

Yokohama Skies

Love is an Unbalanced Equation

Neer Ya

Sample Chapters

Neers.Co

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CONTENT NOTE

Yokohama Skies is a work of fiction that explores themes of trauma and resilience. This novel contains scenes and depictions of sexual assault, use of recreational drugs and alcohol, PTSD, secret societies and violence involving weapons. These elements are integral to the characters' journeys but may be distressing for some readers.

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CHAPTER 1

Mumbai | 2018

His phone pinged with a soft digital sigh. A text. He had been staring at it for what seemed like hours. Quiet like a relic, on the weathered teak table, now it shone like a tiny, cold star in the dim warmth of the Bandra café.

Open beside it was his PhD thesis, the words on sedimentology blurring into grey rivers, his focus eroded by a deeper, more persistent ache.

He knew the text was hers, without looking. He had been waiting for it, a man awaiting a verdict he'd handed down upon himself.

Nandini: Got the papers — very corporate of you, Sharma. 😊 Go live your happy. (But you're still on the hook for Karan Papa lifelong duties, just FYI.)

He exhaled, a slow, shaky release of breath he felt like he'd been holding for a year. Since she left for Tokyo with Aani, and the air in their Mumbai flat had thinned, becoming unfit for the life they'd tried to build there. He'd stayed back to finish his doctorate, clinging to the architecture of a life that was already a ruin. They'd tried.

Video calls that stretched into the silent, lonely hours of the night, conversations that were ninety per cent about Aani's school, the weather, the price of mangoes—anything to avoid the chasm widening between them.

He had been the one to give it a name, finally. The paperwork was just a formality.

His thumb hovered over the keypad. He needed to be light. He needed to be the steady one, even now, especially now. He needed to give her permission to be free of the guilt he knew she would carry. He typed his truth, the only one that mattered.

I still love you, you do know that, right. Both of you

He did. He loved the brilliant, fractured geochemist who had walked into his life in a Delhi faculty lounge, all sharp edges and sharper mind. He loved the fierce, wonderful mother of his dragonfly. He loved the family they were, even as he signed the papers to end the marriage that contained it.

The love hadn't stopped. It had just changed shape, becoming something that no longer fit within the confines of a wedding band or a shared address. It was a love that had to learn a new configuration.

He sent the message and put the phone down, screen-first.

The first tear was a surprise. A hot, sudden breach of his composure. It traced a clean path through the dust of a long day and fell onto the open page of his thesis, blurring the word "erosion."

Very dramatic, Sharma! Nandini would have said.

Then the dam broke.

There was no sob, just a silent, devastating avalanche. He sat perfectly still in the corner of the bustling café, his hand pressed to his mouth, as tears fell in a steady, relentless stream. The world dissolved into a watercolour of noise and movement—the hiss of the espresso machine, the laughter of a group of friends, the clatter of cups—all of it receding behind the sheer, crushing weight of the loss.

He had done the right thing. The necessary thing. So why did it feel like he'd just willingly amputated a part of his own soul? He was so utterly alone in the crowd, a monument of quiet grief.

That's when she appeared.

A shift in the light, a change in the air pressure. A presence, calm and still, beside his table.

He looked up, his vision blurred, expecting a server with a concerned look, ready to mumble an apology.

It wasn't a server.

A woman stood there. She was all quiet composure, a stark contrast to the café's chaos. She was beautiful, not in a dramatic way, but in the way of a perfectly composed haiku—every line, every silence, deliberate and meaningful. Her dark hair was swept into a simple knot, and she wore a linen shift the colour of a dove's wing.

But it was her eyes that held him. Dark, observant, they held no pity, no awkwardness. They simply saw him. Saw the entirety of his silent, crumbling world.

She didn't offer a tissue. She didn't ask if he was okay. She simply stood there, acknowledging the truth of his moment without a word of judgment.

Then she spoke. Her voice was melodic; words curled with a soft accent.

"Hope you find peace," she said, her gaze steady and impossibly gentle.

She wasn't dismissing his pain; she was acknowledging it.

Karan could only stare, his breath caught in his chest, the tears still wet on his cheeks. The noise of the café rushed back in, but it was different now. It had a new centre of gravity.

She offered a slight, almost imperceptible bow of her head, a gesture of deep respect for his pain, and then turned to leave, melting back into the flow of people as quietly as she had arrived.

Leaving Karan Sharma alone at his table, the taste of salt on his lips, the weight of the divorce papers in his bag, and the first, fragile seed of something new taking root in the devastated earth of his heart.

The words were out of her mouth, gliding in the humid Mumbai air, before she could stop herself. As she turned and walked away, Yuki Sato's heart was a frantic bird beating against the cage of her ribs.

What did I just do?

Eight months of solitary travel across Southeast Asia—through the silent temples of Bagan, the chaotic markets of Hanoi, the mist-shrouded hills of northern Thailand—and she had spoken to almost no one beyond the necessary pleasantries. She was a curator of quiet moments, an observer. Her sabbatical was a shield, a year-long exhale after a lifetime of holding her breath, though from what, she wasn't entirely ready to examine.

She had seen him from her small table by the window. The handsome, broad-shouldered man with the kind, intelligent face now etched with a pain so raw it was almost physical. He'd been trying to contain it, to fold it neatly away like the pages of the academic text he was failing to read. And then he couldn't—the silent, shuddering collapse of a man determined to be strong.

Others in the café had glanced away, uncomfortable, adhering to the unspoken rule of urban indifference. But Yuki had been unable to look away. A residual darkness, yes, but a truthful one.

And something in her—some deep, instinctual part she barely recognised—had compelled her to rise. To cross the room. To offer not comfort, but recognition.

Her own bravado astonished her. Who was she, the quiet woman from Yokohama, to bestow a haiku of wisdom upon a weeping stranger? She felt embarrassed and stupid. He must think me a ridiculous mystic or, worse, a pitying fool.

She pushed through the café door, the wall of Mumbai's heat and noise hitting her like a physical blow. Auto-rickshaws sputtered, horns blared, and the scent of exhaust and frying spices was overwhelming after the café's air-conditioned hush. She walked, not seeing the street, her mind replaying the moment: the shocking wetness on his cheeks, the way his dark eyes had lifted to hers, wide with a vulnerability that had stolen her breath.

The pull was inexplicable—a taut, invisible string tied to her sternum, tugging her back.

She stopped. Her hands clenched at her sides. Go back. The thought was clear and insane. Go back and say what? Apologise for her intrusion? Ask his name? The impulse was so foreign it felt like it belonged to another person.

She took a step back toward the café. Then stopped again. No. It is done. You have already disrupted his peace, and your own. Your flight is tomorrow. Yokohama is waiting. This was just a moment, a single, poignant brushstroke on the vast canvas of her journey. It was meant to be left as it was.

She resolved to walk away, to let the strange encounter become just another story she would never tell. She took a firm step forward, deciding to lose herself in the chaotic rhythm of the city one last time.

But fate had a different edit.

The café door swung open behind her with a frantic jingle of the bell. She heard a hurried step, a pause.

Yuki turned.

And there he was. He'd burst out as if chasing a ghost, his expression a desperate, searching question. His eyes scanned the crowded street, frantic, until they locked onto hers.

Twenty feet separated them. The chaotic symphony of Mumbai—the blaring horns, the shouting vendors, the incessant hum of millions of lives—faded, becoming a blurred, impressionistic painting around the edges of their vision.

For a heartbeat, there was only the space between them. The air shimmered, with a sudden, language-less, logic-less understanding.

You. You felt it too. This isn't random.

He stood, slightly breathless, his earlier grief now mingled with a dawning, bewildered wonder. She stood, perfectly still, her own carefully constructed walls of solitude slowly crumbling.

In that suspended moment, on a noisy Mumbai street, the past and the future folded into a single, silent point.

CHAPTER 2

The bubble popped. A speeding scooter veered between them, its horn a harsh, blaring reality check. The spell broke, but the connection, was—a live wire humming in the space between their eyes.

Karan looked almost as startled as she felt. He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of self-conscious confusion. “I... I’m sorry,” he said, his voice rough from crying, yet clearer now. “I just... I didn’t get to say thank you.”

Yuki’s own embarrassment returned in a wave. She offered a small, flustered bow. “There is no need. It was forward of me.”

“No,” he said, taking a step closer, compelled. The Mumbai crowd parted and flowed around them like a river around two steady stones. “It wasn’t. It was the exact right thing.” He managed a shaky, heartbreakingly genuine smile. “I’m Karan. Karan Sharma.”

“Yuki Sato,” she said softly.

An awkward, charged pause followed. The logical next step was a nod, a farewell, a return to their separate orbits.

It was Karan who, defying every instinct of his own bruised heart, spoke. “I don’t suppose... would you... Let me buy you a chai? To say thank you properly. This is wildly unlike me,” he added, almost apologetically, as if he needed to convince himself of his own actions.

Yuki, whose every impulse for eight months had been to retreat, to observe from a distance, heard her own voice answer. “A chai would be... nice.”

He led her to a tiny, hole-in-the-wall stall a few streets over, where an elderly man with a kind face served sweet, spicy tea in small clay cups, kulhads, that were meant to be smashed after use. A metaphor, Karan thought wryly, that was not lost on him today.

They found a relatively quiet spot on a low wall overlooking the chaotic, vibrant street. The silence between them was no longer uncomfortable, but contemplative.

“You’re not from here,” Karan stated gently. It wasn’t a question.

“No. From Japan. Yokohama,” Yuki said, cradling the warm kulhad. “I am... travelling. Before going home.”

“A sabbatical?”

She paused, and he saw a subtle shutter fall behind her eyes. “Of a sort.” The mystery was deliberate, a door left slightly ajar but not yet open. She turned the question gracefully back to him. “And you? You are a scholar.” She nodded toward the café. “The book.”

“Geologist. Or almost. The PhD is a perpetual state of ‘almost,’” he said with a weak smile that didn’t reach his eyes. The grief, a fresh wound beneath the surface. He took a breath, looking out at the swirling street life. “I was umm... finalising my divorce. When...”

Yuki simply nodded, her silence an invitation if he wanted it, not a demand.

And to his own surprise, he did want it. The words, locked away and festering, needed a witness who wasn’t part of the story.

“Her name is Nandini,” he began, the name both a pain and a blessing on his tongue. “She’s... the most brilliant person I’ve ever met—a force of nature. And we have a daughter. Aani. She’s just turned ten. The absolute light of my life.” His face transformed when he spoke of them, the love so evident it was like a physical light, making the subsequent pain even more profound. The fact that Aani wasn't his flesh and blood never crossed his mind, and it would be months before Yuki would learn the depth of his love.

“We met at university in Delhi. I brought her a chai because I’d read her paper on zircon decay chains. No one else in the faculty had ever talked to her about her work, only about whether she was married.” He shook his head at the memory. “She looked at me like I was an alien. Then she smiled. And that was it for me.”

He fell silent for a moment, collecting himself. “But forces of nature... they’re hard to contain...” He looked at Yuki, his eyes raw. “She took Aani to Tokyo a year ago for her work. We tried—the video calls, the visits. But I could see it. She was drowning trying to be the wife she thought I deserved, and I was... I was lonely in my own marriage.”

He swallowed hard and continued in a rapid stream, as if this, this recollection to a kind stranger, would finally convince him that what he had done was the right thing to do. “So, broke my heart and broke hers too... When... when”, he could feel himself choking over the words, “and well... signed the papers today. She texted me just before you...”,

The words hung in the air, heavy and final. He gestured vaguely, unable to finish.

Yuki listened with her entire being. She saw the man before her with his profound capacity for love, his self-awareness, his heartbreaking courage in choosing a painful truth over a comfortable lie. And the shards of his fractured heart, glinting in the vermilion sunset of Bandra. He wasn’t aware, and perhaps neither was she. This unabashed confession over a spicy, sweet chai would be her undoing. His love felt like a warm, messy, generous thing, and Yuki wanted to smuggle her entire being into it.

“You are a good man, Karan Sharma,” she said, the words a breath, a wisp of smoke.

And on that day, those particular words became a tangible thing, a sudden weight in the air, like a single, perfect bead of mercury placed upon the scale of a heart already bowed. It is a marvel, this architecture of the spirit, that we can be so vast and so fragile, that we can be felled and filled by something as quiet as a name, spoken kindly in the half-light.

He gave a sad, dismissive shake of his head and a smile that snagged her already wobbly heart. “I don’t know about that.”

The light was fading, painting the Mumbai sky in streaks of orange and purple. Yuki knew she should go. Her flight was tomorrow. This was a moment, not a beginning. Or was it?

But then he asked, “So Yokohama? Family?”

A complex shadow passed over Yuki’s face. She nodded and looked down into her empty clay cup. She chose her words with the precision of someone defusing a delicate instrument. “This was my... My sabbatical”, the words took a magical meaning in her lilt of an accent, “A sabbatical to be... just Yuki. Before I must go back and be a Sato again.”

It was a significant offering, a glimpse through the keyhole of her own mystery. He didn’t press, respecting the boundary she had drawn.

They stood in silence for a while longer, two strangers from different worlds, sharing a wall and a moment of profound honesty as the city pulsed around them.

Finally, Yuki said. "I must go. My flight..."

Karan hesitated, a sudden, surprising panic in his chest at the thought of her vanishing. "Of course." He fumbled for a pen and scribbled his number on a scrap of paper from his thesis notes. A reckless, hopeful act. "If... if you ever come back to Mumbai. Or if you just... want to talk."

Yuki took the paper. She didn't have a number to give him in return. She simply bowed again, a deeper, more formal bow this time. "Thank you for the chai, Karan-san."

And then she turned and walked away, disappearing into the swirling, anonymous crowd.

Karan stood alone, the weight of his loss still there, laced with a strange, inexplicable sensation: the faintest of hope. It felt like fate. That in the depths of his grief, he met a stranger from the land where his soul resided.

It was Autumn in Yokohama. Yuki paused before opening the door to the café's window. Her eyes instinctively went to the art deco calendar. 12th Aug 2025. Almost to the date seven years ago, she had found this café. Maples blazed in auburn and gold. She closed her eyes, and the world shifted—time folding like an origami crane—carrying her back to that humid Bandra evening in 2018 and the first few days after she reluctantly got back to her earlier life. Trying very hard to acclimate, aimless and unmoored, she had randomly walked into this new cafe 'Bibliobrew' - the name calling to her before she could decide whether she really wanted coffee.

Yuki Sato had stepped into the café's threshold, the late afternoon sunlight pooling around her like liquid gold. Her heart still fluttered from the audacity of her words—words spoken to a stranger and carried away on the monsoon breeze before their echo could settle. It had been three days since she had texted him, as soon as she got a new phone: "Yokohama does not have chai"

She saw two ticks, but no response.

Eight months of solitary travel across Southeast Asia— her sabbatical had been a shield. Yet something about that man's grief had pierced her carefully constructed solitude. In his silent collapse, she recognised the raw honesty of a heart undone. It was the most genuine thing she'd witnessed in all her journeys—a landscape stripped to its bedrock.

Now, as she sat at a corner teak table, the memory washed over her like a distant tide. He wasn't here. But the table had a faint indentation of his presence, like the one back in that Bandra cafe; it was a reminder, calling to her like a siren song, she couldn't explain. And yet, she felt alive with a promise. A promise of what?

She fetched her notebook, its cover stamped with the curve of Mount Fuji and wrote a single line, in her elegant Kanji: "In the aftermath of all storms, we choose the seeds we sow."

She closed it gently and was about to leave behind the echo of her silent vow, when her phone pinged: "I carry that evening like a lucky charm in my pocket. Sorry, I went against my instinct to respond immediately, but I wanted to wait and reward myself once I submitted my thesis"

Yuki: "Congratulations! So, you are a Dr now?"

Karan: "In a month, when I hear back from the committee"

Yuki: "How are you celebrating?"

Karan: "by texting you"

Yuki: "Are you flirting?"

Karan: "is it working?"

Yuki: "you mean, am i smiling like an idiot in a corner of near-empty Bibliobrew? Then yes, it's working!"

Karan: typing....

Karan: typing...

Karan: "Bibliobrew looks just as it sounds!"

Yuki's head snapped up, looking around.

Karan: "am not stalking. I just googled 'Bibliobrew', wanted to picture where you were"

Yuki Sato hadn't smiled like that in years.

Someone entered the café and the with the bell above the door, pulling her out of her reminiscing, Yuki opened her eyes, the memory dissolving into the gentle hum of the café. She drew in a slow breath. He was late, as always. Seven years had passed. It felt like a lifetime and like no time at all.

She seated herself at their table by the window, smoothing the linen of her dress and unfolding the well-worn journal that had become their shared chronicle. Across its pages were clippings of monsoon clouds, sketches of Himalayan foothills, pressed cherry blossom petals, and translations of Hindi verses he had sent her, each entry a testament to the slow burn of their connection.

She traced a finger along the earliest page, where she had stuck a printout of their first texts: "I carry that evening like a lucky charm in my pocket..."

A warmth unfurled in her chest. In the years since, they had nurtured this across oceans:

He visited Yokohama in spring, wandering quiet temple gardens with her, the air fragrant with plum blossoms. She flew to Mumbai to help him pack up his life after all.

She remembered meeting Nandini and Aani and immediately understanding his love for these two women, and herself falling in love with this readymade family she was now a part of.

They wrote long, confessional emails about their fears: his fear of vulnerability, her fear of roots.

He asked her to marry him. She did. Eleni, Aani and Nandini were there.

Each journey chipped away at the distance until love crystallised as an ember glowing through the monsoon's grey. They discovered that love's actual terrain was less about grand gestures and more about the gentle tending of each other's wounds, the daily acts of presence and understanding.

A sudden breeze fluted through the café, carrying the scent of fallen leaves. Yuki looked toward the door. He stepped in moments later, his shoulders still bearing the quiet strength she remembered, but his eyes soft with anticipation.

He crossed the room and settled opposite her, offering a half-smile that spoke of relief and reverence. She closed her journal and slipped her hand across the table, their fingers interlacing—two maps converging, charting a course forward.

“Ready, Ms Sato?”

“Always, Mr Sharma”

“Nandini and Aani are meeting us at the venue, and then let’s get dinner after”

She nodded, they got up, and as she was about to leave, she turned back to their table, her favourite corner, and she swore she could see the woman looking at her phone with dreamy eyes and smiling for the first time in years.

CHAPTER 3

Yokohama, once again, held them in its gentle embrace. The air in Karan and Yuki's home was thick with the warm, convivial hum of a gathering winding down. It was a different energy from the frantic, crisis-laden meetings of months past. This was softer, settled. The kind of easy comfort that comes from battles weathered and a new, fragile equilibrium found.

Anurag and Thea were on the large floor cushion, his hand resting possessively on Thea's knee. She was all soft features and a contented smile. Her sharp beauty was accentuated by the glow of pregnancy.

They'd found a flat in Tokyo, a sun-drenched space with a spare room already being referred to as "Aoife's HQ."

Thea and Nandini were deep in conversation about geothermal energy, segued perfectly from a discussion about an Icelandic artist Thea was trying to woo for her gallery, their hands gesturing in similar, precise ways.

Across the room, Aani and Takumi were giggling over something on their phones.

The fracture caused by the revelation of her paternity had been painstakingly mended, not erased, but woven into the fabric of their new reality. She was Anoop's daughter and Karan's Aani, and the duality of it was becoming a source of strength, not conflict. Anoop watched them, a quiet, profound ache of happiness in his chest. He was here. He was part of the chorus.

Anoop raised his glass of single malt, the ice clinking. "A toast," he announced, his New York accent rounding the edges of his words. "To the imminent arrival of our overlady. To the new flats. To not have any immediate, life-shattering emergencies for a full month. It's been blissfully dull."

Everyone laughed, raising their own glasses—whiskey, tea, juice. The clink was a sound of solidarity.

"I'll drink to dull," Anurag said, grinning. "My nervous system can't take much more plot."

"You love the plot," Thea murmured, nudging him.

"I love surviving the plot, darling," he corrected. "Any case, the plot twist is on her way, so..." he chuckled.

Nandini caught Anoop's eye from across the room. She smiled, a small, private thing that still had the power to short-circuit his thoughts. It was all there—the history, the pain, the impossible second chance. They were learning to build on fault lines.

It was in this moment of perfect, unguarded peace that Anoop's gaze drifted, idly tracing the familiar contours of the room. The shelves of Karan's geological tomes, Yuki's collection of exquisite Hagi ware pottery, and the framed print of Hokusai's Great Wave that Aani had given them.

His eyes fell on a small, beautifully carved tansu chest in a corner he rarely glanced toward. It was a lovely piece, old and polished. But it was the object resting on it that made his breath catch in his throat.

On a stand of dark velvet, displayed like a revered artefact, was a single, exquisite prayer bead. It was carved from ivory, yellowed with a patina of great age. He knew, without moving closer, that it would feel both cool and impossibly smooth to the touch. His documentary-maker's eye catalogued the details automatically: the size of a large marble, the hole for the string worn smooth.

But it was the carving that stopped his heart.

It depicted a lotus flower in breathtaking, microscopic detail. Each petal was perfectly rendered, unfurling in a specific, unique pattern he had spent three weeks filming from every possible angle in a dusty museum in Jakarta. It wasn't just a lotus. It was the lotus!

The symbol of the Padmavyūha, a secretive, centuries-old sect of artisans and guardians rumoured to have been wiped out in the political upheavals of the mid-20th century. A sect so shadowy, most historians debated its very existence.

What was it doing here?

The bonhomie of the room faded into a dull roar. This wasn't just an antique. This was a relic. A specific, coded signature. It had no business resting on a velvet stand in a peaceful Yokohama living room. It belonged behind reinforced glass, or in the depths of a Javanese forest temple, or in the nightmares of men like Malik, who had whispered the sect's name with a mixture of greed and terror.

He was moving before he realised it, drawn across the room like a magnet. He stopped before the tansu, his shadow falling over the bead. Up close, the craftsmanship was even more stunning. It was undeniable. He had the footage to prove it.

His mind raced, trying to forge a connection. Karan? A historian, yes, but his field was geological, his interests academic. He wouldn't have this. He wouldn't know. This wasn't a collector's item; it was a birthright—a statement.

Slowly, as if pulled by a string, he lifted his gaze from the lotus.

Yuki was watching him.

She had her mother's capacity for silence, but thankfully, not her reasons for it. She was still seated, her posture as serene as ever, a half-finished cup of tea in her hands. But her eyes—usually pools of gentle, amused calm—were different. They were sharp, aware, and utterly still. She wasn't surprised by his focus. She seemed to have been waiting for it. Her expression wasn't challenging or fearful. It was acknowledging. A silent confirmation that he was, indeed, seeing what he thought he was seeing.

The air in the room crystallised.

Karan, sensing the shift in the energy around his wife, followed Anoop's line of sight to the bead, then to Yuki's face. His affable expression faltered, replaced by a flicker of confusion that quickly deepened into dawning, unsettling curiosity. He looked from the ancient artefact to Anoop's expression to his serene wife, and the cognitive dissonance was a physical jolt.

From the floor, Takumi's keen artist's eye missed nothing. He saw Anoop's frozen posture, the intensity of his focus. He saw Yuki's unblinking stare. He saw Karan's confusion. His hand stilled in the clapping game. His eyes met Anurag's.

A silent, electric message passed between them. It was the same look they'd exchanged in the hospital corridor a couple months ago, when Bapa Gede, the ancient, wizened Indonesian who had helped Aani, had looked at Yuki not with the polite curiosity of a stranger, but with a deep, unnerving recognition. He had bowed his head, just slightly, a gesture of profound respect that had seemed utterly out of place. They'd dismissed it then as a cultural misunderstanding, an old man's confusion. Now, that moment snapped back into focus with terrifying clarity.

Anurag's grin vanished. The plot, it seemed, was not done with them.

Nandini felt the silence descend. She looked from Anoop's rigid back to Yuki's calm face, to her husband's bewildered one. "Everything okay?" she asked, her voice cutting through the tension.

The spell broke.

Yuki blinked, and the sharpness in her eyes melted away, replaced by her usual gentle warmth. She smiled at Nandini. "Hai, daijoubu, Anoop-san seems to appreciate the old bead." She said it lightly, as if he'd merely complimented a vase.

Anoop forced himself to turn around, to unclench his jaw. "It's... remarkable craftsmanship," he said, his voice sounding rough to his own ears. "I've never seen anything like it. Except... umm."

"A family heirloom," Yuki said smoothly, before he could finish, rising to collect empty cups. "Very old." She moved toward the kitchen.

The goodbyes that followed were stilted, the earlier ease gone. Takumi, sensing the undercurrent, made his excuses. Anurag and Thea left, promising to call, their glances back at the house filled with unease. Aani, picking up on the mood but not its source, was quiet.

The drive back to Tokyo was silent. Aani was on her headphones in the backseat. Nandini watched Anoop's profile, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. "What was that about?" she asked softly.

"I'm not sure," he said, and it was mostly the truth. "That bead...ummm... I think I filmed it once."

"Yuki said it was an heirloom."

"Hmm, perhaps I am mistaken"

Back in Yokohama, the house felt too big, too quiet. Karan moved through the nightly routine on autopilot: locking doors, turning off lights —the familiar actions did nothing to quiet the whirlwind in his mind.

He found Yuki in their bedroom, already folding her clothes with her usual meticulous care. The peace of the room felt like a lie.

He leaned against the doorframe, watching her. How to dance around the question he was suddenly terrified to ask? The question he had promised, drunk on love and the promise of a future, never to ask.

He cleared his throat, aiming for light, for the humour that was their default setting. "So," he began, "that was quite the moment. Anoop looked like he'd seen a ghost"

Yuki didn't look up, her hands smoothing a silk blouse. "He has a good eye. It is a unique piece."

Karan pushed off the doorframe and walked to his side of the bed, sitting down to take off his shoes. "You know, it just struck me tonight, with everyone here... we've been through so much chaos in the past couple of months" he paused, choosing his words like stepping stones carefully, "And through it all, you've been this... epicentre of calm. You knew exactly who to call in Thailand to find Aani. You had a team of people there before I'd even finished panicking. It was seriously badass, Yuki."

He chanced a look at her. She had stopped folding, her hands resting on the fabric.

He pushed on, the humour feeling thinner now. "I guess I just never asked... where does a brilliant, serene potter and art curator learn to orchestrate an international rescue operation with the efficiency of a special forces commander?" He tried to laugh, but it came out strained. "It's just one of the many mysteries of you, I suppose."

The silence that followed was heavy, filled with the weight of his unasked question and her one condition after his proposal: *Never ask about my past*

Yuki finally turned. Her face was calm, but her eyes held a sadness so deep it made his breath hitch. It was the look of someone who has always known this moment would come.

"Karan," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "It's just an heirloom and... and you promised."

She didn't elaborate. She didn't need to. The answer was in the set of her shoulders, in the ancient stillness in her eyes, in the exquisite, impossible lotus bead sitting in the other room.

Karan stared at her, the woman he loved, the mother of the children they had lost, the centre of his peaceful world. And for the first time, he began seeing beneath her quiet serenity. It wasn't the absence of chaos. It was the profound, formidable peace of someone who has already survived the storm.

He had promised never to ask. But the question was screaming in the space between them now, and he knew, with a sinking certainty, that he would break his promise and the answers would change everything.

CHAPTER 4

Tokyo unfolded around Anoop in a familiar, yet still alien, rhythm. His days had found a new cadence, a syncopated beat composed of early morning walks with a surprisingly chatty Aani, afternoons spent in his temporary studio reviewing footage from his team's latest pitch.

The mystery of the ivory lotus bead was a low, persistent hum beneath it all, a bass note of disquiet in his new symphony. It didn't overshadow the joy; it shadowed it. He found himself turning the memory of it over in his mind like a worry stone—its specific weight, the exact curl of the petals. It was a detail that didn't fit the narrative.

And Anoop Krishnamurthy had built his life on fitting details into narratives. Needing a break from the four walls of his studio and the digital glare of edits, he sought the quiet analogue solace of the Tokyo Public Library. The air smelled of old paper and quiet dedication. He wandered through the aisles, letting the quiet hum of the library soothe his restless mind.

He found himself pausing in a section marked 'Ancient Secret Societies & Fraternal Orders'. It was a fanciful title, promising more conspiracy than history. His hand trailed along the spines—books on the Templars, the Freemasons, the Thuggee cult. Then his fingers stopped. One book, thinner than the others, its cover a deep maroon with gold embossing that had all but faded. *Padmavyuha: The Lotus Labyrinth - Myth and Legacy of the Sakti Parampara*.

He pulled it out. It felt light, insubstantial. A myth. He'd been chasing a myth. A wave of foolishness washed over him. He was seeing patterns where none existed, imposing the shadows of his own past onto the serene life Karan and Yuki had built. He was about to slide it back onto the shelf when a feeling, a prickle at the back of his neck, made him stop. Someone's watching.

He turned.

Twenty feet away, standing at the mouth of the Geology section, was Karan. He was greeted warmly by a librarian, a tired-looking academic whose face lit up at the sight of the esteemed Professor Sharma. Karan smiled, nodded, but his eyes were distant, his mind clearly elsewhere. He looked the way Anoop felt—preoccupied, mentally tracing and retracing a problem with no clear solution.

As if feeling the weight of Anoop's gaze in turn, Karan's eyes lifted and scanned the aisle. They found Anoop. There was a fractional pause, a micro-expression of surprise that quickly softened into a fond, if weary, smile. He raised a hand in a small, silent wave.

Anoop waved back, the book in his hand feeling suddenly conspicuous. He gestured vaguely toward the library's café area with a questioning look. Coffee?

Karan nodded, his own relief visible. A problem shared, even if unspoken, was better than one shouldered alone.

They found a quiet table in a sunlit corner, two steaming mugs between them. The awkwardness was a tiny, fleeting thing, quickly burned away by their shared history and the mutual, unshakable love they held for the women in their lives.

"Escaping the university?" Anoop asked, stirring his coffee.

"Escaping my own head," Karan replied with a dry chuckle. "Sometimes the walls of my office start to feel like the boundaries of my own thoughts. Needed a bigger space to think." He didn't elaborate on what he was thinking about. His eyes flicked to the maroon book Anoop had placed on the table between them. "Research?"

Anoop followed his gaze. Padmavyuha. The title seemed to pulse between them. He could lie. He could say it was for the documentary, a tangential interest. But this was Karan. The man who had opened his home to him, who was father to his daughter even before he knew she existed, who was clearly wrestling with his own storm.

“Not exactly,” Anoop said, choosing his words with care. He tapped the cover. “This... this relates to something I saw a long time ago. In Indonesia. During my... time there.” He left the ‘time there’ vague, a dark cloud they both understood. “A symbol. A specific kind of lotus carving. I thought it was lost to history. Or a story.”

He paused, weighing how much to say. He looked at Karan, really looked at him. He saw the subtle tension around his eyes, the same haunted curiosity that had been in his own reflection lately. “I was surprised to see it again. The other night. At your house.”

He didn’t say “on your tansu chest.” He didn’t say “owned by your wife.” He didn’t have to.

Karan’s face went very still. The affable professor’s mask slipped, revealing the raw, bewildered man beneath. He stared at the book as if it were a ghost. He looked from its faded title to Anoop’s earnest, concerned face. The two separate lines of their private investigations had just converged, violently, on this small café table.

“Yuki,” Karan said, the name a sigh. He didn’t ask for confirmation. He’d seen Anoop’s reaction. He’d seen the bead a thousand times and never seen it. Now he could see nothing else. “She never speaks of her family. Not really. Not a single story. And what she did for Aani...” He shook his head, a world of awe and confusion in the gesture. “It wasn’t normal, Anoop. The speed, the efficiency. It was like she had a... a switchboard to a world I don’t know exists.”

He fell silent, his own fears given voice, hanging in the air between them. They were no longer two separate men with separate worries. They were allies staring at the same locked door.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Anoop said quietly, regret lining his voice. “I just... I saw it, and it... It shook me. That’s all. It’s probably nothing. An heirloom, like she said.”

“But you don’t believe that” Karan stated. It wasn’t an accusation.

“No,” Anoop admitted. “I don’t, rather let’s say I do believe it, and that’s probably more worrying”

They sat in a heavy, shared silence, the weight of the unspoken pressing down on them. The love for Yuki was a tangible thing in that silence—a protective, fierce love that made the mystery even more terrifying.

They finished their coffee on lighter topics—Aani’s upcoming debate, Thea’s latest craving for pickled plums, the merits of Anoop’s new project keeping him based in Tokyo.

Finally, they gathered their things. Anoop slid the book into his bag. They walked out together into the bright Tokyo afternoon, the unresolved tension a third presence between them.

“Take care, Anoop,” Karan said, clapping him on the shoulder, the gesture warm but fraught with new meaning.

“You too, Karan.”

They parted ways on the sidewalk: Karan headed toward the train station, Anoop toward his studio. Each man walked alone, lost in a labyrinth of his own making, now knowing the other was lost in it too.

From the shadow of a nearby konbini, a man lowered his phone. He hadn’t been taking pictures. He’d been filming a short video clip. His thumb hovered over a single contact, listed only as a series of numbers.

The clip was short and clear. It showed two men—the documentary-maker and the professor—exiting the library, their expressions serious, their body language speaking of a deep, shared concern. It ended as they parted ways.

The man hit send. The video whisked away into the digital ether.

Then he made a call. It was answered on the first ring. No greeting was exchanged.

“They were together,” the man murmured in low, fluent Japanese, his eyes still on Anoop’s retreating. “At the library. Talking for a long time. The Krishnamurthy man had a book. Padmavyuha”

A pause as the person on the other end then an instruction.

“Understood,” the man said finally. “I’ll continue to observe.”

He ended the call, melted back into the foot traffic, and disappeared, another ghost in the Tokyo crowd. The game was far from over.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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