phone made,' Pranay said.

'I didn't see clearly who they were,' Kabir said. 'Or even the car properly. If I rush to write that someone tried to kidnap me, and it turns out to have been something else, then—'

'You're a journalist,' Pranay interrupted, 'but to me, right now, you're the person I love, and you're hurt. What matters first is that you stay alive to write your complete list of facts.'

Kabir did not laugh. He held Pranay's hand. 'You were speaking when the call was connected. For a moment I thought I would never be able to answer you.'

Pranay's eyes filled with tears. He said nothing. For so long they had struggled to keep their love from becoming a public spectacle, but in the white room of the hospital there was no audience from the outside world between them.

The doctor recorded the shoulder injury, abrasions on the arm and the possibility of psychological trauma in a written report. She made it clear that the nature of an injury did not establish an assailant's intention. The hospital informed the police in accordance with procedure. When Kabir was fit to give his statement, he described the sequence he had actually seen.

'The car door was half open. Two men came near me. One caught my arm. I broke free and shouted. They ran—perhaps towards the car, but I'm not sure.'

The investigating officer made a note. 'We will examine the complaint of "attempted abduction" in the light of the account recorded. The scene, eyewitnesses and any available footage of the car still have to be examined.' For the first time Kabir was glad that someone had not treated his uncertainty as weakness.

In the corridor outside stood Vidya Deshmukh, Akriti Jha and Shaival. Before raising the question of preparing a news report, Vidya asked what Kabir wanted. 'No one has the right to make your private medical

information public,' she said. 'In the office's name, we'll say only that a colleague was attacked and that the police are investigating.'

Kabir agreed. 'Keep Naresh's family's photograph out, exactly as we agreed. Don't change the reporting on my account.'

'It's because you insist on that,' Vidya said softly, 'that I know you're still thinking about work even from a hospital bed. But others will do the work now.'

At noon Pranay went home, not to examine the file on paintings damaged at the exhibition but to collect some necessary clothes for Kabir. Under a cupboard he found an old envelope. Its cover referred to a proposed translation of the artist's exhibition material and consent for publicity. Kabir and Pranay had spoken of the letter before, but after the application was rejected it had been placed in another file.

When Pranay opened it, he saw that permission had been sought not merely to use his image. There was also a subordinate clause about 'international cooperation in the city-dialogue programme'. He had paid little attention to that clause earlier because the main subject was his painting. The final page carried three names under separate headings: coordinator, translator and receipt examiner.

He did not recognise the first two names. The third astonished him: 'Magda Borg'.

Where had he heard that name? He remembered a Brussels correspondence note among the papers Kabir had left behind. It named a temporary employee in Malta who had been connected with the entry register for a grant's letter of authority. They might be two different people; a shared name did not prove a shared identity. Nevertheless, that Maltese name on an old art contract in Delhi raised a question.

Pranay returned to the hospital. Kabir was half asleep. He did not hold the envelope in front of Kabir's face. First he put aside the original paper, the postal markings on the envelope and his old letter refusing consent. He understood that when someone you love is injured, rushing towards them with the truth can sometimes become another kind of violence.

In the evening Kabir asked of his own accord, 'You went home. Did you find anything?'

Pranay told him only that the letter existed, not the name it contained. 'When you're better, we'll look at it together. What constitutes evidence we'll submit lawfully. What may be only coincidence we'll leave as coincidence.'

'Are you keeping something from me?' Kabir asked. His voice was not harsh; it carried the insecurity left by the injury.

Pranay sat beside him. 'No. But I won't turn my fear into a claim of authority over you. You need rest now. If you want, I can read it aloud.'

Kabir remained silent, then said, 'Read.'

Pranay began with the date of the letter. It was three months older than the first proposal for his exhibition. If someone called it an instruction for the new publicity campaign, the date itself would contradict the claim. Yet the old writing already contained the expression 'special cover production', which appeared again in later papers.

'Magda Borg,' Pranay read at the end. Kabir was silent for a moment.

'The employee in Malta?' he asked.

'That is the name. I don't know whether it's the same person,' Pranay said.

Kabir did not even attempt to raise his injured arm. 'No accusing anyone without written authorisation,' he said. 'But Sofia ought to see this paper, if we have the right to make it available.'

The next morning the police did not come to take Kabir's statement again. Instead, they sent an official communication asking what he wished to do. Hospital staff explained the status of the small card, the objects preserved from the scene and the initial eyewitness statements. One shopkeeper had not seen the vehicle's full registration number; another remembered only the voice. Camera footage had been requested but had not yet been obtained.

Rather than change his statement, Kabir added a sentence: 'I was called over with the words "the editor's car", but the editor knew nothing about that vehicle.' Vidya agreed to confirm that fact in writing.

As they came out of the hospital, Pranay took Kabir's hand again. He could feel both his hands trembling. 'I'm afraid,' Kabir said, 'that next time no one will hear my voice.'

'Then we'll find ways to stay alive,' Pranay replied. 'Between keeping silent and speaking out, there's a third way: staying safe while giving evidence.'

A receipt message from Sofia Vella's office arrived on Pranay's phone. It asked for only the necessary pages of the letter to be made available through a secure, lawful channel. The message also contained a question: 'Was Magda Borg's name on the list written by hand or printed?'

Pranay looked at the paper again. All the names were printed, but before Magda's name was a short blue line whose meaning he could not understand. He remembered that there had been a blue mark on one of Aarav's old invoices too. Was this the same sign? No: the same colour on two papers was not proof of a connection. But beneath that line was a small word he had not noticed before: 'Prior approval'.

CHAPTER 102

Sara's Truth

The first sunlight of morning in Phoenix, Arizona, was falling on the glass of the buildings. Isha had placed two cups of tea on the little table at home. She knew one cup would remain untouched; Sara was in Delhi, not here. Today, however, she positioned her phone camera not towards the empty chair but straight in front of her own eyes.

Sara appeared on the screen. It was evening behind her in Delhi. 'Were you working all night?' she asked.

'No. I was thinking about how often I've hidden my fear by calling it confidentiality,' Isha said. 'I can't give you confidential details of my work. But what I'm entitled to say, I'll say now: I have not sent the private list of victims from your office to anyone. I'm willing to have the source of that accusation examined.'

Sara's eyes were moist. 'I only wanted to know whether you were listening to me. I have something to tell you as well, something I couldn't say because of my professional duty.'

Isha fell silent. Sara said, 'A woman came to my office because she was being threatened over her employment contract. She didn't want any digital file made public; she only wanted the original messages preserved. With her consent, our office issued two dated acknowledgements of receipt. I didn't tell you about that material because it was my client's information.'

'Can you tell me now?' Isha asked.

'The woman has now given written consent for a limited reference to be provided to the authorised investigation team. But the complete history of her file is still private. I can disclose only that securely preserved records exist and explain the lawful procedure for requesting them.'

Isha drew a deep breath. At last they both understood that telling the truth in love and disclosing confidential material were not the same act.

In Delhi, the senior advocate at Sara's office, Vasudha Menon, read the written permission a second time. The client's name did not appear in papers where it was unnecessary. She sent Mansi Verma a letter stating that securely preserved original copies of certain digital correspondence were held by the office; copies could be provided within the limits of an authorised order and the concerned person's consent. There was no permission for the material to be released to the public.

On receiving the letter, Mansi called Naman Singh. 'According to Isha's earlier observation, the discrepancy of seventeen minutes remains unresolved. Could the new file answer that question?'

'Possibly,' Naman said, 'but first we have to see how the file was created, which time zone its original record used, and whether the stamps for "sent", "received" and "archived" are distinct. A difference between clocks does not prove forgery.'

'And will Isha herself give the conclusion of the investigation?' Mansi asked.

'She can explain the technical system. The evidentiary weight of the original records of an Indian office must be decided by an authorised examiner. We need both independent expertise and a chain of custody.'

In Phoenix, Isha was reading her institution's general public guidelines. A customer's session record showed local time, but the principal service record was stored in a prescribed universal time standard. Of the two times appearing in the old copies, one was from an acknowledgement of transfer and the other from the clock displayed on the user's screen. This offered a possible explanation for the difference of seventeen minutes, but nothing could be determined until the original file had been examined.

'Do you ever feel I turn our love into a technical problem?' Isha asked Sara that evening.

Sara smiled. 'Yes. And sometimes I take your silence for rejection. Today we can both talk without using the language of documents.'

They talked about their future: the possibility of living in one city, the boundaries of their different professions, their ageing parents, travel, and a few days away from crowds. There was no secret conspiracy in any of it. They wanted to make decisions about their lives as free people, not as people forever running after a crime.

The next day the woman who had sought help came to Sara's office herself. Her name remained protected in the papers. 'My consent doesn't mean my life is to be made public,' she said. 'Check the date on the approval I signed, but give no one my private photographs or home address.'

Vasudha replied, 'We shall record who your permission covers, what portion of the material it covers and for how long. If an authorised inquiry requires anything else, the legal basis for that will be examined separately.'

After this conversation, copies of the two acknowledgements were sent through official channels. One recorded the time the initial letter was received; the other recorded the time a further note had been added to the proposal. Treating the two as a single event would alter the appearance of the dates. Naman first prepared a list of source procedures: preservation of the original file, route of receipt, time zone, transfers, and a transparent reconciliation of the copies.

That afternoon in Delhi, Naman showed Mansi a small difference. An earlier summary had said, 'Indian publicity proposal approved.' But the

English sentence in the newly available first acknowledgement actually meant, 'Indian publicity proposal sent for approval.' A decisive grammatical difference lay between them. Sending something for approval was not the same as approving it.

Mansi stared at the paper. 'Is this an error in translation, or was a separate approval issued in between?'

'That question remains open,' Naman answered. 'The second acknowledgement contains a note made seventeen minutes later, but we need its full original text and a certified copy of the service log. It would be wrong to decide on the strength of a single sentence.'

Mansi did not send Isha a private message. Through an authorised channel, she requested limited confirmation of the date-handling procedure for the Arizona service records and the relevant contract. The institution's legal department was instructed to preserve pertinent originals; no unauthorised entry or use of a private account was to be made.

In the evening Sara told Isha only that, with her client's consent, the investigation team had been informed that securely held records existed. Isha asked, 'Are you all right now?'

'Yes,' Sara said, 'because today I can tell you about my fears without breaking into anyone's confidential records.'

After ending the call, Isha went outside. A pale blue remained in the desert sky. She knew that the next day Lata Desai would have to carry out a separate, lawful examination of the original service logs. Isha did not yet know what that inquiry would find.

In Delhi, Mansi placed the two new acknowledgements on the same table. The first reported receipt of the proposal; the second carried a note made seventeen minutes later. If the second note was indeed an approval, the decision had been made on that date. If it was only a clarification, the entire accusation in the earlier news report might have been built on a false premise.

Then Naman recorded one final observation. The date written on the first copy and the local date shown on the second were different, but converting both moments to the same universal clock did not reverse their chronological order. What had been reversed was the meaning of the verb used in the papers: 'sent' and 'approved'.

'The paper has not given us a decision yet,' Mansi said. 'It has given us the right question.'

She decided that no wording of any allegation would be changed until Lata had examined the original session records. But an official letter was sent at once, directing that the original source of the word 'approval', the translator's identity and the corresponding server records be preserved.

CHAPTER 103

The Image of Original Time

At daybreak in Phoenix, Arizona, the sun was so clear that Lata Desai could see even the fine trails of dust on the glass of her office. Inside stood three clocks—local time, the time in the customer's region, and one with no city's name on it, only universal time. Until the previous day, they had been ordinary instruments to her. Today all three stood between one person's rights and another person's possible crime.

The night before, Nikita had said on the telephone, 'Ma, was that car standing outside your house again?'

Before answering, Lata looked towards the window. The car was not there. 'Not today. But I've given the police the details of the earlier incident. You concentrate on your work.'

'You're hiding things from me.'

'I don't want to frighten you.'

'Fear grows when you tell only half the story,' Nikita said. The words reminded Lata of two incomplete acknowledgements belonging to Sara's client. How far half a statement could travel!

When she reached work, Lata sat down with Jonah Reed, the senior authorised representative, and Amina Qureshi, the records-preservation officer. A lawful request from Delhi lay on the table. It did not seek a customer's full private particulars, only confirmation of the designated proposal's session records, the chain of custody, and the meaning of its timestamps. Amina first read the legal limits of the document.

'Being able to preserve something does not automatically give us the right to share all of it,' she said. 'We'll do this in two stages—the preserved original, and a separate copy exported under authority. The record will show how the two were matched.'

Lata nodded. 'And the seventeen-minute difference?'

Jonah said, 'How do we know these are two events relating to the same proposal?'

'We don't know yet,' Lata replied. 'That's why we're here.'

After they entered the authorised examination room, Amina recorded the preservation identifier of the original log, the time at which it was opened, and the names of those present. Two events appeared on the screen. First, the Indian publicity proposal had been received. Second, an additional note had been entered in response to that proposal. Seventeen minutes

separated them. The local clocks displayed the time differently, but conversion to the same universal standard did not alter the sequence.

'Then is the translation "approved" in the first acknowledgement wrong?' Jonah asked.

'The first acknowledgement says "sent for approval",' Lata said. 'There is reason to suspect a mistranslation, but who translated it, and which original they saw, must be established from the translation process.'

She read the second entry. It referred to 'confirmation of receipt', not acceptance of the proposal. Only a note had been added: 'Separate authorisation from the Indian rights-holder awaited.' There was no approval marker before or after that line.

Jonah leaned back in his chair. 'So if a newspaper reported that an Indian advertisement was approved in Arizona, that conclusion cannot be drawn from this record.'

'Yes,' Lata said. 'But it doesn't prove that approval was never given anywhere. It is simply absent from this service record.'

At that moment, a reference to an internal letter appeared on the second examination screen. The customer's original proposal had been submitted for review of a technical service; the final decision about where the advertisement would appear had been left to a third party. Lata had long heard this distinction offered as a reason why the Arizona institution was distant from the alleged crime. But one line in the letter had been circled: 'Awaiting confirmation from the Indian records contact point.' The line was dated several days after the actual publicity had already begun in India.

'Who released it?' Amina asked.

'I don't know. The document gives only a category of contact, not a person's identity.'

'Then it would be wrong to turn that category into a person and write a story about them,' Amina said.

Lata wrote those words in her notes. She remembered Nikita saying that half a story increased fear. In an investigation, half a story increased accusations.

Outside the records room, Lata's colleague Tessa stopped her. 'Behind the page where you're searching for a decision are the names of three ordinary employees. I'm afraid that if management made the mistake, we'll be the ones to lose our jobs.'

'Write down what you saw, not a verdict about blame,' Lata said. 'The record should also show the work of those who followed the proper procedure.'

Tessa was silent for a while. 'I prepared the first acknowledgement. The screen said "received", not "approved". The customer called afterwards, but I didn't hear what the call was about. If anyone says, using my name, that I approved the proposal, it's a lie.'

Lata did not immediately treat this account as written evidence. She explained Tessa's right to make a statement independently, in her own words, before an authorised officer. Tessa's eyes filled with tears. Lata understood that in an international criminal investigation even an ordinary employee who pressed a button lived with fear.

By afternoon, Mansi Verma's office in Delhi received, through legal channels, notice of a limited certificate of evidence. The original log remained securely preserved abroad; access to an authorised copy depended on a separate legal process. For the first time, Naman Singh made two new columns in his old chronology: 'sent' and 'decided'. Between them lay perhaps not merely a few minutes, but the distance of an entire commercial decision.

Nilima said over the telephone, 'However urgently we want to find the guilty, we have an equally serious duty to remove the name of someone wrongly implicated.'

Mansi replied, 'The publicity advertisement certainly appeared. The questions are who ordered it, who carried it out, and who profited.'

Evening fell in Phoenix. As Lata was leaving the office, Amina showed her a new entry in the incoming-records register. A separate letter connected with the original log preserved under Delhi's authorised request had been found in an older collection. It was not itself an approval, but it contained a space reserved for a signature from the Indian side. In that space was not a digital name, but an image of a signature made on paper.

Lata studied the image. She had never seen the signatory's name in her office contact list. The designation written beneath the seal was not that of an Indian advertising company either, but of a consulting-trust organisation. Whether that person had genuinely been authorised, or had merely been appointed on paper, was a question the Arizona server could not answer.

'Shall I send this page to Delhi?' Amina asked.

'Through the lawful channel, with the proper limits,' Lata said. 'And add this: showing a signature does not establish that the signatory is the owner.'

When Lata reached home, she called Nikita. This time she did not conceal the matter of the car, nor did she claim that the inquiry had ended. She said, 'I'm safe, but I'll have to be careful for a few days. Keep talking to me.'

After she put down the phone, a copy of an authorised incoming message arrived on her desk. Her eyes stopped at the second line of the Indian signatory's designation: 'Temporary representative, acting on the instructions of the ultimate beneficiary.' The ultimate beneficiary's name was nowhere to be found. After a day spent searching for the correct time, she had reached the shadow of someone whose identity would be disclosed not by the clocks but by the records of ownership.

CHAPTER 104

The Owner in Name Only

On the day Meghna Sen first came to Hong Kong for training in auditing, its skyscrapers had impressed her more than anything else. Now she felt their shadows falling across her papers. Behind one name stood another company; behind that company, a third office; and everywhere the records smiled like doormen: 'We are all duly registered.'

In the morning a message arrived from Irene Lok: 'Not an open café this time. We'll meet in the office's public visitors' room. My lawyer will be there too.'

Meghna agreed. She knew that Irene had revised the time period of an allegation against Viraj Sahni in her earlier testimony. Viraj's name appearing in an old register did not mean he controlled the company at the time of its most recent payment. Meghna herself had revised her earlier assumption. To conceal that fact would weaken the credibility of the entire investigation.

In the visitors' room, Irene sat with her lawyer, Yan Tai. Rain had begun outside. Three bundles of papers lay on the table, covering different periods under the same name: incorporation, changes in authority, and limited bank customer-identification details.

'You said earlier that the owner sat at the top of an international gambling empire,' Irene said.

'I am not making that finding,' Meghna replied. 'I had treated the name available to us as a likely indication of actual control. That assumption may have been mistaken.'

Yan Tai showed her the first page of the bundle. The company's registered director was an elderly man named Chen Wing-ho. His name was recorded as a legal director of several companies. The list included some dormant companies. Such professional services were not in themselves criminal; many lawful businesses appointed administrative directors.

'Did payments go out on this man's signature?' Meghna asked.

'The register does not tell us that,' Yan replied. 'A legal appointment to a company and practical authority over its account are separate questions.'

The second bundle contained minutes of an internal meeting. Chen's presence was recorded, but the minutes said that the proposal for the decision had come by telephone. The papers did not name the person at the

other end of the line. The record increased Meghna's suspicion, but it could not be turned into a firm conclusion.

'Did he ever come to the office?' Meghna asked.

'I saw him once,' Irene replied. 'He was not a lively talker. His hands trembled. He'd left his reading glasses at home. An employee told him they only needed his signature to record his attendance.'

'Will you give a written statement about that?'

'About what I saw, yes. Not about who made the decision over the phone.'

Meghna left her cup of tea untouched. She had not herself witnessed Chen's trembling hands; she had only Irene's account of them. She made that distinction clear in her notes.

Before noon Meghna asked to meet Chen Wing-ho. Yan agreed only to a voluntary conversation. Chen was seated in the little garden on the ground floor of the office building. His granddaughter was with him, helping him read old papers.

'I don't remember all the business of every company,' Chen said. 'I attended some meetings under a contract for legal services. But I can say clearly that there is one file I did not sign.'

Meghna showed him a photograph. Chen put on his spectacles, then looked at his granddaughter. 'That is a seal bearing my name,' he said. 'The signature doesn't seem to be mine. But I've been writing for fifty years; sometimes a hand changes. Let an expert examine it.'

'Would you agree to testify?'

'Only to what I saw myself. I won't guess whose orders they were. Don't put my granddaughter's name into any papers.'

Meghna agreed. Until then Chen had been merely a name on a list. Now he was a person—with packets of medicine, his granddaughter's gentle hand, and the fear that his name had been misused. His human presence diminished Meghna's former certainty. That was not a weakness in the investigation; it was a correction.

In the afternoon she compared Irene's papers with another copy from an independent public company register. On a specified date, Viraj's possible representative authority had ended, but notice changing the old contact's name had reached the bank later. Was this an administrative delay or a deliberate obstruction? To answer that, they would need the bank's original correspondence.

Then a message reached Meghna from a former colleague of Tara Lama. Tara was still missing; every unfamiliar telephone call made her family tremble. The colleague wrote: 'Tara used to write the instruction to withdraw money from an account separately from the authority to issue that instruction. Her notebook hasn't been found at the office.'

Meghna asked the investigation team to protect the source of the message. She did not know where Tara was. This information could not

support a fresh allegation. But she remembered Tara once saying, 'The person whose name is on the board doesn't always hold the key.' It had sounded like a proverb then; today it was the question at the heart of the inquiry.

That evening Irene allowed Meghna to examine another piece of evidence. It was not a confidential bank statement, but an older audit letter prepared for the company's authorised audit. The letter raised questions about irregular service fees. In reply, the company's authorised representative had said that the decision was made with the final approval of an 'investment advisory committee'. The letter did not contain a complete list of that committee's members.

'Did this committee legally exist?' Meghna asked.

'I have no proof,' Irene said. 'Those are simply the words in the document.'

As Meghna was closing her notebook, Yan made an important point. 'Bank customer-identification papers contain information about the beneficial owner. But writing down somebody's name is one thing; that person actually exercising control is another. Evidence must be sought through the lawful process under which the bank is authorised to disclose it. Don't publish these private account details in a newspaper.'

Meghna agreed. She wanted no sensation built on people's private particulars. She wanted to trace the path of decision-making authority.

At night she spoke to Nilima over a secure channel. 'I've corrected an assumption,' Meghna said. 'Viraj's name is in an old register, but it is not yet possible to conclude that he owned the company when the recent funds were transferred. Chen is a director, but we don't know who made the operational decisions.'

'Should we say nothing, then, about the unknown owner?' Nilima asked.

'Write about it—but as a question. And include the evidence of the company's legitimate business, so that lawful employees aren't burdened with undeserved blame.'

Nilima fell silent. Looking at the rain beyond her window, Meghna said, 'If the five percent is called a service fee, we have to ask three things: who provided the service, who received it, and who made the decision.'

After the call ended, Meghna received a message from Yan's authorised office. The list of enclosures to the bank's old audit letter mentioned a brief appendix that had not been shown that day, either at the café or in the visitors' room: 'Updated beneficial-ownership information, in a separate envelope.' For now, only the list was visible. The name inside remained confidential and might be obtainable under a judicial order.

Meghna thought: if the reference to the beneficial owner was here, the company's account must surely lead close to that person. But proximity and control were different things. Just then a short question arrived in her mail from Sofia in Malta: 'Is the person described as the beneficiary in the Hong

Kong service payment the same as the recipient in Malta?' Meghna had no answer. The next clue might lie not inside the bank, but on the other side of the sea.

CHAPTER 105

The Money's Missing Destination

Beside the sea in Valletta, the night was bright. Tourists were taking photographs, music played in the restaurants, and Sofia Vella, without looking at the sparkle outside her office window, was adding up the difference between three figures. A consultancy fee paid by one company, an amount received by another, and 'payment in full' written on a third paper—these were not three descriptions of the same sum.

Magda Borg's message had arrived in the morning: 'My daughter is safe for now. Please don't put my name in any new report without asking me.' Sofia sent back more than her agreement. She also provided details of an independent lawyer who could advise Magda on giving testimony safely. If Magda wished to speak, she must do so on her own terms. That was Sofia's first responsibility.

In the afternoon the auditor Filippa Vassallo came to Sofia's office. She had been appointed not as a voluntary helper to the investigation but to conduct an authorised, independent professional review. She carried a services contract. Its title concerned consultancy; its description read 'commercial compliance and market assessment'. Such services could be perfectly ordinary in legitimate business. The heading alone established no crime.

'Whose papers would tell us whether the service was actually performed?' Sofia asked.

Filippa answered, 'The scope of work, the reports delivered, acknowledgement by the recipient of the service, the payment trail, and any tax records required by the applicable law. Issuing an invoice is not proof that the service was completed.'

Sofia placed a sheet on the table. It showed fifty thousand euros, while the related bank's official, limited confirmation recorded receipt of forty thousand. There was no explanation of the ten thousand in between.

'Were those ten thousand stolen?' Filippa asked.

'We can't say yet. Bank charges, instalments, withheld payment, a mistaken reference, or another agreement—all must be examined. All I can see is that the claim of "payment in full" doesn't match the evidence available.'

Filippa smiled. 'That sentence won't make a sensational headline, but it may be useful in court.'

Sofia thought of her father, who had kept the accounts on a small ship. He used to say that the weight of a cargo might increase on paper, but not on the ship's scales. This time there was no cargo. They had to weigh the word 'consultancy' against what had actually been done.

Magda came to a secure room the following day, accompanied by her lawyer, Maria Grech. She brought a small notebook of dates. On one page she had written, 'Receipt and authority are different.' Magda said, 'I used to sign for incoming mail. But an employee treated the image of my entry in the register as if it were a general approval. Then I saw a document attributed to me that I hadn't written.'

'Did you see that document?' Maria asked.

'I saw a copy, not the original.'

'And who made it?'

'I don't know.'

Instead of pressing her with repeated questions, Sofia offered Magda tea. It would have been wrong to invent a story about her trembling hands; they had to remain within what she herself said. Magda went on of her own accord: 'According to the records, my old employee identification was still used a week after I left the office. I wasn't there on that day.'

'Do you have independent evidence that you were absent?' Sofia asked.

'I have my maternity-leave certificate and a receipt from the visit when I took my daughter to the doctor. I don't want those private details made public, but I'm prepared to show them to an authorised officer.'

Sofia arranged a separate preservation request for that information. Magda's privacy and the legal validity of the original records both had to be protected.

As Magda was leaving, she stopped by a painting of the sea hanging on the corridor wall. She remembered that on the first day of her temporary appointment she had placed a little toy for her daughter beneath that painting and taken a photograph. The office had seemed safe to her then.

'When did you last come here?' Sofia asked.

'The day I was questioned about the use of my name. I became frightened and went home. I thought nobody would listen to me. People are listening now, but I don't know whether my daughter will ever have the world she knew before.'

Sofia said, 'The value of your testimony is not only for a court. You want the right to your own name. That right belongs both to those who suspect a crime and to those who are wrongly suspected.'

Magda looked away from the painting. 'Then write this in the record as well: I wasn't an officer authorised to approve anything. I received the mail.' Sofia recorded those words as Magda had spoken them.

In the evening Meghna's question came from Hong Kong: who was the recipient in Malta? Sofia shared the registered name available to her, but not a person's private identity. The paper named a company called 'Meridian

Compliance Consultancy', whose address was in a building offering office services. Many legitimate organisations used that building; a shared address alone did not establish a criminal connection.

'If the company didn't receive the whole sum, who did the money go to?' Filippa asked.

'We'll try to establish that legally, with the bank's assistance,' Sofia said. 'The payment record tells us something, but it doesn't authorise us to look into anybody's private account.'

A formal reply arrived from the bank's compliance department. Part of the identified payment had been entered as a separate adjustment, it said, but specific particulars of the beneficiary could be provided only in response to a verified lawful request. The reply did not resolve Sofia's question. It merely showed that the money had not vanished into an unverified void; official information about it could be made available.

That night Sofia set down four precise questions in her written request: who provided the service, who received it, what was the final lawful destination of the payment, and whether the person in whose name approval was recorded had been authorised to give it. The questions went to separate offices. If every piece of paper were heaped against one accused person, the actual offender and an unrelated employee could both disappear into the same darkness.

On her way home she stopped beside the sea. Music was playing; lights changed colour on the glass buildings. In that brightness she remembered Mira in Macau, whose hope of employment had been sold in her name until she no longer had even the right to keep her own passport. In the trades in money and in human bodies alike, paper had been made more important than people. Within the limits of her profession, Sofia wanted to set that order right.

When she returned to the office, she found a petition delivered through secure, confidential mail. The sender's identity was not public, but the letter expressed a willingness to testify through the court's procedures. The sender had written: 'I formerly worked in Indian public service. I still have a copy of a document contemporary with this Maltese contract. But parts of what I have to say will also confront me with difficult questions about my own conduct.'

Sofia read the first line again. The letter named no accused person. The prospective witness sought independent advice on rights, safety, and the possibility of self-incrimination. She prepared to forward the request to the authorised team in India through the proper channel.

But a small reference inside the letter stopped her: 'A page from the old accounts of the closed training centre at Rajgir.' Sofia had heard the name of that place before, in Vivek Sood's story. The question now was not whether the new witness would tell the truth; it was whether the page in the

witness's possession was connected with the incomplete ledger that Nilima had been searching for in Delhi for years.

CHAPTER 106

The Price of Testimony

There was still mist in the Rajgir morning, but the old training centre no longer looked as deserted as before. A fresh notice had been nailed beside the locked gate: UNAUTHORISED ENTRY PROHIBITED. One corner of the paper had become wet from below. When Vivek Sood stepped out of the car, he felt not the fear of his first day there, but the weight of decisions he had made in that fear. What he had once regarded as a refuge to save his life, he had kept hidden for six months behind the news of another person's death.

Vivek had been brought there to assist with an authorised local examination of records. A security officer and a lawyer were both present. He had not been an employee of the centre, but while living in hiding he had studied the ledger left in the training room. Today some of its pages had returned as questions he would have to answer himself.

'I shall ask you only about papers you have seen with your own eyes,' Mansi Verma said. Her voice was neither harsh nor comforting. 'The petition received by Sofia Vella in Malta is subject to a separate country's legal process. We do not yet have full access to its sender's identity or statement. A reference to Rajgir and your recollection do not become a single source simply because they seem to agree.'

Vivek glanced once at the clock. 'I'll tell you what I remember. But first, one thing. When I initially fled, I didn't have the original ledger. I had some photographs and handwritten notes from a few pages. After reaching Rajgir I tried to put them back in order. During that process, one page was torn.'

'Was it torn, or did you tear it?' Nilima Jha asked. Her earlier anger was still alive in her, but her question was precise.

'I did,' Vivek replied. 'Not some unknown man. I tore it myself.'

Inside the room even the fan's noise became distinct at that moment. Mansi stopped her pen. 'Why?'

'The page had two different subjects in the same column. Above was a summary of payments to intermediaries; below was a disguised heading for some kind of assistance expenditure. I thought that if it fell into the wrong hands, innocent employees' names would be added to a list of criminals. I tore it and kept the page separately, intending to compare it with the

original source later. But not telling you all immediately—that was my own mistake.'

Nilima said, 'Why did you take the decision about other people's safety into your own hands? You may also have taken away the chance for the people named on that page to defend themselves.'

Vivek looked at the old burn on his right hand. 'I was afraid at the time. Fear does not always make a person innocent.'

Two rooms away sat Harihar Prasad. At their first meeting Nilima had understood that the elderly accounts assistant could recognise the centre's history from small receipts. Today he had brought an old notebook recording the serial numbers of items taken out of the office. As he opened it, one corner of his thumb looked blue; he had stained it with ink while opening a medicine bottle.

'Nobody had instructed me,' Harihar said, 'but this man came one night with a torn page. He said it was a paper separate from his personal notes, and I shouldn't put it with any official account without checking. I refused to accept it without a written receipt.'

'So did you accept it?' Mansi asked.

'He wrote down what the paper was about in his own hand. I sealed the envelope and entered it in the centre's old dispatch register. That register was later transferred to the district archives store. But one corner of the page was already torn; I did not see the complete page.'

Vivek interrupted. 'I called it a complete page. The truth is that a corner had already been removed. That must be put on record.'

Mansi examined the receipt-register entry. An old date appeared beside the serial number, but whether it matched the period during which Vivek stayed in Rajgir could not be determined without comparison with the original register. Harihar's recollection, Vivek's admission, and the entry in the notebook were three separate sources. She did not announce that the complete envelope was immediately available.

At midday Vivek came out for a short rest, as the doctor had permitted. Nilima was standing on the veranda. At the edge of a distant field, a child was learning to ride a bicycle. His father ran beside him, holding the seat for a while, then let go. The child knew without looking that his father's hand had left the seat.

'You weren't at my mourning ceremony,' Nilima said.

'I know,' Vivek replied.

'That day I placed flowers beside your photograph. The body associated with that photograph belonged to someone else. The questions Bhubaneswari Devi and Gauri are asking won't be answered only by bank papers.'

Vivek said, 'I want to admit my mistake before that family. But they have no duty to accept my apology.'

For the first time, Nilima demanded no promise from him. Vivek's remorse seemed genuine to her, but genuine remorse was no substitute for judicial evidence.

By evening Mansi received preliminary information from the district archives through lawful channels. The serial number of an old sealed envelope matched Harihar's register. The outside inventory said: 'Incomplete approval entry, separate source; independent of the principal ledger.' The envelope had not yet been opened, and Vivek's name was absent from the inventory. Its authenticity, the continuity of the seal, and its correspondence with the old receipt register still needed verification.

On hearing this, Vivek looked towards Nilima. 'I told you the page was torn. But there's something else I haven't said. When I left that paper with Harihar, I kept a copy inside the back cover of my notebook. I hadn't written that copy myself.'

'Whose handwriting was it?' Mansi asked.

'I don't know. But in its top corner was the old printed mark of the office whose name made me tremble when I saw it in the letter from Malta. I said nothing about the copy in my first statement. Today I'm correcting that silence.'

'We shall record this new account separately,' Mansi said. 'Your earlier silence makes the need to examine it even greater.'

Returning to the room, Vivek signed his supplementary statement. Outside, the mountain's shadow had grown long. Truth had not suddenly become daylight after six months of darkness. But at least the possible location of the torn page was now in a recorded register, not merely in somebody's invented recollection.

CHAPTER 107

The Torn Page

The light in Delhi's secure records room was very bright, yet the edges of the page seemed darkened with soot. Nilima Jha did not want anybody shouting that something had 'been found'. Establishing where a seized document had actually come from, understanding its full meaning, and determining whether it could be presented in court were three different tasks.

Mansi Verma had brought the register of lawful transfer received from the district archives. Before opening the outer envelope, they recorded its old serial number, the condition of its seal, and when and in whose custody it had been. Two independent employees witnessed the process. Naman Singh made only authorised examination images; Nilima was not permitted to touch the original page.

The envelope contained a folded paper, a small receipt slip, and a carbon copy that had already been kept separately. The left edge of the original was torn unevenly. In the lower corner was an inkblot, as though the writer had once paused to think. Perhaps the missing half of a sentence in Vivek's earlier notes was here. But a torn paper did not by itself prove that two fragments belonged to the same sheet.

'Write down the questions before you read for the answer to the mystery,' Nilima said. 'First we must make sure that the handwriting, the paper, and the sequence of receipt agree.'

'Today we'll examine only the visible correspondence and the sequence,' Naman replied. 'Handwriting and ink belong to the experts.'

Nilima found such restraint difficult. She had been reading Vivek's first ledger for years. One of its entries said, 'Five percent—contact expenses.' From that heading many people had tried to trace commissions to local intermediaries. The new page carried the same five percent at the top, but underneath appeared different words: 'Reserved for claim settlement.'

'That's another expenditure head,' Nilima said almost to herself.

Mansi immediately replied, 'The words are different. Check whether the amount on which the percentage is calculated is different too.'

Three abbreviated letters appeared beside the amount in the lower column. No full name was written there, but the attached carbon copy carried a longer heading that could be read: 'Janachetana Seva Manch—Workers' Claims Assistance.' Beside the name were the words 'proposed

beneficiary', not 'payment received'. In the right-hand corner of the page another line said, 'Request separate original proof of receipt.'

Nilima fell silent. A paper bearing the name 'Janachetana Seva Manch', similar to the 'Janachetana Manch' that did genuine relief work in Patna, had already surfaced. But the presence of that name on an old page was not in itself evidence that such an organisation lawfully existed at the time, still less that the money went into its account. Rather, it raised a question: had somebody added the name to an old record afterwards, or had the name already been in use? The chronology of the paper became crucial.

'Five percent of whose claim-settlement amount?' Naman asked.

Nilima looked at the first line of the paper. Part of the base amount had been torn away. A few figures were visible on the carbon copy, but filling in the rest would be guesswork. 'I'm not going to enter a total yet,' she said. 'But this suggests a possible purpose different from the earlier heading for intermediaries' commission.'

Mansi asked, 'Paritosh Jha's unfinished letter says "withheld in the workers' name". Does this page explain what that means?'

'It might,' Nilima replied, 'but the ink, date, and authorship of Paritosh's letter are being examined separately. Finding the same words does not make two documents records of the same event.'

Arunima Rao was available by telephone outside the records room. She no longer held her former investigative post, but she had permission to provide a lawful written recollection. Nilima told her not of her first claim but of her own error: 'I had treated the old five percent as a single kind of commission and built several comparison tables around it.'

'Then write a correction to those tables,' Arunima said. 'Don't erase the markings. Let both the reader and the court see the distance between the old conclusion and the new one.'

At midday Revati Karn asked to meet Nilima. She had heard that the torn page from Rajgir had been found. Instead of showing her the paper, Nilima confirmed only that it had been located. Revati did not laugh. 'You're right to do that,' she said. 'Yesterday I too received an anonymous message saying that "the real five percent was meant for social welfare". That's only half a statement. Fraud can be committed in the name of welfare, and genuine assistance can be given under that name too.'

'And if I publish a report without checking,' Nilima said, 'I'll be committing another wrong against social workers, labourers, and victims alike.'

Aditi Rane sent written information from Surat. The five percent deduction shown in worker Shankar Paswan's wage register related to a different amount and period from those on the newly found page. An easy connection broke apart. Nilima struck through the old link with a red mark. This defeat of a theory brought her a surprising calm. The ability to abandon a false connection was also an achievement of an investigation.

In the evening the handwriting expert's preliminary inspection note arrived. It was not a conclusive report, but it indicated partial physical correspondence between the torn edge of the page and an edge of Vivek's old ledger. A section of the paper might be connected to the Rajgir notes. The name on the second carbon copy was legible, but the date when that copy had been made required separate testing.

Mansi had two separate preservation compartments prepared for the papers. 'We won't join these together and call them one document. The supporting copy has a different role in court.'

At the beginning of her diary Nilima wrote one sentence: 'Proposed beneficiary is not actual beneficiary.' Then, instead of a question mark beside the name, she wrote three separate questions: who approved the proposal? What amount was actually transferred? And if it was transferred, which account received it?

Meanwhile, a request came for a supplementary statement from Vivek about the record. He admitted that he had seen the name 'Janachetana Seva Manch' on the paper but had assumed at the time that it was a genuinely registered organisation. He had made no verification. That was one source of his present remorse: mistaking a name written on paper for a real person or entity.

That night an authorised examination revealed a small line on the back of the old copy. The ink was fainter. The line was not next to the amount but under the column for office approval: 'See bank compliance warning; reply awaited.' In the corner was an old office reference number. Naman read it aloud. Nilima remembered seeing a number in the same format in Aarav Malkani's Mumbai records.

Two things about the meaning of the page had now changed. The possible beneficiary of the five percent differed from the earlier assumption, and there was mention of a bank warning before approval. But who had written that warning, and whether anyone listened, were questions that now led towards a closed file in Mumbai.

CHAPTER 108

The Disagreement Within the Bank

The sea breeze was damp in Mumbai. Standing before the bank's tall building, Aarav Malkani remembered the day of his appointment. The building had not seemed large to him then; the future had. Today, seeing his face reflected in the glass, he wondered whether he could accept responsibility for his own actions and protect the dignity of other employees at the same time.

He was no longer an employee of the bank. A date had been fixed for an authorised review, his lawyer was available, and the limits of his attendance had been set out in writing. The validity, possible irregularity, and actual effect of the forms he had signed earlier were to be examined. But Aarav was more concerned about another person's name than about defending his own: Nalini Deshmukh.

Nalini worked in the bank's internal compliance department. When Aarav had first read her warning, he had thought her excessively cautious. 'Small amounts, legitimate customer particulars, papers in order'—that had been his answer. Today those words returned to his ears as an admission of his own weakness.

At the start of the meeting, Sushma Kapoor, the bank's independent examiner, said, 'We are not sitting here with the authority to declare anybody guilty. We need the sequence first: when the warning was entered, who received it, who made which decision, and what consequences followed.'

Nalini brought a short, two-page note. The first page described frequent deposits in quick succession and similar transactions across several unrelated accounts. The second also recorded a victim's complaint, the earlier customer-identification checks, and the possibility of false-positive alerts. She had not merely pointed out the danger; she had written of the harm done when an innocent account-holder was stopped without cause.

'I raised a warning,' Nalini said, 'but I cannot claim that every account was criminal at that time. I requested an appropriate additional review.'

'Who did you send the request to?' Sushma asked.

'To the three departments designated in the system. Aarav's name appeared in one, but I can't say the final decision was his alone. We'll have to compare the acknowledgements of receipt with the decision records.'

Aarav's face tightened. He placed a copy of his own earlier reply on the table. It said, 'Suspicion presently insufficient; review again after the prescribed period.' Those words did not mean an immediate declaration that everything was above suspicion. They recorded a decision to defer, whose reasons and lawful limits could be examined.

'I wrote that note,' Aarav said. 'But I failed to mark some cases for further review. That is my part in the decision.'

Nalini looked at him. 'You say that now, but my second letter received no reply at the time.'

Aarav started. 'A second letter?'

'I sent it four days after the first note. I linked an account-holder's complaint to the original warning. A copy isn't in my working file; it's in the bank's secure, independent review register.'

Nobody in the room immediately called it a 'missing file'. Nalini explained that a separate records officer had confirmed the existence of the preserved copy, but prescribed permission was still needed to open it. Bank security and customer privacy were both legal matters; curiosity was no justification for handing out confidential details on the spot.

During the midday break Aarav sat with his lawyer on the lower veranda of the bank. Outside, a tea-seller was drawing a tarpaulin over his cart to protect it from the rain. Aarav remembered his father's voice: 'An error in accounts can be corrected, but when a day's hard-earned money has gone to the wrong place, when does a person's trust return?' He wondered why it had taken him so many years to understand those words.

Nalini too came outside. Aarav stood up when he saw her. 'I used to make fun of the work you were doing. I'm sorry.'

'Thank you for apologising,' Nalini said, 'but I'm not worried only about myself. Thousands of people work in the bank. It's easy to call them all criminals because of a few wrong decisions. Show the accountability of those responsible for reading the complaints that were recorded.'

'Were you threatened?' Aarav asked.

Nalini did not answer at once. She looked at a picture of her daughter on her phone and then said, 'An anonymous message came saying, "People who make too many records won't keep their jobs." I filed a complaint. I still don't know who sent the message.'

Aarav drew no further conclusion from her answer. He told his lawyer that the actual sequence of Nalini's complaint should be made available to the official investigation, and that her request concerning her family's safety should be recorded separately.

In the evening Sushma opened a sealed copy of the independent review register inside the authorised examination room. Two officers checked the serial number of the document, its receipt date, and the old preservation entry. After Aarav's first reply there was clearly a second letter, signed by Nalini. It requested an expanded review of certain suspicious payments, but

also contained a warning: 'Do not freeze a customer's funds without verifying the actual account of the charitable organisation bearing a similar name.'

'That line matters,' Sushma said. 'The employee wasn't asking only for restrictions. She was also asking that action against the wrong person be prevented.'

A limited authorised notice reached Naman Singh in Delhi. He compared the reference number found on the Rajgir page. There was a superficial match in the sequence already available, but separate verification of the bank's original timestamp, the customer's identity, and the amount was still outstanding. Nilima said over the phone, 'If the second letter was dismissed earlier, the real reason should be in the documents.'

At the end of the meeting Aarav proposed writing a new explanation beneath his old signature. Sushma stopped him. 'We mustn't correct an old record with fresh ink. Make a supplementary statement explaining your reasons and the limits of your decision. A future examination will need both.'

For the first time Aarav felt relief in that refusal. Rather than erase an old mistake, he could face it and answer for it. Nalini gathered her papers and left. The bank's heavy door closed, while the sea breeze continued to come in from afar.

That night Sushma received a new notice of receipt from the records officer. A separate appendix had been preserved alongside Nalini's second warning. The bank's earlier internal committee had excluded that appendix from consideration, calling it 'irrelevant foreign material'. But the appendix contained two different-language versions of material relating to the Maltese contract, and two different terms had been used in the same place for 'recipient'.

Sushma read the old reasoning behind the decision. The complete meeting minutes were available, not just one signature. Before anyone could be declared guilty, a question remained open: if the foreign page that had been set aside as useless were compared with a certified translation from another country, would it show the payment's true destination differently?

She instructed that a copy of the appendix be placed in lawful preservation. The next morning, in Brussels, Elise and Revati were due to receive a request to examine the multilingual evidence. The disagreement inside the bank had now become a question involving the languages of six countries.

CHAPTER 109

Multilingual Evidence

The Brussels morning was not nearly as cold as the chill that came over Elise Vander when she read a little word. In the margin of the third page, there were two languages. A single line had become “the person receiving the money” in the first translation and “the person nominated to receive the money” in the second. To an ordinary reader the two expressions seemed almost identical, yet on that distinction rested the account of an innocent institution, the defence of an accused person, and the meaning of Paritosh Jha’s unfinished letter.

On Elise’s white office table that day lay six folders of different colours: papers connected with India’s judicial request, company records from Hong Kong, a Macau employee’s statement, a Maltese contract, Belgian expenditure on assistance, and the records of technical services based in Arizona in the United States. Lin Yu’s technical interview in Beijing was also part of the inquiry, but it would have been wrong to call it a seventh accepted document in this formal exchange among six jurisdictions. Elise wrote that distinction in her very first line.

Nadia had stayed awake all night confirming the availability of the translators. Her mother was unwell; the hospital had telephoned, and after giving three brief replies Nadia had returned to the papers. Revati Karn handed her a cup of hot tea. “You can go home today if you wish,” Revati said. Nadia replied, “When the meaning of a document changes, people’s daily lives change too. But I shall go to my mother at noon. The time of an investigation and the time of my home are not the same.”

Maeva Roche, the translation reviewer, had formal training in languages, but she said, “I can explain the difference in meaning. I cannot say what evidentiary value a court in any particular country will give it.” Elise liked that sentence. Everyone there understood the limits of their authority.

The expression in the original Maltese text of the first contract could mean a potential recipient of a payment; it did not mean the payment had been made. In an earlier summary prepared in India, that very expression had already become “actual beneficiary”. On that basis, some older tables had assumed that the money had definitely reached the trust’s account. Elise picked up her red pen and put it down again. An error was to be marked not with a colour but with a written correction.

"Then was what I published wrong?" Revati asked.

"What you published said 'mentioned in the contract'," Elise replied. "But other news organisations turned that mention into 'the money has arrived'. The responsibility in the two cases is different. Look at your original wording and, if necessary, publish a clear correction."

Revati opened the preserved copy of her report. She was relieved to find that she had chosen careful words in the body of it. But relief brought embarrassment with it. Many who read a headline never read the cautions in the story beneath it. The headline had spoken of "the secret beneficiary of the five per cent". Now even its question mark seemed inadequate.

The translation of the Macau statement revealed another problem. In Samir Bose's guest list there was a distinction between "a person accompanying someone" and "a person paying to be accompanied". Nothing in Mira's statement automatically accused every guest at a dance club of trafficking. In Reshma's testimony, the expression "was kept" referred to control over her passport, not to a lawful period of employment. Maeva had a separate explanation of the source-language expression attached to that line. The victim's experience was not weakened; on the contrary, its true meaning became clearer.

Nadia compared the register of authenticated powers of attorney with the Maltese original. Two pages previously kept together had been created on different dates. One carried the date of an internal proposal, the other the date of external receipt. Both had been rendered as "approval" in translation. Elise listened as the two different terms were pronounced. She suddenly remembered Magda Borg's trembling voice: Magda had said that she had not authorised her name to be entered without authority to represent her.

"Will we have to bring Magda here?" Revati asked.

"Not yet," Elise said. "There is a lawful route for the statement she has submitted. We shall not frighten her daughter again. First we must secure the relevant original of this document."

A light rain began in the streets of Brussels at noon. Nadia left for the hospital. Elise and Revati stood by the window. Across the road an elderly man on a bicycle had spread plastic over his bag. Elise said, "People imagine that the answer to international crime lies behind some enormous screen. Sometimes the answer lies in a small verb used by the person who prepared the accounts. 'To be paid' and 'was paid' are not the same."

"And 'a name was written down' is not the same as 'the person bearing that name committed a crime'," Revati replied.

By evening the papers were ready for authorised review. Each page was accompanied by a copy in the original language, the translator's declaration, a register of receipt, and a statement of the limits of its use. Because the source of one copy was still unclear, it was kept separately as an "informal lead". Seeing such small distinctions, Revati understood the

disciplined distance between wishing to know the whole truth and claiming to have found it.

Just then Nadia telephoned. Her mother’s condition was stable at the hospital. After giving that news, Nadia said, “I’m sitting in the hospital corridor. There was a question I wanted to ask you. On the date you are reading in the summary, the original register shows the office as closed. Was it because of a holiday, or was the document prepared the following day? I’m not directing the inquiry. I only want you to notice the difference.”

Elise opened the date in an old bank annexure. The day recorded there as “received” was two days before the date on the certificate of the original translation. That was not impossible in itself—an advance copy might have been sent earlier—but the summary claimed that the decision was taken after the certified translation had arrived. The sequence of events did not agree.

“Perhaps the date on the certificate was entered later,” Revati suggested.

“Perhaps,” Elise replied. “Or an internal decision was taken without a certified translation. Those are not the same situation. I shall send a query now.”

In the margin of her paper Revati wrote a question for herself: “Was what was described as evidence available at the time the decision was made?” She thought of Nalini Deshmukh’s second warning, which had not previously been placed before the committee in full. A difference in language and a difference in time now stood side by side.

That night Elise sent an interim finding to the Indian coordination team through the authorised channel. The letter did not call anyone guilty of a crime. Its last line contained only one request: “Provide the copy in the original language predating the decision, together with independent proof of when it was received.” Having sent the letter, Elise closed the window. The rain outside had stopped, but the two dates on the paper were still far apart.

CHAPTER 110

The Seven Tables of Evidence

Seven tables had been arranged in the meeting room in Delhi. At the sight of them, Nilima Jha remembered a school examination in which a child would sit for a long time before a question left blank by mistake. Here, too, a blank space was a decision. No one was permitted to fill with colour what had not been proved and thereby turn someone into a culprit.

Mansi Verma was presiding over the formal inquiry. Because Arunima Rao had been transferred to another post, she was no longer the chief investigating officer; she had been called to provide written clarification about her earlier work. She sat to one side, not at the table in the centre. Giving up her old chair still hurt, but her responsibility now was to provide evidence, not to issue orders.

The seven tables dealt with seven distinct subjects: victims' complaints, banking transactions, export consignments, employment and human trafficking, public propaganda, digital records, and cross-border companies and grants. At each table sat two officers, a legal reviewer and, where required, a specialist. Seven tables did not mean seven accused persons. Mansi emphasised the distinction.

Four words were written on the wall: SUPPORTED, POSSIBLE, DISPUTED, REJECTED. Nilima noticed that beneath "REJECTED" there was no provision for erasing old papers. It meant that an earlier conclusion had been shown to be wrong and the reasons would remain on record.

The first table held Rani's complaint from Darbhanga: the accounts Amresh had written in his own hand, the bank's freeze, and the advertisements for the new website. Together they supported the existence of her personal loss and complaint, not any nationwide figure for net profit. The records of the digital-arrest fraud involving Shivshankar separately supported an actual financial loss, but those sources alone did not establish that both crimes were run from the same headquarters.

"If Rani speaks of the pain of losing her five hundred rupees," Nilima said, "I have no right to turn it into a complete accounting of two thousand crore."

At the second table were Nalini Deshmukh's first and second warnings. Aarav's earlier response, the bank committee, and the question of the missing additional review were laid out separately in order. The bank's internal delay was supported by the evidence; the participation of every

employee in a criminal conspiracy was not. No one wrote the name of a supposed assailant beside Nalini's request for her family's protection.

At the third table was Aditi Rane's shipping account. A legitimate consignment of cloth had indeed been exported. Part of the four-day discrepancy could be explained by the process of preparing the register, but inconsistencies remained in the details of two invoices and a service payment. Those inconsistencies were grounds for investigating "possible commercial fraud", not for condemning an entire industry. The question of Shankar Paswan's five-per-cent wage deduction remained separately recorded as a labour dispute.

The fourth table held the available testimony concerning Mira, Farheen and Sujata. The space for Sujata's present whereabouts was left blank for want of confirmation. Mira had expressly consented on the condition that her real name not appear in the public tables. When an employee remarked that it would be easier to put all the statements in one compartment, Mansi replied, "We shall not mix together the papers of people whose lives were made difficult merely to make our own work easier."

At the fifth table lay the original video of the meeting in Patna, an edited version of the images, and the payments for publicity. The evidence supported the genuinely peaceful character of the demonstration. Comparison of the sources also showed clearly that certain misleading visuals had been produced. But it would have been going too far to write that the maker of those visuals, their distributor and their supposed financier were one and the same person. Revati Karn attended this table not in her capacity as a journalist but to give limited confirmation of the source text.

The sixth table was examining the protected records held by Isha and Sara. The seventeen-minute discrepancy had already been identified, and the original service logs of Lata Desai in Arizona had established part of the sequence. But a marker reading "sent for approval" had been mistranslated as "approved". That fact weakened an earlier suspicion of digital tampering. Naman Singh wrote the correction himself in his previous table of findings.

At the seventh table was Elise's letter from Brussels: copies in the original languages, translators' declarations and two contradictory dates. Meghna's Hong Kong register, Sofia's Maltese authorisation and Samir's guest records from Macau were separate sources. Having an office in the same city, being partners in the same company and receiving criminal proceeds were three different claims.

The first disagreement in the meeting concerned Aarav's file. One bank report said the warning had been presented to the committee. But a list of documents received, attached to another copy, did not mention Nalini's two-page annexure. Mansi listened in silence. Arunima said, "If I write my report on the basis of the first copy alone, it will seem that the committee

knew everything and deliberately ignored it. If the second document never reached the committee, the nature of its responsibility is different."

"And if someone deliberately removed the annexure?" Nilima asked.

"Then an allegation may be made when there is evidence," Mansi said. "An allegation is not a substitute for a question."

There was no formal banquet at lunchtime. Revati sat in a corner with food served on a paper plate. Nilima came over to her. "How much of my reporting turned out to be right?" Revati asked. Nilima said, "Some of it. And some concerned things I had wanted to believe were true, but the grounds for them remained weak."

Revati could not smile. "I'm afraid that if I publish a correction, people will say I lied the first time."

"If you don't publish a correction, the people you want to protect will be hurt a second time," Nilima replied.

In the afternoon, Viraj Sahni's legal representatives supplied some original service records capable of verification. Shamita Mehra was not personally present at the meeting; her written submission had come through the prescribed procedure. Under one item in a contract already on file, the services of regional translation, organising meetings and language editing had actually been provided. A receipt from an independent employee of the institution receiving the services, the dates of the work, and a specific bank payment all corresponded to the same period.

Nilima looked at the next page of names. The reference to five per cent against that item had previously been included in a table of Viraj's alleged criminal commissions. The new evidence showed that this particular sum arose from a separate service contract. That did not mean all Viraj's dealings were innocent; it meant that this payment should not be used as evidence of a crime.

"If we remove one item, the whole story will become weaker," a new officer said.

"Then let the story become weaker," Arunima replied. "An accusation does not go to court to preserve a story."

Mansi formally moved the item from DISPUTED to "REJECTED FOR THIS ALLEGATION". The document was not destroyed; the reasons for the decision were attached. The inquiry into Viraj's other payments, a different contract mentioning five per cent, and his links with nominal directors would continue unchanged. A direct question arose: which officer or intermediary had entered that genuine service payment in the first table against Viraj in a misleading way? An error was not automatically a crime, but its origin had to be examined.

In the evening the conclusions of all seven tables were brought together. Nobody had won. An important piece of evidence had emerged in favour of a person accused, some of the victims' claims had become clearer, and certain supposed connections had fallen apart. Nilima felt that a successful

investigation might sometimes grow smaller, but the part that remained would endure.

Before she closed the last file, Mansi received a secure message from Meghna in Hong Kong. Comparison of the receipt time with the bank payment had brought a third name into view—not that of a signatory, but of a position empowered to stop or release a payment. In place of a person's name stood the designation of a post. Meghna had written: "For this post, we need not merely a translation of the document, but evidence of who actually controlled the decision."

Mansi put aside a copy of the finding accepted in Viraj's favour. It would have to be produced at the next hearing. But because of that new designation, the file at the seventh table could not yet be closed.

CHAPTER III

Hope in a Name

For the first time Viraj Sahni sat on an ordinary bench in the corridor of a Delhi court. In the photographs published of him earlier, there had always been a gleaming car or the white wall of a hotel in the background. Today a corner of the plaster behind him had crumbled away, and two men kept asking about the dates of their cases. Viraj was waiting for his lawyer, Shamita Mehra, but the blank screen of the phone in his hand had become more of a mirror than a screen.

"What are you hoping for here?" Shamita asked as soon as she arrived.

Viraj answered, "That the work I really did should not be called a crime."

"And the work for which the documents have not yet provided an answer?" Shamita asked.

"Those questions will have to be answered," Viraj said quietly. He surprised himself with his reply. For days he had felt that every allegation was part of the same attack; now he was beginning to understand that when one false allegation fell, the remaining questions did not fall with it.

At the hearing, Mansi Verma's written findings were placed before the court. Arunima Rao was present to clarify the decisions she had made in the earlier investigation, not to direct the prosecution. Nilima sat with papers concerning the limited subject of her technical and financial analysis. Revati was in the corridor, but she had already decided that she would not publish the private identity of any witness.

Shamita pointed to the item in the service contract recording expenses for regional translation and assistance with organising events. The bank receipt, the letter certifying completion of the work and independent corroboration showed that the services paid for under this item were genuine. The earlier table had described that particular payment as part of an unlawful five-per-cent commission. "I am not asking for every allegation to be withdrawn," Shamita said. "I am asking for this payment to be removed from the wrong category, and for the further conclusion drawn against my client on its basis to be corrected."

The court's question was brief, but it seemed enormous to Viraj. "What does the investigating team have to say about this particular item?"

Mansi said, "In the light of the independent records received, it would not be proper to treat this item as supporting evidence for the earlier

allegation. A corrected table has been submitted. Questions relating to other transactions, goods, company ownership and fraud remain under separate investigation."

Just as Viraj felt relief fill his chest, it was not Rani's face in Darbhanga that came to mind. He remembered an employee in his own office who had waited for months to be paid for work actually done. He thought: some work in the business had genuinely been performed, and there was evidence of it too. But why had he not made that truth clear earlier? How much of his silence had come from fear, and how much from self-interest? He could not escape that question.

In a limited interim order, the court directed that the support for the allegation relating to this particular payment be withdrawn and amended records produced. Nobody was thereby cleared of every charge; nor was the earlier allegation allowed to proceed unexamined. When Viraj came out, two people with cameras hurried towards him. Someone asked, "Have all the charges been dropped?"

Shamita gave a direct answer. "No. An earlier finding in the investigation has been corrected in respect of one specific payment. Please do not read more into the order than it says."

Viraj unlocked his phone. There were three messages. The first congratulated him on a victory; the second called him a criminal and abused him; the third came from a former employee: "Who will pay the wages I am owed for the work I did?" Viraj paused over the third message. The name was Suresh. He remembered Suresh's face: once the man had stood at the doorway for a long time holding a file, and Viraj, busy on the telephone, had not called him in.

"Can I pay Suresh?" he asked Shamita.

"If there is no legal restriction and the debt is genuine and established, pay him according to the rules. But do not mix the court papers with your personal responsibility for wages," Shamita said. "A court's decision cannot be bought."

Meanwhile, in Mansi's office, Nilima was reading a new message from Meghna. It mentioned the existence of an authorised register of "control rights" behind the Hong Kong receipt. A person who served as a company's nominal director did not issue the final instruction to stop or release a payment. Meghna was trying to locate the document bearing the actual order. The question had been there all along, but an important confusion had now been removed: the person who actually received a service did not necessarily control the transaction.

"How did the evidence in Viraj's favour reach us?" Nilima asked.

"Through the lawful defence procedure," Mansi replied. "Not because we regard him as trustworthy. Our work is not to choose a side, but to examine the documents."

Nilima drew a small table. On the left she wrote “person performing the work”, in the middle “person receiving the money”, and on the right “authority to stop payment”. On many earlier pages, all three columns had been filled with the same name. Now one column was empty again. That blank space identified not a culprit but a real need in the investigation.

Outside the court Revati wrote a short report. She gave it the headline “Allegation over One Payment Corrected; Remaining Investigation Continues”. Her editor, Vidya Deshmukh, said over the phone, “We’ll have fewer readers with a headline like that.” Revati answered, “So be it. But the work, families and justice affected by a wrong headline cannot count for less than our readership.” After a moment Vidya said, “Leave that headline as it is.”

In the evening Viraj passed his old office. He was not permitted to go inside, and he did not try to break the rule. A new notice was fixed to the glass of the door: employees’ lawful claims would be examined separately. Viraj sent a message asking that copies of the necessary documents concerning Suresh’s wage claim be made available to the lawful representative. He did not know whether Suresh would see this effort as a reason for trust or as a belated admission of earlier neglect.

That night Shamita received a secure letter. It raised a question unrelated to the public portion of the court order, but connected with the authorised audit of Viraj’s old company. In a declaration of actual control for a foreign service company, the space for the “ultimate beneficiary” had been filled in; the space for the person empowered to stop payment contained only an office designation. The letter requested a supplementary statement under oath from Viraj, explaining when and in what context he had seen that designation.

Shamita called Viraj. “Today’s order protected you from one wrong conclusion. Now tell me: did you know the office identified by that designation?”

Viraj remained silent for a long time. Outside, the first drops of rain had begun to fall on the road. At last he said, “I went to that office. But the man whose name everybody saw did not give the orders. He only signed. I never found the name of the person giving the instructions anywhere on paper—but I have heard his voice.”

“Then don’t name anyone yet,” Shamita replied. “First write down the full details of what you heard: the time, the place, and the people present. We must not mistake a voice for proof of a face and accuse another innocent person.”

Viraj looked towards the window. The reputations of many names and the lives of many people in the city hung upon a single line in a document. Today his own name had escaped one unjust accusation, but the identity of the person whose voice he had heard remained in darkness. The real

question was no longer the next route taken by the money, but who possessed the authority to make the decisions.

CHAPTER 112

The Amended Charges

The corridor of the Delhi court was not as crowded today as Revati had seen it when writing her earliest reports. The corner of an old notice had curled away from the wall. A cleaner was dragging a chair across the wet floor. Amid the sound of his slipping feet, Nilima heard someone say “acquitted” very softly, while the man sitting next to him heard “charge”. Here the meanings of those two words lay very far apart.

Arunima Rao held two files. The first contained the earlier table of allegations and the second Mansi Verma’s revised account. The paper was the same colour and the letters the same size, but an allegation concerning one particular payment had been removed. Arunima had not drawn a red pencil circle in the margin; a separate sheet headed “Grounds for Correction” had been added at that place.

“Why is your signature needed here?” Nilima asked.

“My responsibility began on the day I approved the first table,” Arunima replied. “Now I shall not conceal my earlier role when the findings are corrected. Mansi is the officer conducting the present investigation; I shall answer for the old decision.”

Mansi was coming from the other end of the corridor, accompanied by Naman Singh and the government lawyer, Trisha Menon. Instead of an imposing fifty-page file, Trisha carried a report marked with only three different colours. The first mark was for direct banking transactions, the second for the actual movement of goods, and the third for witnesses’ statements. “The colour is not a verdict,” she said with a laugh. “A page may change its category.”

Inside the courtroom Viraj Sahni was speaking quietly to his lawyer, Shamita Mehra. Since he had left the court the previous day, several reports had declared him wholly innocent; others were calling him the supreme criminal behind the entire network. He did not wish to treat either headline as proof of his own case. Shamita handed him a sheet on which to write one question: “What is the original source of the payment whose documents are still unopened?”

The hearing began. Trisha first mentioned the item representing payment for genuine translation services and assistance with events. “We withdraw our earlier reliance on this payment in support of the charge,” she

said clearly. “The examination of the remaining points is independent of this corrected line.”

Shamita rose at once. “We welcome this correction. But the public use of that payment in the earlier allegation damaged my client’s reputation and affected the livelihoods of employees. That fact should also remain on the court record.”

The court recorded both submissions. Nobody applauded. Suresh, the former employee waiting in the corridor, understood for the first time that wages for work actually done might become an important question before a court. Receiving his own arrears, however, was still far from certain.

Trisha opened the next page. Some transactions in Indian accounts believed to be connected with online gambling were confirmed by independent banking records. But the widely publicised figure of “two thousand crore per month” was a combined estimate of deposits and money repeatedly wagered. It could not be called the criminals’ net income or the sum actually received in the identified accounts. “In our revised submission, that figure will not be the basis of the overall charge,” she said.

A reporter sitting at the back struck out his headline. Revati heard the sound of the line being crossed out in ink, a line whose accounting had sent so many people running about for months.

The next subject was the invoices from Surat. The original records supplied by Aditi Rane for consignments of cloth established that some goods really had been exported. But questions remained concerning certain service invoices, goods described under an identical serial number, and separate payments. Both sets of facts were placed before the court. Trisha said, “A shared office address or a blue seal alone does not prove common ownership of a conspiracy.”

The third subject was testimony from women who had survived trafficking. Trisha presented a sealed envelope concerning the protective arrangements for Mira and Farheen. Shamita asked whether the statements contained direct experiences implicating the accused or things the witnesses had heard from others. Trisha replied, “Every part is subject to separate examination. We shall not make victims’ identities more public than necessary.” The court indicated that it would issue a separate order balancing confidentiality with the right of cross-examination.

Viraj was looking at the ceiling just then. His name appeared on many pages, but the presence of Mira’s name did not seem to him immediate proof either of his guilt or of his innocence. His lawyer wrote her question down again and put it aside.

The original images of the peaceful gathering in Patna were also brought before the court. Edited images had been circulated with a false suggestion of violence, but the sequence connecting their creator, the person who paid for them and any actual criminal purpose was still under

separate investigation. Mansi said, “People who attended the gathering will not be called criminals simply because they appear in a photograph.”

During the break Nilima met Revati in a small veranda behind the court. “What headline will you give today?” she asked.

“The charge grew smaller; the examination grew clearer,” Revati said. Then she checked herself. “But is even that a conclusion yet, or a question?”

“If you describe the grounds on which you say it, the limits of the question will be clear,” Nilima replied.

Rani Devi was not in court that day. She was at the shop in Darbhanga, having Amresh write down the accounts. That was why the expression “the victim’s money” on a court document did not seem to Nilima merely a matter of arithmetic. She remembered Rani’s old question: “There is a name for the money that went away; who will show it the way back?”

In the afternoon Mansi received a secure response from Malta. Through Sofia Vella, Magda Borg had expressed her *consent* to give a remote statement in the presence of her lawyer and through the appropriate local legal procedure. She wanted her original language, the translation and questions about a former employee’s authority to be made clear. That consent did not in itself verify her statement or turn it into admissible evidence in court. But a human voice that had long avoided the process was now ready to hear questions directly.

“Do not send her prepared answers,” Arunima told Mansi. “Prepare the questions, and arrange to hear her own words.”

The afternoon light slanted across the floor. The pages of the amended charges were ready. The records from the seven tables had not become one final judgment about a single crime, but every page now showed where a fact came from and how far it could go.

Before leaving for home, Mansi received another message. Before making her first testimony public, Magda had requested that the safety of an Indian woman be ensured. She had given no name. Mansi did not take this as proof of a new conspiracy. She simply replied: “Send the details of the protection request through the lawful confidential channel.” The question of whose life lay behind that unfinished name remained with her until the following morning.

CHAPTER 113

Mira's Own Home

Rainwater from the morning had collected in the potholes of an old neighbourhood in Kolkata. There was a smell of limewash in the ground-floor room of a small house, and the wood of the door had not yet dried completely. Mira opened her bag and stood in the middle of the room. It was rented, not a permanent home. But she had chosen it herself.

Samir Bose had telephoned the previous night. He had asked whether it might be more convenient for her to remain in the protected accommodation for a few more days. Mira had replied, “Safety is necessary. But I don’t want other people making every decision for me. I want to learn to open and shut the door of my own room.”

Her time in Macau was a long darkness in her memory, though within it there had also been little lights from the kindness of certain people. A handkerchief from Reshma Gurung, a glass of tea silently offered by Farheen, and Samir’s words—“If you don’t want to, you needn’t speak now”—all had their own meaning. But she did not want her entire identity from this day onwards to be simply “a survivor”.

Sharmila Das, a support worker, brought a plain folder of documents. It contained recommendations for protecting Mira’s confidential identity, a written tenancy agreement and options for vocational training. “None of these options is compulsory,” Sharmila said. “You decide. Do not sign any paper you do not understand.”

Mira read the first page. “Why is there a number beside my name here?”

“It is the reference number for a confidential assistance record. Your name need not appear on a public list,” Sharmila said. “But if you wish to have your original identity documents issued again as a matter of right, that is a separate procedure.”

Mira sat by the window. For the first time in a long while, the meaning of her name was not being determined by an employee’s permission. She could state what she wanted concerning her body, work, travel and testimony. The room was empty, but in that emptiness there was possibility as well as fear.

At the edge of the room was an old door that looked slightly crooked from outside. The landlady, Subhadra Devi, called a carpenter to repair it. The carpenter first asked Mira, “How secure would you like the lock to be from the inside?” At such an ordinary question Mira felt her throat tighten.

There had been locks in Macau too, but the keys had not been in her hands. Now she chose a new lock to suit herself. Subhadra entered the small cost of the repair separately on the rental papers. Ownership of the room had not changed, but the meaning of having a right over it had.

That evening Mira began a letter to an old friend. After two lines she stopped writing. She did not know how much of the past year she ought to describe. She did not tear the letter up; she folded it and put it in her notebook. It was not her duty to tell the whole story of her past at once. Thinking that she might write it one day, she hung the first little curtain in the room with her own hands. She had chosen its colour herself—a pale, earthy yellow.

At noon Farheen telephoned. "Have you really reached your own room?"

"Yes. There are two flowerpots on the veranda. If I water them, the plants will survive," Mira said.

Farheen was silent for a while. "I still remember the address of my old home. But I don't know whether it would be right to go back."

"You don't have to decide now," Mira said. "Even living here, I haven't found the answers to every question."

Farheen mentioned Sujata. Her whereabouts were still uncertain. Some private messages had arrived, but without independent confirmation it would have been wrong to declare her either alive or dead. Mira looked out of the window. A child was trying to touch the leaves of a potted plant. His mother called to him from a distance. Mira thought that being able to call one's child back was itself an ordinary kind of happiness.

In the evening she received information about a lawful proposal to give evidence over a video link. It was not compulsory. Deepa Chaudhary, a lawyer, explained independently which parts of a statement came from Mira's direct experience, which she had heard from others, and on which matters she still wished to remain silent. "Telling the truth does not mean making every private detail public," Deepa said.

Mira looked at an image of her old appointment letter. She remembered some of its words: allowance, accommodation, safekeeping of the passport. On paper they had all sounded like promises; later those promises had become instruments of control. She said, "I shall say what I saw. But no officer should invent for me what happened to everyone who was with me."

"We shall state the limits of your testimony clearly," Deepa assured her. "And if your safety requires a change in the procedure for certain questions, we shall make a lawful request to the court. The accused will retain the right of cross-examination too."

That night Mira did not put off her statement because of her doubts. She decided to request permission to give evidence under a protected name, provided that her voice, the meaning of her language and the sequence of her account were not distorted. It was her decision—not an advertisement

for an anti-crime campaign, nor the final moving scene of someone else's book.

Rain began suddenly outside. A little water was seeping through the gap beneath the door. Mira folded an old cloth and put it there. A message came from Farheen: "What flowers will you plant in the pots?" Mira wrote back, "For now, the leaves will do."

The next morning she went to see a community skills class. The instructor asked, "What work did you do before?" At the question Mira's hands tightened. She felt that an answer would force her to go through all her earlier pain once more. The instructor immediately added, "If you would rather not say, tell me what interests you."

"I can read accounts," Mira replied. "But I am frightened whenever I see numbers on paper. I want to learn work in which one looks for a person's consent behind their name."

The instructor gave her a small notebook for taking measurements of cloth. When she touched its corner, Mira remembered the old guest register in Macau, in which a name had been treated as proof of a person's willingness. Now she wrote down a measurement and, on the line below, a colour she liked. Nobody stopped her.

That evening Sharmila brought written confirmation: the request to give remote testimony under a protected name had been received through the prescribed channel and forwarded for preliminary examination. Final permission, the scope of questioning and language arrangements remained to be settled. Mira did not hide the paper in her bag. She placed it on the table where that very day she had written an account of how she had spent her first small earnings.

After closing the door, Mira listened to the silence inside her new home. An unseen question still accompanied her: how far had the search for Sujata progressed? But the absence of an answer did not put her own life on hold. In that little room a new decision had been born: she would give her testimony, and meanwhile she would build a future for herself.

CHAPTER 114

Rani's Five Rupees

When the first train crossed the bridge in Darbhanga, the glass jars in Rani Devi's shop trembled faintly. Amresh no longer started at the sound. Earlier, amid the noise of the bridge, he would keep listening to the sounds of games on his phone; today he held an old paper notebook. Beside it lay a five-rupee coin Rani had counted out.

"Ma, why is this five rupees separate?" Amresh asked.

"Yesterday I ordered a box of wheat biscuits on credit. The carriage charge was five rupees short in the account. The suppliers returned it today," Rani said. "If something is short, we shall write it as short. If something comes back, we shall not call it a victory."

Amresh picked up the coin. It held none of the promises of a glowing screen. Once, whenever he saw "only five hundred" written on his phone, he felt that money acquired its true worth inside the game. Today he understood that even the return of five rupees in an honest account was an achievement, involving another person's trust and the labour of his own day.

Outside the shop, Shivji the cobbler sat mending the broken strap of a slipper. He asked the price of biscuits. Rani said, "Let the debt you already owe remain on the books. If you want some tea, have it." Shivji laughed. "It would be better if the page of debts grew shorter." Rani laughed too. The debt was not yet settled, but she did not wish to hide it either.

Amresh's notebook had four sections: household expenses, old debts, money recovered and money still to be paid. He remembered drawing up these four sections of his own accord for the first time. Earlier, in his gambling accounts, he would enter less against losses than he entered against winnings. Now Rani asked, "Where is the money for oil for the lamp wick?" He turned the page at once and showed her. Giving the correct answer brought him a pleasure no false victory in a game had offered.

Madhavi Mishra telephoned in the afternoon. Shivshankar's health had not fully recovered, but he had begun taking a short walk every day. Madhavi said, "Father spoke at a public meeting about the fraud committed against him, but now he doesn't want to repeat it every day at home." Rani replied, "I understand him. If the name of one's pain keeps sounding all day, it becomes difficult to live."

Hearing Madhavi, Amresh remembered the meeting from the fifth part of their story. People had been raising slogans, others recording the scene on their phones, and some unfamiliar faces had been trying to give everything a violent appearance. That day Amresh had learnt that telling the truth did not always require assembling a crowd; sometimes a correct receipt accomplished more.

Suddenly a woman arrived at the shop with her teenage son. Her name was Prabha. She worked as a seamstress in a nearby settlement. Amresh did not recognise her. Prabha said, “I wanted to tell you something. My son kept getting messages about that game, and I used to ignore them. When I heard about your complaint, I sat down with him and looked at the phone. We did not send any money to the game. The money saved for his school fees remained safe.”

Amresh did not speak immediately. He wondered what might have happened if she had never heard of the complaint. But he did not need an answer based on speculation. He merely said, “You talked to your son. That is what matters most.”

The boy opened his notebook. Inside was the receipt for his school examination fee. Amresh looked at it but did not take a photograph. He knew that the money a family had managed to save was not a victory poster for a publicity campaign. Prabha did not stay for tea; she had to return to her sewing. But before leaving, she bought five rupees’ worth of biscuits.

Rani placed that five-rupee coin apart from the earlier one. “This is a sale,” she told Amresh. “The first was the return of a carriage charge. Both amounts are the same, but they mean different things.”

Amresh remembered something Nilima had said earlier: total stakes, deposits and withdrawals did not mean the same thing. The two coins in his mother’s shop were the smallest lesson in that arithmetic. He suddenly understood that a great gambling network did not merely destroy the numbers in an account; it confused the meaning of the lives behind each number.

In the evening a letter came from the bank. Some old restrictions on Rani’s account were under review, but they had not been lifted completely. The letter asked for additional documents. Rani sat down, looking weary after reading it. “More papers,” she said.

“We shall have to arrange the old messages on the phone, the acknowledgement of the complaint and the shop accounts again,” Amresh said.

“Arrange them,” Rani replied. “Do not make up what you do not have. Write clearly what you do have.”

That night Amresh put the papers in order for the bank. There was sweat on his forehead, but his eyes did not stray towards the prize images on the screen. Rani sat quietly on the veranda. From the distant market came the sound of an advertisement for a new gambling site; the old name had

changed, but the promise was the same. Amresh looked in that direction for a moment, then closed his notebook.

“Everyone talks about winning,” Rani said. “Few ask for an account of the money that was lost.”

“And the five rupees?” Amresh asked.

“That account will be complete when the person who owes the money acknowledges it and the person entitled to it receives it,” Rani replied. “Today five rupees have come back. Not all the money has.”

Amresh heard no easy reassurance in that answer. Their household would keep going, but debts, the bank’s restrictions and the consequences of the old losses remained with them. The school fee Prabha had saved gave him happiness, but it would have been wrong to regard it as proof that he himself was free from wrongdoing. Change was a difficult practice repeated day after day.

As she closed the shop, Rani opened a fresh page in the notebook. At the top she wrote, “Today’s collections”. She entered five rupees on that line, then made a separate entry for the five-rupee sale. The figures looked exactly alike. Between those two lines lay the difference between an old world and a new caution.

Late that night a message arrived from Nilima: if further official documents were needed concerning the bank complaint, they should contact the designated office. Amresh’s reply was brief: “From now on I shall send my receipts, not my guesses.” Putting the phone down, he placed the two five-rupee coins in separate compartments of a box.

The train crossed the bridge again. The glass jars trembled. Somewhere far away a fresh decision might be being made about transactions worth lakhs of rupees, but here the meaning of five rupees had become clear again. That clarity had not saved a family; it had merely begun to show them a way forward. And the question of whether the bank would reply the next morning still remained.

CHAPTER 115

The Ultimate Owner of the Account

The sea in Malta that morning was a colour that looked blue from far away and pale ash from close by. Sofia Vella had shut her office window. No wind was entering the room, but she had closed it not because she feared that the three sheets of paper on her desk would blow away, but because she feared their meaning would change once again. Three documents concerning the same sum: a company register, a service contract and a bank authorisation. There were names on all three, but not one page by itself established who owned the money.

Meghna Sen joined over a secure video link from Hong Kong. Behind her was a plain wall, not the books in her office. “I have spoken to Chan Wing-ho again,” she said. “He acknowledges that his name is entered as a director of the company. But the document giving him authority to stop payments does not bear his signature.”

“And the designation?” Sofia asked.

“The designation is ‘control representative’. No name was entered, and the old copy shows a new seal over the blank space. I shall not say the seal is forged. I want to know when it was affixed and on whose authorised instructions.”

Sofia turned over the first page. Beside her was Magda Borg’s earlier testimony. Magda had said no more than she was entitled to say: she was an employee in an office, not its owner; she had been present on the day the power of attorney was prepared, but had not witnessed its final approval, if any. Sofia placed her thumb on that sentence. It would have been easy to add what the witness had not seen to what she testified. Sofia would not accept that convenience.

“The translation sent to Delhi uses the word ‘recipient’,” Sofia said. “The original-language term has two possible meanings. One is the person proposed to receive the money; the other is someone into whose account the money has already arrived. That distinction made an innocent institution suspect before anything else was examined.”

Meghna opened her account register. “The limited evidence I have received from the bank through the prescribed lawful channel shows that two payments were actually settled. The third appears only as a request for approval. I will not link all three with a single arrow.”

In Delhi, Nilima and Mansi Verma were reading the authorised extracts from that conversation. On Mansi's table lay Aarav Malkani's original account notes, the second copy of Nalini Deshmukh's warning letter, and the revised service particulars supplied by Viraj Sahni's lawyer. Arunima Rao was no longer the officer conducting the present inquiry. She was responsible only for answering for her earlier decisions. She was not turning the papers of the old inquiry into orders for the new one.

"If we put these three records together, we could accuse one person directly," Naman Singh said.

"We can bring the documents together," Mansi replied, "not the accusation. First show who had authority, then show who benefited, and then show knowledge of the crime. Those are three separate questions."

Magda arrived at Sofia's office with her independent lawyer. Her daughter had gone to school, but because of earlier threats she still kept checking the time when the girl would return. Sofia asked, "Was it distressing to be called here again?"

"What distresses me is that people read my name and think I know everything," Magda said. "The initials in the right-hand corner of a new copy are not mine. But the older copy of the page does have my short signature. No officer has asked me about this difference until now."

Meghna placed the dates of both pages on the screen. Sofia compared their order with the old reference register. The page bearing Magda's signature was a draft sent from the office; the page with the new initials was dated after the bank's approval message. The pages had been arranged in a way that made the proposal seem to have been accepted already. The difference could still have been accidental, but there was now a definite date for investigating it.

"I can see a name," Meghna said. "Anurag Bedi. It appears in the Hong Kong client-relations register and in a Mumbai service invoice. But his designation is 'transaction representative'. It would be a mistake to write, on that basis, that he owns the whole empire."

Nilima remained silent in Delhi. She remembered Anurag's name from Aarav's old telephone messages. Nobody had paid it much attention at the time, because Viraj's dazzling photograph had become the leading image in the news. All along, beside the man whose image everyone pursued, someone authorised to carry documents from one desk to another had stood in plain sight—but no one had looked at him.

"Wait a moment," Nilima said. "In my first account, Viraj's office had a large desk. The desk of the man who passed his papers on was smaller. But there is no reason why the button that stops a payment must be on the larger desk."

"That is a good literary metaphor," Mansi said, "but a court needs the actual register of authority over that button."

Sofia read a line from a document obtained through authorised banking cooperation. A representative's signature appeared against three limited service items; above it, written approval was required from a separate "decision group", not from the local company. Two members of the group were named, and the third place contained a designation. Such an arrangement was not inherently unlawful; legitimate companies too sometimes used joint approval. What mattered to the inquiry was that the person signing was not the person deciding.

Magda looked at the page. "Those letters in the right-hand corner were used in my office," she said. "But I do not know what they meant. I have not seen the woman who kept the register since she left the job."

"Her name?" Sofia asked.

"There was once a call from Tara Lama's office," Magda said, "but the woman who kept the papers here was not called Tara. I am afraid someone will turn the two into one person."

There was silence for a few moments. Tara was still missing; it would not have been right to fill the space left by her absence with a piece of paper such as this. Meghna left a clear gap between the two names in her notes.

In Delhi, Mansi added revised questions to the request for mutual legal assistance: who declared the ownership of the company, who approved the specific payments, and on what date the bank's operating authority had changed. She did not send a list seeking the arrest of an entire group. Separate grounds were written beside every name.

As Sofia rose to leave the office in the evening, a short receipt reached her through a secure channel from Aarav. It was a copy of an old service order from Mumbai, not Malta. Anurag Bedi's name appeared not beneath a signature, but on a line reading "decision communicated". On the day Aarav had thought him an ordinary intermediary, he had actually been conveying someone else's instructions to the employees.

Sofia read the original reference written in the top corner of the receipt. It dated from the very first month in which Rani's account had been frozen in Darbhanga. The coincidence of dates might still have been accidental, but the direction of Meghna's search had changed: she was no longer looking for the final owner of the bank account, but for the person who had made the final decision to move the money.

A message from Mansi flashed on Sofia's phone: "It may be possible to obtain the original decision register. Do not make any name public yet." Sofia closed the papers. Outside, the sea looked just as it had before; inside, a change in the order of three documents had revealed a new line running between cities. Its end was still unknown, but for the first time the direction in which to follow it was clear.

CHAPTER 116

The Second Dawn of the Raids

Dawn had not yet fully broken over Delhi. The old wall clock in Mansi Verma's office seemed to have stopped just before five. Not everyone was looking at a phone: some held originals of orders, others the registers acknowledging their receipt. Arunima Rao had come to the meeting by special invitation, to explain her experience of the earlier investigation, not to lead the present operation. Her transfer remained in effect.

Mansi began by saying, "We shall act only within the limits of the judicial authority we have obtained. We shall not search anyone's home merely because their name has appeared in the news. Where there are victims, protection comes first. Where there are lawful workers, we must protect both their employment records and their lives."

Officers from Delhi, Mumbai, Surat and Patna joined the meeting over separate remote links. Naman Singh was reviewing the papers authorising each seizure. A young officer asked, "If the same organisation's poster is found at another public event, should we detain the organisers as well?"

"A poster is not evidence of a crime," Mansi said. "People at a peaceful gathering are not our targets. It is another matter if there is reliable evidence of a specific person's crime."

In Patna, Shivshankar Mishra sat on the veranda with his morning tea. Madhavi came to show him a news report: government action was being discussed in several offices. Shivshankar's first question was, "Will someone come and take the papers of my complaint again?"

"No, Father," Madhavi said. "The copy we kept is with us. If necessary, we shall submit it to the lawful office."

Shivshankar remembered the frightening face of a false official six months earlier. The uniform displayed on the screen that day had imprisoned him inside his own home. Now even news of genuine officials brought the same trembling into his body. He put down his glass of tea and said, "Last time they frightened me by using an officer's name. This time the officers are real. Why, then, does the fear not feel different?" Madhavi sat beside him.

In Mumbai the morning light fell upon the glass of Aarav Malkani's old office. Aarav appeared at the appointed time with his lawyer. Firoz, an employee there, had maintained salary accounts for seven years. Seeing the

operation, his face darkened. “My daughter’s school fee is due today,” he said. “Will my account be frozen too?”

The authorised officer told him that his personal account did not automatically become suspect. Receipts would be given for documents lawfully required, and wage claims would be recorded separately. For the first time Aarav saw that when an office came under investigation, many ordinary employees working there were forced to account for their lives as well. He remembered once more the cost of his earlier silence.

In Surat, Aditi Rane arrived at the site after receiving permission to be present during the operation. When the locked warehouse door was opened, bales of cloth were still stacked inside. Shankar Paswan, the guard, did not go near the stacks; he first asked for his old notebook of wages. “I shall write again about the discrepancy in the goods I counted with my own hands,” he said. “But I shall not write the name of anyone I did not see.”

“Write what you saw yourself,” Aditi said. “I shall compare the remaining papers separately.” The time was recorded beside the employee’s statement. An original transport receipt was found on which the category of goods appeared to have been corrected by hand. The correction might have been lawful, but no evidence of its approval had been found. The corrected page was therefore preserved separately; no finding of guilt was declared.

In Delhi a second team arrived at a service consultancy office. A board outside bore the name “Navakshitij Seva-Sampark”. After opening the door, the officers made an inventory of the registers found there and the secure copies of computer records. The storage sequence of one specified original document was also recorded. Anita, an employee present, kept asking, “Will I still have my job?”

Mansi instructed the officers to ask her only questions connected with the work she had personally done. Anita prepared accounting tables; it was not within her authority to judge whether a client’s business decision was proper. “Look at the documents you prepared yourself and identify them,” Mansi said. “Other people’s decisions will not be placed on your shoulders.”

A new officer noticed a photograph of a conference in Brussels hanging in the office. In his excitement he said, “Put everyone in this photograph on the list.” Naman stopped him at once. “Attending a conference is not a criminal connection. The photograph is an ordinary record; independent grounds are needed to establish control over the business.”

By noon acknowledgements, officers’ signatures and inventories of preserved material had arrived from several locations through the prescribed channels. There was no victorious smile in Mansi’s office. Some papers from Delhi matched the Malta list; two receipts from Surat suggested a possible link with service expenses in Mumbai. But some publicity records pointed towards an institution for which genuine services had already been

proved. Mansi wrote a separate note on those items: “Do not classify legitimate work as criminal payment.”

Revati Karn was waiting outside the office. She wanted news of the action in four cities, not victims’ names. Vidya Deshmukh called and asked, “Is the headline about the second great raid ready?”

Revati answered, “I shall report that action has taken place. We have no confirmed details yet of how much money has been seized or whose guilt has been established. If we publish the pictures first, we shall turn some innocent people into criminals all over again.” Vidya breathed deeply. “All right. Let the report be short, but accurate.”

In the evening Mansi received a limited response from the bank. It confirmed compliance with orders imposing lawful controls on certain specified accounts. The sums concerned were not full compensation, nor had every transaction in those accounts been proved criminal. Reading the letter, Nilima asked, “If money remains in the accounts today, will all of it be returned to the victims?”

“No,” Mansi said. “First the court, then the examination of claims, and then orders according to the rights lawfully established over the money. We must not commit another injustice in the name of swift justice.”

A message came from Mumbai: Anurag Bedi had not been found at his designated workplace. One employee said he had left on a journey some days earlier. Another said he had been in contact until that very morning. The statements did not agree, and confirmation of travel was still outstanding. Mansi did not immediately write “absconding” as an official finding. She instructed the relevant investigating officer to verify independently his legal status, travel records and contacts.

Before nightfall Meghna sent word from Hong Kong. An old office associated with Anurag’s name was found to be closed. No current contact address was available. Meghna wrote: “I have not been able to discover where he is now. But his name appears both in the bank’s register of representatives and in the correspondence from Mumbai.”

That night at home Arunima looked again at the copy of an old government order. She had no present authority over the investigation. But she wrote a letter correcting a misleading conclusion she had previously drawn and identifying where original evidence needed by the present team might be found. She sent it to Mansi through official channels. She did not want to turn it into a display of her own leadership.

At first light the papers from the operation lay neatly arranged on Mansi’s desk. A decisive financial register had been secured from a representative’s room, though many of its entries still required independent authentication. One person was being sought. The greatest achievement of the operation was not that someone had been caught, but that the original sequence of documents had been preserved intact.

Mansi was leaving the office with that thought when Naman's telephone rang. Meghna had received a letter in Hong Kong. The envelope bore no sender's name, but the contents purported to carry Anurag Bedi's signature. Mansi's first response was, "Treat the letter not as testimony, but only as a possible lead. Every fact written in it must be checked."

CHAPTER 117

The Letter from the Missing Man

The streetlights were burning even in the daytime rain in Hong Kong. When Meghna Sen reached her office, she found a brownish envelope lying on the reception desk. Her name was correctly spelt on it, and so was the office address. But there was no sender's name. The woman at reception said, "A courier delivered it. I signed for it. I have not seen what is inside."

Holding the envelope, Meghna remembered an anonymous message that had arrived some time earlier concerning Tara Lama's missing notebook. The fear expressed in that message had not made it true. Neither would the authenticity of this envelope establish itself. She called her authorised legal colleague, Yan Tai, recorded the time of receipt and arranged for the original letter to be preserved as it was.

There were two pages in the envelope. The first said, "I am Anurag Bedi. The person you all think is the owner merely passed on the orders for decisions. I, too, was not the owner of the whole enterprise." The second page mentioned three sums and named an office that had since closed. There was no authenticated proof of identity with the letter. No one had examined the signature for a match.

Meghna read the last line of the first page: "On the day the list of five per cent was prepared, I was afraid. But I liked my commission more than I feared anything." Reading it made her angry. If the author really was Anurag, this was not only self-defence but part of an admission. Yet to treat the letter as true in her anger would not be an investigation.

"What conclusion do you draw from this?" Yan asked.

"For now, only that someone wants to say these things," Meghna replied. "Someone may have written under Anurag's name, or Anurag may have written it himself. Both are possible. Unless the original source, the signature and the independent facts inside are checked, it will not stand in court."

Yan prepared the necessary receipt register for making a copy of the letter. She advised against publishing it privately. "Even if one line in it is true, that does not mean the other lines are true," she said. "And if it falsely accuses someone, correcting the damage after publication will be difficult."

They examined the first entry about money. A category of monthly expenditure was called "publicity services" in the letter. The same category appeared in Nalini's old warning in Mumbai. But the date attached to that

sum in the letter differed by two days from the available bank receipt. Meghna wrote a question beside the discrepancy. “Perhaps the writer made the error out of ignorance,” she said, “or perhaps someone is deliberately mixing in a different transaction.”

The second entry mentioned “Navakshitij Seva-Sampark”, but described it merely as an office transmitting instructions, not as the owner of the decision group. The third named a company whose registration she had seen earlier—an inactive company for which there was no proof yet of renewed activity. The language of the letter was designed to sound very certain, but some of its facts did not support that certainty.

Meghna’s phone rang. It was Mansi Verma calling from Delhi. “Tell me what you know about the letter,” she said.

“I have two pages. They bear Anurag’s name. But the writer’s identity is still unknown. I have preserved the original and recorded when it was received.”

“No arrest or new declaration of guilt on the basis of its sentences,” Mansi replied. “If the letter contains verifiable facts, check them first against existing independent records. The court hearing is near. We must not make another mistake through conjecture.”

Meghna put down the phone and looked outside the office. Two young men were running along the road with umbrellas. A woman placed her scarf over a child’s head to keep him dry. There were so many ordinary lives here, turned into a colourless background in reports about international crime. She remembered the faces of Tara Lama’s family. Their question was not the name of a criminal, but whether Tara was alive. Meghna did not want to manufacture an answer to that question out of the letter’s language.

In the evening Irene Lok telephoned. She proposed meeting at a secure office with her lawyer. Irene held an independently certified copy of the company’s old client-relations register. Meghna asked whether the sums and dates in the letter matched that register. Irene said, “One name matches, but the amount does not. And I saw the office address given here in a contract five years old. The company was doing different work then.”

“Does that mean that part of the letter is false?” Meghna asked.

“Look at the dates before calling it false,” Irene replied. “The old address might have been used again. But the evidence we have for that period shows it was only a correspondence address, not a place controlling funds.”

By evening another independent piece of evidence was found. An old authorised letter available from the lawful Hong Kong company register contained a specimen of Anurag Bedi’s signature. Meghna did not compare it herself and announce a decision; she prepared a request for signature examination. She also sent a separate query to match the bank identification for one of the three sums described in the letter. Whether the letter was true or false, each of its parts required its own route of verification.

In Delhi, Revati Karn received a message: “Confession of fugitive official found. Publish immediately.” It contained a blurred image of the letter. Revati asked her editor, Vidya Deshmukh, “Do you know where this picture came from?” Vidya said, “No. But several news pages are already running the headline.”

“Then we shall not run it,” Revati said. “We shall report what has been publicly confirmed about the operation. We shall wait for the letter to be verified. Not to protect anyone, and not to pronounce anyone guilty in advance either.”

In Kolkata, Mira was watering the plants on the veranda of her new home. Farheen sent a message: “Another story is circulating with my name in it. What should I do?” Mira replied, “Speak to a lawyer who can protect your rights. Do not remain silent and let something you never said be treated as your statement.” Mira now understood that even if a criminal escaped, a victim’s voice had a life apart from news of the pursuit.

That night Meghna read the final line on the second page. It said, “Even if you catch me, the name on the first account will already have changed. The name of the person who made the decisions will be written again behind a new screen.” The sentence could easily inspire fear. Meghna made no red mark beside it. Instead of gazing at the sentence, she examined the sequence in the authorised register.

One claim in the letter could now be tested: the date of a meeting of the decision group. Meghna had an independent register with a receipt number for that day. But the register did not say who had attended the meeting. The meaning of the evidence was small, but solid. The remainder of the letter’s story was still open.

Yan got up to close the office. “What will you write as your conclusion?” she asked.

Meghna replied, “Anonymous letter received. Writer unverified. An external reference found for one date. Remaining financial claims under examination.”

“That will make for a short news report,” Yan said.

“If the truth is short, it is not my work to make it long,” Meghna said.

Late that night a message arrived from Sofia in Malta. The name of the old decision group had appeared again in a new company register, but under a different trading name. The mere existence of that company was not a crime; nor did it verify all the letter’s claims. It was, however, a reason not to declare that the entire network had been brought to an end by one operation. Meghna looked once more at the original envelope of the anonymous letter. The rain outside had stopped. Inside, the questions on paper remained—and the day when they would have to be answered under cross-examination in Delhi was no longer far away.

CHAPTER 118

The Day of Cross-Examination

The first sound in the Delhi courtroom that morning was not the judge's voice. The blades of an old fan hanging near the window made a faint rattle with every turn. Nilima Jha was straightening the edges of her papers. She had seen millions of figures in her life, yet today one little word frightened her more than any number: "proved". Once written on paper, that word could follow a person through the years of a life.

In the corridor Revati Karn told a young journalist, "Do not describe today's hearing as a final judgment." He asked, "Then what headline should I give it?" Revati replied, "Write what actually happened. If nothing new has been proved, do not fill the gaps in the hearing with your guesses." Instead of closing his notebook, the young man wrote on its first page: "Questions first, verdict later."

In court the government lawyer, Trisha Menon, stood holding a limited portion of the amended charges. Mansi Verma sat behind her; Arunima Rao sat in a separate row as the officer accountable for the earlier investigation. Viraj Sahni's lawyer, Shamita Mehra, was taking a page from the previously identified original documents. Viraj's face was far removed from the glamour of the world of cameras. In his lawyer's notebook he saw two words: "limited admission".

"There are three kinds of papers in this case," Trisha said. "Those that can be authenticated from an original source, those that merely indicate a direction of inquiry, and those that were earlier assumptions and have now been corrected. I will not read all three as one." Silence followed in the courtroom. It was not the victory of a criminal, but an opportunity to place documents before questions.

Shamita challenged the first document. "In her revised report, Ms Verma has accepted that genuine translation work was performed for this service payment. The earlier table called it an illegal commission. Will you place the error on record in clear words?" Trisha replied, "Yes. The earlier finding in respect of this particular item cannot stand. Its basis has been withdrawn." Viraj looked behind him. There were no cameras. He wondered why nobody applauded when a real correction was made.

"But this admission does not make other payments lawful," Trisha said, turning to the next page. "Some transactions remain that correspond to the original bank register and independent account statements. Their purpose

and authority require examination." Shamita answered, "And so does the identity of the person who made the entries." For a moment they looked at one another. Even in this case, agreement was possible on some matters without either side winning the argument.

Nilima was called to explain the limited financial analysis of the evidence. Shamita's first question was, "Two thousand crore a month—is that the amount of unlawful profit sent out of India?" Nilima placed her thumb on the paper. "No. It was an unverified claim from the first source. It cannot be called profit without separating fresh deposits, repeated stakes, withdrawals and the actual balance remaining. The available records do not support such a comprehensive conclusion."

"Then was your investigation useless?" Shamita asked.

"No. The account statements that do correspond to one another do not lose all meaning," Nilima said. "If a large, incorrect figure is removed, the existence of smaller, verified transactions does not disappear. My work is not to defend a grand claim, but to defend correct arithmetic."

At the back of the courtroom Shivshankar Mishra was slowly trying to steady his breathing. The sight of the false uniform on the screen still woke him in the night. There was no line for his fear in Nilima's calculations. Nevertheless, he understood that if his real bank receipt were examined instead of some conjectural sum in crores, that paper might hold the truth of one night in his home. Madhavi put an empty paper cup from his tea into his hand and said softly, "Father, it isn't your turn to testify now. Please sit."

Trisha produced another sequence: written authorisation for the second coordinated operation, receipts for records found in the offices, and the bank's lawful response. Shamita paused at one page. "This copy was authenticated three days after seizure. Who controlled the original during the interval?"

Mansi rose. She described the times, seals and sequence of receipt separately; she also recorded the interval for which no confirmed answer was available. "I shall not press for a decisive conclusion on what I cannot yet verify independently," she said. The judge had that line entered on record. Stating a weakness clearly showed the limits of the remaining chain of evidence rather than stripping it of all value.

The anonymous letter that had arrived in Hong Kong under Anurag Bedi's name came up. Revati looked again at its blurred image on her phone in the outside corridor. Inside, Trisha said clearly, "Receipt of the original letter is recorded, but the writer's identity has not been established. For now it is only a lead capable of verification." Shamita asked, "Can its language, then, be treated as a confession against my client?" The answer was "No." Meghna Sen's limited written submission said the same thing.

For a moment the air in the courtroom seemed to change. Viraj felt relief, but he could not understand why fear remained with it. Some

genuine payments in his office now appeared under their proper descriptions in the record, yet the question about the orders issued from the little representative's office was still open. He whispered to Shamita, "That voice..." Shamita signalled with her eyes that he should be silent. "If you testify, it must be in full context. A whisper is not judicial evidence."

Nilima received the final question from Trisha. "What is the difference between a decision group's register, the signature of a representative and operational control at the bank?" Nilima opened three pages. "The first shows a proposal concerning authority; the second, an approval on paper; the third, a transaction actually completed. If all three do not bear the name of one person, further independent evidence is needed before calling anyone the sole owner. What is supported at present is the action relating to particular payments, not the ultimate ownership of a worldwide network."

Before adjourning, the court made clear that the day had dealt with limited questions of admissibility of evidence and cross-examination. There had been no final finding of guilt or acquittal on the remaining charges. The correction concerning the specifically misclassified payment would remain on record. Proper examination of authenticated receipts and limited bank details would continue in the next proceedings. No new conclusion would be drawn from the claims in the anonymous letter without independent corroboration.

Outside, a reporter asked Viraj, "Have you won?" Viraj opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. Shamita said, "Read the written order about what was decided today." It was a lawyer's cautious answer, but what the victims standing outside the court wanted above all was to have their questions heard.

Rani Devi watched the crowd from a distance. She did not understand much of the language of the court, but that afternoon Nilima explained to her separately that removing a wrong allegation against an innocent person was important and that a victim's claim remained a different matter. "Then what about my frozen money?" Rani asked.

"That will depend on a separate order, examination of the account and proof of the actual right to the money," Nilima said. "I cannot say yet how much will be returned."

Rani was silent for a while. "They said that if you staked five hundred, you would get an answer in a moment. Now I need so many papers to get an answer about my own money?" There was anger in her question, but within that anger was also her right to demand justice.

By evening the court corridor was beginning to empty. Nilima wrote one line in her notebook: "Proof of guilt and a victim's loss each require their own truth." The day in court was over, but those words raised a question for another day: if some money had genuinely been preserved, into whose hands could it be returned, on what evidence, and when?

CHAPTER 119

The Money Recovered

At the bank in Patna, Shivshankar Mishra opened his receipt paper and examined it twice. It bore his name and particulars of the sum, but the line concerning the order everyone in the neighbourhood was talking about had not yet appeared in his bank letter. The employee behind the counter said, "Uncle, what you heard on television does not mean the money has reached your personal account." Shivshankar folded the paper and put it away. Months earlier a false officer had said, "Pay now or be arrested." Today a genuine employee was saying, "Wait, and produce evidence." Waiting was burdensome, but Shivshankar had to take care that it did not become another humiliation.

Madhavi was with him. She asked the employee, "To whom must we apply? We have evidence of the money taken in the fraud, but the circumstances of every victim are different." The employee showed her the written instructions. The process depended on a specific court order, the source of the funds, the claimant's identity and the possible rights of other parties. "Money frozen in accordance with the rules does not automatically belong to whoever shouts the loudest," he made clear.

In Delhi, Mansi Verma was at a separate meeting. The bank's representative, the government lawyer Trisha Menon, an officer responsible for victim assistance and an independent auditor looked at one another's faces more often than at their papers. Limited sums had been secured during the second operation; an interim court order required examination of their origins, their links with claims and the lawful rights of third parties. The order said nothing about the entire proceeds of crime having been recovered for the country.

"Five people have claims against the same remaining sum," Nalini Deshmukh said, opening her papers. "Because of one payment route, their bank statements all converge at one point, but their losses are different. One was defrauded directly, another's account was used without permission, and a third has lawful wages trapped in the same account. It would be wrong to call all of them participants in a crime, and equally wrong to return the same money to all of them."

Aarav Malkani had been invited to give evidence at the meeting, not to act as an officer deciding claims. Looking at Nalini's page, he said, "There was a time when I saw a line marked 'commission' and assumed the business

was running. I did not ask whose money it was. The account now frozen also contains a receipt for an old service of mine. I shall not claim a share on that basis until there is an independent accounting." Nalini looked at him. His answer did not lessen the cost of his earlier silence, but for the first time he was accepting part of his public responsibility.

The frozen account associated with Rani's name was a small but difficult question in the larger case. It held some money from commercial sales, some disputed transactions and some sums of uncertain origin. An earlier order by the bank had brought her daily business to a halt. Whether the account had been operated with criminal intent or used by outsiders required separate examination. Rani brought her handwritten notebook of credit, small receipts from customers and dates of sales.

"Your notebook cannot testify against the bank's machine," a young employee began. Rani replied, "I am not saying my notebook is above everything. But where your machine has written five hundred, ask whether I sold five hundred rupees' worth of goods that day or whether someone's gambling money arrived." A slight silence settled over the room. Not every entry in the notebook immediately matched the independent bank records, but for the first time the inquiry had a precise question to answer.

After examining recovered funds linked to the lawful claims of a limited group, the Delhi court ordered suitable partial distribution. Other disputed sums remained under the court's control or lawful safeguards. Some claimants were directed to submit additional proof. The order did not claim that every victim had received a full refund. Revati made that one distinction the centre of her report: "A way has opened for some money to return; not everything has come back."

In Patna, part of Shivshankar's claim received preliminary recognition, but not the full loss. Madhavi read the letter's words slowly to him. Shivshankar asked, "Where is the price of all these months of fear written?" Madhavi could not answer. Financial compensation was not the full value of a wound in the mind. That day Father placed the written order with his own hands into the file he had once been afraid even to open.

In Darbhanga, Rani received a notice from the bank: after further examination of certain entries relating to her daily business, the process of lifting a limited restriction would begin. The notice was not a complete letter of release. She read it and told Amresh, "This paper says 'process initiated'. Do not write 'money received' in its place." Amresh remembered an old advertisement on his phone: "Deposit and win instantly." He was growing accustomed to being careful about the difference between words.

In Kolkata, Mira had a different sort of document before her. A lawful workers' assistance fund had covered limited expenses for her accommodation and training; it was not recovery of gambling money ordered by the court. Mira insisted that the organisation speaking with her make that distinction clear. "The help I receive is not a share of money lost

at gambling," she said. "The wrong done to me has its own evidence and its own claim." Sharmila Das wrote down her words.

That day, for the first time, a little bag Mira had made in her sewing class was sold. The price was very small. Holding the earnings from her own labour, she had neither defeated the world of crime nor recovered the time she had lost—but what she could put her hand upon was her own. She placed part of the price in the box for her rent and set aside the rest to buy soil for the flowerpots.

Farheen telephoned that evening. "So many people say the case has been won. I still have no news of Sujata." Mira said, "Your question is right. Call what has been found 'found'; do not stop searching for what is missing." There was a new lock on the door of her room, but she lived behind it of her own free will. That fact had a significance quite different from relief decided for her by someone else.

Revati stayed up late rereading every figure in her report. The available particulars showed money frozen in one region, identified financial flows in another, and sums kept under court protection in a third. All three could have been added to produce one enormous figure for success. She did not do so. Vidya Deshmukh asked, "Will readers be satisfied with such a limited answer?"

"I don't know whether they will," Revati said. "But I have no right to sell false hope to people who have been selling the water they need at home or pawning their jewellery to find money." Vidya looked again at the page. The first headline read, "Thousands of Crore Seized". She crossed it out and wrote, "First Partial Recovery; Examination of Claims Continues".

The following day in Delhi, Nilima sat down to write her consolidated report. On the first page she placed three questions: how much genuinely new money had entered, what part of it was confirmed by the investigation's records, and how much relief had reached those lawfully entitled to the funds. The answers to all three questions were different. At the bottom of the page she could see an image of Amresh's old receipt, on which five hundred had been written.

A message from Rani reached Nilima's phone: "Do I need to send the page from my shop accounts again?" Nilima replied, "Send a secure copy limited to what has been requested. Keep the original notebook with you." The answer was not merely technical wisdom from a criminal investigation; it was an ordinary caution learnt through a long struggle.

She began the final page of the report but did not fill it at once. What would be the real basis for judgment between the first five hundred rupees lost by Rani's family and the five per cent that had emerged in the inquiry? No bank could answer that question by itself. Night was falling outside. Across Delhi, people were opening and closing accounts and counting the cost of water. As Nilima prepared to write the final figure, she understood

that writing it did not mean declaring the darkness over; it meant keeping alive the light by which the accounts could be read.

CHAPTER 120

The Final Five Percent

When the train climbed onto the bridge, its first vibrations ran through the iron before the sound reached Rani Devi's shop below. The glass jars trembled, and the little pieces of biscuit inside struck one another. Amresh had known that sound since childhood. But unlike before, he was not bending over his phone screen and failing to notice the trembling jars. Today he held a proper sales receipt for five hundred rupees.

"Is this money from today?" Rani asked.

"Yes, Ma. Biscuits and supplies for tea went to a school function. Both the customer's name and the quantity of goods are written down." Amresh showed her the receipt. Rani read it silently and put it in the notebook. Five hundred: the roundness of the figure was unchanged; what had changed was the reason it had come into their hands.

There was something new in the shop. A small paper notice had been stuck beside the door: "Do not send money through unfamiliar gaming or prize links; check the source first." Rani had put it up at a customer's suggestion, not as a sermon. Some read it and laughed; others took out their phones and showed her messages. Amresh had not become an official entitled to answer every question. He merely told people who were unsure to contact a trustworthy assistance service.

In Delhi, Nilima Jha gave the final copy of her consolidated report to Mansi Verma to read. The first page did not display an imaginary map of a vast criminal empire. It contained a table with seven columns: statement, original source, corroboration, contrary evidence, effect on the victim, jurisdiction and remaining questions. The facts available to Meghna, Sofia, Lata, Isha and the Indian investigating team entered the table only as far as the authorised limits permitted. The name of a foreign city was not itself evidence of a crime.

Mansi asked, "What should the first sentence of this report be?"

"Only as much as has been proved," Nilima said.

"People will be disappointed," Mansi said quietly.

"If we exaggerate because we are afraid of disappointment, we shall deceive the very people we call victims again," Nilima replied.

The report stated clearly that the available records did not establish one verified monthly figure of two thousand crore covering the entire turnover, fresh deposits and actual profit. Evidence existed for some specific Indian

payments, suspicious publicity contracts and limited banking transactions; many other international connections remained under investigation. Some earlier allegations had weakened under cross-examination, some particular payments had proved to be for genuine services, and some records had withstood the tests required for admissibility.

Mansi put her thumb on one page. It said: “Not every entry for a five-per-cent service fee was an unlawful commission; and where suspicion of a commission was justified, not every recipient was the ultimate owner.” It was not an easy conclusion. In a world where a prominent name on a dazzling platform could instantly become the face of a crime, it was difficult to understand the categories of authority printed in small letters.

“Then who is the ultimate owner?” Mansi asked.

“Where the chain of authority in the decision register is incomplete, that question remains,” Nilima said. “The letter received under Anurag Bedi’s name has not been authenticated. One date in it matches another record, but that does not make the whole letter true.” Beneath the line, Mansi added a reference to the next lawful request for verification. Neither of them was willing to invent an all-knowing answer merely to give the story an ending.

In Arizona, Lata Desai was taking her daughter Nikita to school before going to the office. After the earlier threats, that ordinary journey was a daily routine she had won back. Isha had been given responsibility for putting into effect a new, explicit rule concerning services linked to protected digital records: the time a request was made must not be treated as the time it was actually approved. Sara telephoned from Delhi. They did not speak only about evidence; they also talked about whether the plant at home had dried up, when they would next meet, and the difficult period of silence between them. Sara said, “What I do not wish to look at without permission, I do not wish to hide either.” Isha replied, “Both my work and my love need boundaries; a boundary is not distance.”

In Delhi, Kabir’s shoulder had not yet completely stopped hurting. Pranay was replacing the torn frame of a painting from his exhibition. Another artist had urged him to leave the marks of the violent attack on the picture, but Pranay fitted a new frame. “The damage is part of history,” he said, “but I will not let it become the owner of my painting.” Kabir told him the title of his next report: “What Was Not Known”. Pranay laughed. “A title like that won’t sell.” Kabir laughed too. Their relationship had not remained merely a reaction to threats; it was a life they chose for themselves every day.

In Brussels, Elise Vander checked the permissions again in the list of people receiving genuine assistance. The process of removing an unverified allegation against an institution had begun. She did not see protecting legitimate services as the opposite of investigating crime. She told Nadia,

“Keep the donations that are proper clearly identified. Question the expenses that remain unclear. Both tasks must be done together.”

In Hong Kong, Meghna Sen telephoned Tara Lama’s family before sending any new information. Tara had still not been found. Meghna did not want to cover that absence with the successes of her criminal investigation. “I have no newly confirmed news at present,” she said. There was a long silence at the other end. Then an elderly voice said, “If you find her, tell us first.” Meghna said, “Of course.” She understood the weight of those words.

In Kolkata, Mira turned the pages of her sewing-measurement notebook. The process of obtaining a new lawful copy of her passport was under way, and her independent lawyer was handling the question of remote testimony. The search for Sujata was still incomplete. Mira wrote down the name of a new customer at the end of her notebook, but before noting the colour of the fabric beside it, she asked for permission. Asking what another person wanted was among the simplest and hardest lessons of her time.

In Mumbai, Aarav Malkani was examining a separate file concerning wages owed to an employee of his old office. The government investigation had not removed the question of his own responsibility. Nalini Deshmukh submitted another written proposal to improve the system for reporting risks in the office. “Take action against whoever was responsible for an error,” she said, “but make sure the words of the employee who warned in time are not lost again.” No rule in one bank could bring all crime to an end, but sometimes the preservation of a small report could prevent a great loss.

In Patna, Shivshankar Mishra was helping his grandchild practise writing. The child wrote “पाँच”, then crossed it out and incorrectly wrote “पंच”. Shivshankar laughed and said, “The first form was right.” Madhavi watched from the veranda. Her father’s fear had still not ended; he would start at the sound of an unfamiliar telephone ringing at night. But now he had learnt to check who was calling before taking a new call. The court’s partial order had not restored all he had lost. Even so, his own voice was slowly returning to his home.

One evening Mansi telephoned Nilima again. There had been information about advertisements for a gambling page under a new name. “A new face of the old network?” Mansi asked.

“I cannot say yet,” Nilima replied. “We shall have to examine the original access route, publicity contracts, evidence of payments and the identity of those responsible separately. What seems likely must be investigated before it becomes a fact.” Mansi did not make the new file a copy of the old one. She gave it its own evidence number. It was a small institutional decision that would receive no publicity around the world, but it mattered for judicial truth.

That night in Darbhanga, before closing the shop, Amresh did not delete the old messages on his phone. He decided to keep them as a secure record of his complaint. Earlier, after every loss in a game he would imagine winning in the next one. Now he was looking at the outstanding account for school supplies on the same phone. His finger paused once over the bright image of an unfamiliar advertisement. He did not open it. He was not running away from curiosity; he remained in charge of his own decision.

Rani was wiping an empty glass jar. Amresh asked, “Ma, what if people like that come again?”

“Then we shall look again at what is true,” Rani said. “Nobody promised me that I could put the whole world right. I can at least make sure I do not write false accounts in my own shop.”

The train climbed onto the bridge once more. The jars trembled. Rani did not hold them steady; the glass remained standing in its place. Amresh put the five-hundred-rupee receipt safely in the notebook. He remembered the five hundred from the first night: in that wager there had been hope of winning, but a line in the accounts had gone missing. Today real goods had been given in return for five hundred, the customer’s name was recorded, the money had been received, and nobody had promised another game.

The last line of Nilima’s consolidated report remained: “What we cannot account for, we cannot call complete.” It was not a declaration that every criminal in the country had been caught. But because of that sentence, even the smallest figure, long blurred, had found its meaning again. Five per cent of the darkness still remained; it could be called darkness. That small light of truth was not enough, but it had not yet gone out.

SIX PARTS · 120 CHAPTERS · AN EPILOGUE

FIVE PERCENT DARKNESS

A trail that runs from Patna and Rajgir to Hong Kong, Macau, Malta, Beijing, Arizona and Brussels, one five-per-cent letter at a time.

01 The Empire of Five Hundred Rupees
02 The Wealth of Seven Seas
03 Gleaming Bodies, Dark Business
04 The Export of Lies
05 The Darkness of Democracy
06 The Final Five Percent

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