

The Empty Seat

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Introduction: The Still Point

Outside the panoramic window of the thirty-fifth-floor apartment, the Sydney Harbour Bridge stitched the sky to the sea, a silent, grey arch against a canvas of brilliant, cloudless blue. The water below was a dazzling sheet of crushed sapphires, dotted with the white sails of pleasure boats drifting on the gentle afternoon breeze. The air that drifted through the open balcony door was clean and carried the faint, salty tang of the ocean, a stark contrast to the landlocked, traffic-scented air of Melbourne he had left behind.

Inside, the apartment was a sanctuary of order and profound silence. The polished concrete floors were cool underfoot, the walls a serene off-white, adorned with nothing more than the shifting patterns of light and shadow. The only sounds were the soft, rhythmic click of a keyboard and the distant, melodic chime of a wind bell dancing on the balcony. A single stick of sandalwood incense burned in a simple brass holder, its fragrant, woody smoke coiling slowly towards the high ceiling, scenting the air with a familiar, calming perfume. This was the world Chunmun Singh had built for himself in the years since the fall. A world of clean lines, quiet discipline, and meticulous control.

He was now a Lead Enterprise Architect for one of Australia's biggest tech firms, a position of considerable respect and influence.

His colleagues here knew him as a quiet, intensely focused genius—a man whose mind could hold the continent-spanning complexity of their digital infrastructure with an almost supernatural ease. They respected his boundaries, his preference for solitude, and his polite refusal of after-work drinks. They saw a man of immense discipline; they did not see the architecture that discipline was built upon. He was successful. He was, by all external measures, at peace.

His vow remained. Thirteen years had stretched into fifteen, then twenty. The record of Lakshmana was a landmark long since passed, no longer a goal but simply a feature of his past. The vow was no longer a practice; it was the very essence of his being, the still point in his turning world. And the gift it had bestowed upon him remained as well. The silent, chaotic symphony of other people's thoughts was a constant hum at the edge of his awareness. Over the years, he had learned to mute it, to build psychic walls that filtered the noise, allowing him to exist in the world without being consumed by it. It was a tool he rarely used, a sense he kept veiled.

Then, a notification bloomed silently on his screen, a simple, automated reminder he had set years ago and forgotten. The stark, black text seemed to absorb all the light in the room: "Anniversary: Great Ocean Road."

The chime of the wind bell outside suddenly sounded like shattering glass. The salty air tasted of ash. The serene blue of the harbour was instantly replaced by a vision of twisted metal and a canopy of lush, indifferent green. He could hear the high, piercing shriek of tires, feel the phantom jolt of his body hitting the grassy verge, smell the acrid smoke and the cloying sweetness of blood. The humming thoughts of his new, distant colleagues were drowned out

by a sudden, deafening chorus of spectral voices—Priya’s shame, Rashmi’s fear, Gusana’s impotent fury—a psychic scar tissue that had never truly healed.

His hands, which had been flying across the keyboard with elegant precision, froze above the keys. For years he had compartmentalised the memories, locking them away in a cold, dark room in the architecture of his mind. But the simple, impersonal notification had just picked the lock. The ghosts of Baba Bank came pouring out, not as vengeful spirits, but as unanswered questions demanding voice. He realized, with a sudden, gut-wrenching clarity, that the silence he had built was not peace. It was insulation.

He took a slow, deep breath, the scent of sandalwood a fragile anchor in the storm. He closed the complex schematic he had been designing. He opened a new, blank document. The cursor blinked, a tiny, rhythmic heartbeat in a sea of white. He had to give it order. He had to build a structure to contain the chaos. He had to tell the story, from the very beginning. His fingers found the keys, and he began to type. Hindi translation has been provided at the end of the book.

Chapter 1: The Lone Architect

The morning sun, a brilliant disc of molten gold, struck the glass canyons of Melbourne’s financial district, scattering light across the city. Down below, where the trams hummed a constant, metallic tune, the skyscraper housing Baba Bank sliced into the crisp blue sky. Its lobby was a cathedral of modern commerce, all polished black marble and cool, sapphire-blue logos that seemed to float on glass walls. The air inside was chilled and sterile, smelling faintly of

industrial cleaning solutions and the expensive, citrus-sharp perfume of the women who hurried across the echoing floors.

On the twenty-seventh floor, in the open-plan office of the Digital Solutions department, the atmosphere was a different kind of sterile. The world was cast in the unforgiving, blue-white glare of fluorescent lights that bleached all color from the rows of grey cubicles. Here, Chunmun Singh, a 35-year-old solution architect, was an island in a sea of vibrant sound and motion. For five years, he had navigated the silent, logical pathways of code, designing the intricate software architecture that formed the bank's digital spine. His monitor glowed with lines of elegant, precise script—a language he understood far better than the one spoken around him.

His manager, Gusana Patel, moved through the office like a shark through water. Her presence was announced by the sharp, authoritative click of her heels on the linoleum and the subtle, musky scent of her power-suit perfume. A staunch feminist, Gusana had cultivated her team of twelve with a singular vision. Her corner of Baba Bank was to be a bastion of female empowerment, and the symphony of the department reflected this: the high-spirited laughter that erupted from the break room, the collaborative chatter that buzzed around shared screens, the rainbow of bright kurtis, sharp blazers, and shimmering sarees. And then there was Chunmun. The sole male, a quiet note of dissonance in her carefully composed orchestra. Hired before her tenure, he was a legacy component she couldn't easily uninstall, a relic tolerated but never truly integrated.

Shy and deeply introverted, Chunmun found refuge in the beige confines of his cubicle. The walls, decorated with nothing more than a company calendar and a few schematic diagrams, were his fortress. Beyond them, life swirled in a kaleidoscope of color and