

Prologue

Shadowed in the yellow light of morning, shaking in the doorway as if she had just seen Azrael, the angel of death, Naamit was telling her, the lady, that they were coming, she was saying they were here. Here, now. Downstairs. That they—the bad men were holding Jaabir, the owner of the hotel, up against the wall in reception. He was answering their questions with short, hurried phrases as piss trickled down his ankles. They would be coming up the stairs next. By then, they would know the room number. Naamit put a hand over her mouth.

Whatever fate they intended for the lady of Room 308 could easily be her fate too if they found that she, Naamit, had warned the lady.

Naamit was the cleaner in this hotel. She shouldn't be caught up in this, someone else's crisis. She had been cleaning 308 yesterday when new guest, Aagni, arrived. Naamit had called her the Pretty Lady, they began to talk. She'd asked Naamit to keep an eye out, tell her if anyone was looking for her, promising her more of the money, if she did. She hadn't done anything wrong. She just needed to get away. Someone else must have noticed she was here, though. One of the other cleaners, or one of the porters. There must be snitches and spies about, it was Dhaka after all, the most corrupt city, capital of Bangladesh, the most corrupt country, in the world. It was a miracle that Naamit had the gumption to rush up here and raise a flag at all, now she had seen who the men were downstairs. Trying not to make a sound, Naamit closed the door and stepped away, she should never have agreed to any of this, she realised all panicked and sweating and distressed. But at the time, she needed the money and Aagni kind of reminded her, of her daughter.

Aagni was alone, again, and began to shiver, she thought she might even throw up. Naamit's knock had dragged her from

a shallow sleep. It was early. The city below was already blaring, seething with a hot and frantic throb. She could feel her knees jitter. The light filtered by the thin yellow curtains gave the small room its pissy, sickish colour. Had it really come to this? The end of the road, here in this room? She had come so far. She had assumed she was well ahead and now that she had reached the city, she was virtually invisible among its millions. She hadn't anticipated they would be quite so good at what they do, they really did have an eye in every lobby, an ear on every street corner.

She would die here.

They would do it here.

They would wrap her up in the bed's flowery cover and dump her in that filthy river. They would do this as cheerfully as they would tip a chaiwallah, a beggar, or cup a flame so a brother could light a beedi. She knew all about them, the secret police who made people disappear and they got paid well, through men like the Python. No one else would ever know what she knew, about the great snake, how its coils writhed across continents. But then there was one small part of her left that did not want this man they called the Python to succeed, to disappear her. And that reminded her that if she had come this far, she still had the road left to run. The actual road, outside – which was a direct route to the airport in the north of Dhaka.

The room was not much bigger than the bed. She shot back and forth across the tiny space between one end and the door, stuffing clothes into her suitcase. She'd thrown her laptop in a river miles back, thinking that if she didn't have it with her, if she ran into them, it would be easier to pretend to be someone else.

In the corridor, stained orange carpets trailed down to corners at either end, where staircases led to other floors and the reception. Any second, at either end, or both ends, men in black stab vests and riot helmets would scramble around the corners.

Each corner held an eerie fascination for her. But why the sensation of thrill and not doom? Something had changed in her since she saw his dead body. She was not the same innocent professional married woman but a girl on the run in the centre of something deep and sinister that all linked back to that man, that interview, that moment she had a hunch to say no but couldn't say no. Because of the money. There was no way. No way she could take the stairs without being swallowed whole.

At the far end of the corridor, the door to the fire escape was locked. Locked! It wouldn't budge. Damn near unbreakable. How ridiculous! How pointless! What if there was a fucking fire, for god's sake? She needed a great deal of control not to hammer on the last room's door, to not pound it with the urgency of a girl who was running for her life. She did not want to needlessly worry the people of that room. Nor did she want to make a sound that could carry down the stairwell. But she did need them to hurry, to open the door, to open the fucking door.

A woman in a white kurta with a baby on her hip shyly opened and stood with a bemused expression on her face as Aagni barged in, smiling, shushing, trying to be as apologetic and unthreatening as possible. Other children playing in the gully between the bed and door looked up and stared blankly as Aagni waved to them, as she stepped across the bed and climbed onto the window ledge.

Scorching, heavy air buffered her face. Last room on the corridor, edge of the building, the corner. She had seen the frame from ground level when she arrived yesterday evening. She crept along the ledge, not looking up, not looking down, back to the stucco, hand outreaching until she grabbed hold of the warm rail of the fire escape. She swung across. Her other hand gripped the metal. The dusty strip of the alley was far below her. Her feet in mid-air flashed until she pulled herself over and onto the platform.

Under a cornflower blue sky, the great city of Dhaka sprawled with its white and russet blocks and billowing smog,

on and on it ran, to the water. First the Meghna River, then to the Ganges Delta, the largest on earth which empties to the pale blue of the Bay of Bengal, the largest bay, the bay into which all the waters run, in the end: the ice melt of the mountains, a hundred river systems, the rains of monsoon, all the industry waste water from every textile factory in this godforsaken dumping ground. It was a country of rivers, small ones, big ones, all ending in the bay. All the waters that had brought her here, she thought. The channels and lakes of the lush Bagicha reserve, and the creek next to the glade with the rough hut where he, Darab, stood. He peered at the brackish water as if something lurked there that first time she met him, as the gangs of men in the villages encircled the wells. The glittering depths of a flute of prosecco with which she was toasted on a rooftop bar in London, dreaming of the delta, the Sundarbans, Cox's Bazar as she was congratulated for the assignment that was ending now. One way or another it was going to end.

Above, just one of the clouds was dark, yet all this talk of rains, of the monsoon that was coming, still coming 'any day now.' This would all be much harder, she thought, in the rains.

When she reached the alley at the bottom of the fire escape, she ran into another river, this time of traffic, of exhaust fumes. Despite the width of the thoroughfare, it was almost solid with vehicles; noisy cars, trucks, tuk-tuks and bicycles. The air was shaking with the rattle of a thousand rickshaw bells and deafening car horns over which vendors selling tea and fruit fought to be heard. The air was a thick haze of fog and fume which obscured the end of the road and made her feel that she could just be heading for a bank of poison cloud. She stood transfixed, overwhelmed and inhaled a waft of dried fish that mixed with the smell of garbage. At eye level: aggravated labourers jumbled among white collars who marched about holding phones to their ears as if there was no developing world at all; the gossiping aunties who shook things; the thieves, the

stray orphans and a local man in a lungi who carried only an axe. On the ground there were young beggars, a cripple, broken curbs and lines of shining liquid waste. Here, it was she who felt like the only stranger. In this hubbub and swirling mass of humanity, she believed she could give the Python's men the slip.

Scanning the jam for an available yellow cab, Aagni noticed a battered Nissan Sunny. Careful of her step, she rushed over and slapped her palm on the side window, frantically staring back and around for men in black vests, black helmets. They might not all look like that. They might look like anyone, anyone here, that guy in the white trousers and crimson shirt sat behind his sacks of rice, the man with the chickens in pyramid-shaped cages, the man in the taxi here with his oiled moustache and washed-out, shapeless pilot's shirt.

'Airport,' she told him as she climbed in the back, and after some faffing and wrangling – her Urdu was good enough to haggle – she agreed on a fee of 120 taka, a banal drama due to what she earned, but it was so customary it would be suspect if she didn't haggle. Even though she was brown skinned, the driver knew she wasn't local, another foreigner. Her shirt and her shoes and her eyes were a giveaway. So why run the meter? Her head bumped the back seat as the driver jerked the taxi forward into a nook in another lane, then banged his hand hard on the horn. The whole minute they simply sat there with the engine running and the blare and barrage of horns encircling them seemed the longest of her life, longer than any interview, any of her legal exams. She closed her eyes and was wishing for all this preamble to pass, but found no meditative state, she just saw him dead again, dead on the floor of the hut in the glade and she saw all the places and stops that led her here, to the backseat of a cab with the Rapid Assault Battalion hot on her tail. The cab surged forward, he thumped his horn as a truck swung in front of them, its flat back loaded with bales of shredded paper as if a million incriminating documents were on their way to be burnt or dumped in the Buriganga River.

Colonial-era buildings and shops selling fabric, shops selling jewellery, flashed past.

The driver muttered to himself and cursed other drivers every time he needed to break or slow the car. Aagni heard the word for clown several times and it made her think, a downside to the rise of Uber back home was the decline of the vocal and persistently furious cab driver.

‘What–time–flight?’ he asked without turning his head to her.

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

There was a pause, either he didn’t understand or he did and this was to do with choices, directions.

‘Where? Going?’

She thought about saying anywhere but here, but instead, simply muttered, ‘home’.

She glanced out of the rear window. A couple of moped drivers zigzagged all over the road in front of a black-windowed four-by-four. Maybe one of them would turn to her like in the movies, pull a gun and blast a hole in her head.

Ten minutes later, when the taxi had entered a freer flow and a long stretch of half-constructed buildings, shells of girders and concrete sheets, the four-by-four was still there in the rear-view mirror.

Despite the heat she shivered and weighed up asking the driver if he thought they were being followed, or if they could change course, head for somewhere else, go back. But this was Dhaka. There were a million cars and one airport. One airport where she would get a flight somewhere random, somewhere determined by the availability of a seat. Frankfurt-Kathmandu-Kuwait City. They would not be so bold as to apprehend her, a British passport holder and lawyer, in broad daylight in a crowded airport. The four-by-four was still there the next time she looked. It was not there as they left the city limits and entered a clear road through a verdant sub-tropical jungle that reminded her of where she had come from, the land she had

been sent here to acquire, all that was caught up in the Python's coils, threatened by the snake's head. She felt more relaxed. She took a swig of water from her bottle. She sat back and anticipated tonight or tomorrow morning, a fresh clean room in a safe city, clean sheets, a hot shower, a glass of ice cold white wine.

Signs at the roadside counted down ten kilometres, then five to Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. The driver was cruising. On the horizon, the airport complex came into view across a plain of scrub and the outer edges of runways. The cab slowed as it approached a roadblock. Soldiers in red berets milled at the side of the road and the driver wound down his window, the soldier asking what he is doing, where has he been, something about his license. Then the soldier asked to see a passport, her passport. Aagni did not yet need to get out of the car, her passport between the fingers of one hand reached through.

'Where going to?'

The airport was on the horizon.

'Where coming from?'

An airliner took off and its engines screamed.

'Where you stay?'

The sound of them had reduced to a drone by the time the soldier began leafing through the passport.

'Job?'

Aagni trusted no one in Bangladesh, no one in uniform, no one with any status or responsibility, but somehow she trusted this soldier, so she answered all his questions. She'd thought about it on the way here and she'd had experience with this across the subcontinent; he's going to ask me this, he's going to ask me that. The soldier continued to flick the pages. She was relieved that she had never been to Israel, she knew that was illegal here. She was fully prepared to pay a bribe to be let through. She regretted not sliding 200 taka into the passport while she was just sitting there in the back seat like a tourist. The soldier

smelled strongly of sweat. The tarmac vibrated. She could feel something advancing towards them. She looked up. A dustcart was coming from the airport, smeared in dust and grime. It was coming, and kept coming until it stopped at the barrier and killed its engine.