



CINCO

**DIBYARAJ
SINHA**

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SINHA**

Dibypraj
Sinha
2020

*“To put on the garment of legitimacy is the first aim of
every coup”*

*-Barbara Tuchman,
‘A Distant Mirror’*

PROLOGUE



20 APRIL, EXIDE MORE, 12:10 PM

The driver sighed again. A ridiculous stoppage time. Amidst all the honks and sound of vehicles, he let go of the steering wheel and sank back into his seat.

Remembering the ‘interview’, he laughed a bit. People with power waving their wands, he thought.

Knock, knock.

He turned to the window. *What is he doing here?*

He thought, but he smiled. The man outside gestured. He nodded, unlocked the door, and the man slid into the seat beside him.

“How are you, Mr. Trivedi?” the man asked.

The driver gave a surprised laugh. “Very funny indeed.” He laughed again.

“Let's go for a long drive, shall we?” the man said with a smile.

“Where to?” Mr. Trivedi asked cautiously.

“Well, follow my directions,” the man replied calmly and pulled out a gun. He quietly placed it on his lap, the muzzle pointing towards Mr. Trivedi.

Trivedi felt a lump in his throat. Outside, it was just another normal, busy day. Cabs sped past, traffic policemen waved, and ‘responsible’ pedestrians ran across the road, dodging vehicles. He swallowed and nodded.

The car sped away, carrying Mr. Trivedi and the man they all called ‘Cinco’.

Chapter 1

THE PEOPLE HAVE STARTED TO GATHER IN COLLATIA



22 JUNE, METIABRUZ, 11:20 AM

“Oi!” Ramiz shouted and ducked behind a bush. It took Shakil two seconds to run to the place from where the shout came. Just bushes.

“Oi!”

Shakil ran again.

Ramiz laughed hard. “Shakil will never be able to spot me,” he thought. “I am a professional.” But Shakil spotted him a few minutes later.

Ramiz was standing still. Shakil ran to him.

Panting and giggling, he exclaimed, “Got you!”

Then he understood. He glanced at Ramiz, who put a finger to his lips.

The man had water bottles in both hands. He was slowly walking away from the mill, towards the road.

“Let's go to the mill, shall we?” Shakil asked.

“But the man?”

“Are you afraid?”

Ramiz shook his head. “Let's go,” he went ahead.

They didn't know that the man wanted them to go to the mill.

03:40 PM

“It says 'Uno' on the notebook cover. The first page has just this one line: ‘The people have started to gather in Collatia’,” Brijesh read out.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Dipta shrugged. “Anything else?”

“One more page, sir. Shall I read it out?”

“Go on.”

“Day three - sensations of bile at the back of the throat, sickness, nausea, and constipation.

Day seven - severe weight loss, weakness, fainting, abdominal pain.

Day thirty - low BP. Low heart rate. Depression.

Day sixty-three - death’,” Brijesh read slowly.

The inspector shrugged again. “Did you call Deepak and his team?”

“They're on their way, sir.”

Dipta nodded and walked out of the crime scene. Suranjana was talking to two kids. She called out to him. “Sir! These kids saw someone!”

“Yes, sir,” a kid echoed. “It was a man. He was wearing a blue shirt and jeans. He was carrying water bottles.”

Dipta smiled at them. “Okay, take notes, detective.”

He nodded to Suranjana's “Yes, sir,” and walked back to his car.

The local police officers walked up to him. He waited a minute, and by that time Brijesh and Suranjana had also joined them.

“Okay, fill me in,” Dipta said, putting his hands in his pockets.

A local officer began, “We found the victim in a half-sitting posture in one corner of the room. He has not been moved.”

“What have we found in the room?”

“Sir, the room had only a table. The notepad was on it. I read its contents to you,” Brijesh explained.

“How long has this place been abandoned?”

“About thirty years, sir,” one of the local officers replied.

“Anything else from the scene?”

“The walls, sir. It seems as if someone scratched them. And yes, we found wall paint under the victim's nails,” Brijesh looked anxiously and continued.

“Now, the victim. Tell me about him”.

“No identity papers. Nothing. As you saw, it seems as if he was starving,” Suranjana pointed out.

"Yeah. I've never seen a thinner human body than that, ever," Dipta paused. "Wait for Deepak and his team. I'll leave. Anything else?"

"Yes, sir," Brijesh bit his lip. "Is this a murder at all?"

Dipta shrugged. "I don't know. The notepad indicates that angle, though. Wait for Deepak". He then got into his car and sped away.

Brijesh punched the air. Almost at the same moment, the skies rumbled. Dark clouds were gathering, he noticed.

"Suranjana! It's going to rain. Call again. Find out where Deepak is."

He glanced up. Finally, some rain for the scorched city.

He felt relieved in some way.

ALIPUR, 06:35 PM

"I wasn't there, sir. How would I know?" he said with a laugh.

"You know what we call this?" Sayak Banerjee bent forward on the table.

"What, Sir?" he asked, curious.

"Utter horseshit!" Sayak shouted into his face and stormed out of the interrogation room.

The man called out after him, "Horseshit's pretty useful for farmers, Detective!"

"That's it. My holiday is over." He sighed as he went out to the balcony.

"Well, my part is done. I came back from the station ten minutes ago." She smirked.

Sayak gave Jahnvi a look. "I am so done with murders. I want a holiday!" He almost cried. She shrugged.

Sayak punched his palm and stormed back into the room. The clouds rumbled. Jahnvi looked out. Dark clouds had gathered all over the city. It would be a cold, stormy night after so long. Finally some relief. And the fact that her share of the paperwork was finished added to the relief. She hurried to the elevator, excited about

the night. She would sleep in peace, finally, without concerns.



23 JUNE, LALBAZAR, 10:45 AM

"Sir," Brijesh said quietly as he came in.

"Yes?" Inspector Dipta Roy looked up from a pile of papers.

"We got the identity, sir." He stopped a bit.

"Umesh Trivedi."

"And?" Dipta did not understand Brijesh's exasperated look.

"He is the Secretary of the Food and Supplies Department. And also the Food Commissioner."

He cleared his throat. "He has been missing since 19 April".

Dipta ran his fingers through his hair. He picked up his teapot, filled a cup, sank back in his chair, and took a long sip.

"I need a copy of the FIR. Did the family file it?"

"Yes, sir. Here's the copy."

He read it slowly, taking his time, and finished his tea.

"Last seen at the Chief Minister's residence?" He looked up, surprised.

"His family said he had an interview with the CM's son, sir."

"Kumardeep Roy? Isn't he a journalist?"

"Yes sir." Brijesh shrugged. "Trivedi left the CM's residence but never returned home—or so the family says."

Dipta finished reading.

"Mr. Trivedi was just months away from retirement, sir," Brijesh added, shrugging again.

"You need to talk to his family. And his close circle." Dipta took some notes.

"Alright, sir. On it." Brijesh left.

04:45 PM

Dipta was pouring tea again when Suranjana knocked and entered. She waved the file in her hand. The postmortem results.

"Thank you."

She nodded and left. He started reading.

07:00 PM

DCP Ajay Biswas smiled at him. Dipta smiled back and sat.

"The postmortem results came in."

"Where does the case stand?"

"We know nothing, sir," Dipta spoke bluntly.

"Brijesh talked to the family. They knew nothing. He left the CM's residence in his car, and that car still hasn't been found".

"What about the postmortem?"

Dipta stopped for a moment. "He died due to starvation." He looked straight at the DCP.

DCP Biswas held the gaze for some seconds.

"How, Inspector?"

"I'll read out some points." He opened the autopsy report. "The large gut was found empty, which suggests no food intake for at least a day or two days. The gall bladder was distended. There was disuse atrophy of the gastrointestinal tract." He kept a straight face.

"I thought you said a day or two. How does two days of starving kill a man?"

"No, sir. It means at least two days. Then there is the disuse atrophy. Deepak made it clear it was due to starvation." He stopped again, then continued, clearing his throat. "They found wall paint under his nails. And in his colon. He scratched the walls and ate the paint, sir."

The DCP looked down. "Then the notepad is true".

"Yes, sir."

"The handwriting?"

"It is not Trivedi's, sir. And we're still working on the meaning of the writings."

"I have a press conference tomorrow, Inspector. And I meet my boss tomorrow evening. Bring me more, I don't want the case to go to the CID", he gave Dipta a look.

Dipta got up, nodded, and left.



24 JUNE, LALBAZAR, 05:05 PM

Dipta cleared his throat. The room fell silent and all eyes turned to him.

"Let's see what work you all have done".

Everyone nodded and started gathering their notes and files.

"Buddha, you begin."

Buddha nodded. "Sir, we found a lock in a bush outside the mill. Maybe it was used by the person—or persons— to lock the room where they kept Trivedi."

"Okay. Anything else?"

Buddha only shrugged and nodded.

"What about the notebook writings?"

Buddha smiled this time and nodded. He opened his notebook. "All the writings were

with a blue dot pen. It was the handwriting of a single person." He paused and took a look across the room. "The cover said Uno. Uno is the name of a game. UNO is the abbreviation of United Nations Organisation. But sir, uno, in Spanish, means the number one." He stopped and stared at Dipta.

Dipta frowned. "Don't you dare bring a serial killer angle into this. Go on. What about the other writings?"

Buddha nodded uneasily and went on, "The first page says 'The people have started to gather in Collatia'. This Collatia was the name of an ancient Italian town. I did some research and found that this 'gathering of people in Collatia' can correspond to two major events".

Dipta walked up to the window as Buddha paused to look at his notes. It was raining again. There was no wind. Everything stood still and

quiet—just the sound of the rain pattering down and of the old ceiling fan whirring. Suranjana and Brijesh sat quietly in their worn wooden chairs, gazing out at the rain.

Buddha went on. "Tarquinius Priscus, the legendary fifth king of Rome, captured this town. At that time, a large number of people gathered to celebrate. That is the first event.

"This same Tarquinius raped Lucretia, the wife of the Governor of Collatia. A revolution followed this incident. The leaders of the revolution gathered in Collatia to hear Lucretia's account. Then they gathered the youth of Collatia. In a line, the second event was when the revolution began against Tarquinius. This revolution overthrew the king." Buddha stopped.

He looked around. No one moved or spoke.

Again, the pattering of rain and whirring of the fan gained the stage.

Brijesh broke the silence. "So which of these two incidents was the murderer referring to?"

He paused, then answered his own question.

"If we take the Uno and this together, I'd say we're looking at the possible beginning of a series of crimes, or at least that's what the murderer wants to say".

Dipta turned. "Why?" he asked, not to anyone in particular.

"I'd say that's the toughest question. The motive is nowhere to be found," Suranjana pointed out.

"Let's call it a day," Dipta said.

The rain was about to stop. The wet leaves outside were shimmering in the last sudden sunlight

of the day.

JORABAGAN, 06:20 PM

Sayak wiped his face with a towel, put it away, and switched on the TV. He settled on the couch with his cup of elaichi tea. The news was all about the Food Commissioner's murder.

Nothing about two CID officers cracking the Esplanade triple murder case.

Hypocrites, he thought. No, wrong term. TRP lust. The term came to his mind and he was delighted. He laughed a little.

He flipped through the channels one by one. The whole country seemed shocked at this murder, by starvation, of a food commissioner. The irony of it.

The movie channels were no different.

Sooryavansham on Set Max and Jab We Met on another, or the usual one-man-army type South Indian flicks everywhere else.

He swore under his breath and switched off the TV. Then he grabbed an umbrella and went out. He liked to sit at the ghat and just gaze. Black clouds still hovered, but he paid no heed. Instead, he walked faster.

MACHUABAZAR, 07:25 PM

The rain came hard. The buyers ran to and fro. Those who had umbrellas had no luck either. The rain was too heavy. Only the vendors remained in the market. They started packing up, getting drenched in the heavy rain. People tried to huddle under whatever shed they could find. Many had umbrellas, but the rain was simply too heavy. It had been raining for the last two days straight and the city looked no better for it. Potholes brimmed with muddy water, the roads were covered with mud. People tried to but couldn't avoid splattering themselves with dirty, muddy water onto their

trousers and shoes. The black sedan only made the people angrier.

"Watch out! Don't splash!" People shouted at the car.

Inside, Mrs. Bose sighed. "Oh no. The vendors have already left, I guess. Turn around, we don't need to go to the market now. Let's go home."

The driver nodded and began turning the car. Knock, knock.

An old man was rapping at the window. The driver kept manoeuvring while Mrs. Bose lowered the glass.

"Do you want mushrooms, ma'am? They are very fresh!" the old man shouted. He smiled as best as he could, rainwater dripping from his eyes and chin.

Mrs. Bose gestured for her driver to stop the car.

"I'll take them. Thank you, Gaur." She smiled back at the old man.

Chapter 2

I, CLAUDIUS



25 JUNE, LALBAZAR, 11:20 AM

Dipta was going through the notes again. He was certain he was not missing anything. This historical angle had made this crime into something far from ordinary. And with the nationwide media glare, the pressure was immense. He had to find something, soon.

"Sir?" Brijesh knocked.

Dipta knew at once that Brijesh had something.

"Go on." Dipta sank back in his chair.

Suranjana entered as Brijesh nodded and began. "This Umesh Trivedi faced an allegation of being involved in the food scam in 2017, sir."

Dipta sat up. "What do you mean by 'faced an allegation'?"

"Sir," Suranjana said slowly, her voice quivering, "he is alleged to have had a direct hand in stealing food grains and fuel which were meant for distribution to the poor under welfare schemes, and then selling them on the open market."

Dipta stood up. His expression had changed.

"On what basis are you making these allegations?" He looked straight at her.

"Sir, if these allegations are true, then we have a motive."

"What motive?" The Inspector's voice was incredulous.

"Someone killed him by starvation. And the scam he was involved in, that caused starvation of many poor people, sir." Her voice was very unsteady.

Dipta could not believe what he was hearing. He looked at Brijesh.

Brijesh shrugged. "The scam involved thousands of officials, from top bureaucrats to ground-level workers, and I'm quoting one of the largest news networks. But only the low-level and a few medium-level officials were ever arrested. One or two heavyweights spent, at most, three days in custody." He gave a sarcastic laugh.

"Wait." Dipta's voice rose. "Do you know what you're saying? Two detectives, making their inferences based on rumours and media stories?"

He clenched his teeth and took a deep breath. "Get out," he said quietly. "And don't you dare repeat this if you don't have evidence, detectives."

They left quietly. They had planted the thought in the Inspector's head.

THE OBEROI GRAND, 10:15 PM

Shalini smiled and looked away.

"Did you read the book?" He asked, wiping his lips with a tissue.

"Not yet." Then, pointing at his food, she smiled. "I don't like basil at all".

"It's me who's eating it, so you need not worry about it," he teased, playing around with his spoon. "I've been thinking about something."

"What? I don't want another lecture on pseudoscience, alright?" She laughed.

He laughed too. "No. I was thinking..maybe I could meet your mother." He wiped his lips again. "Discreetly, you know."

She held his gaze. "Discreetly?"

"Shalini, I want to talk to your Mom. About us."

She looked astonished. "I could do that. And besides, you were the one who told me to keep it away from Mom!"

"Well, I've had a change of view," he shrugged.

"And, I want to talk to your mother about us.

You don't have to do it." He held her gaze.

She thought for a few seconds. "It's a bit weird, but..I guess it's okay."

"Thank you." He smiled. "Where can I meet her? I'd rather it not be some big public place."

Shalini's eyes lit up. Excited about the near future, she clapped and smiled even brighter.



26 JUNE, JORABAGAN, 11:30 AM

Here go the onions. Sayak stole a quick glance at his mobile. Sauté. Alright. Done. Chilli powder. Okay. In it goes.

He leaned over the pan and inhaled. Finally, a good aroma. He smiled.

"Yes!" He punched the air and flashed a victory sign at his mobile.

A loud procession was passing through the street. He went to the window and looked down. A man in white kurta-pyjama, a party scarf draped around his neck, stood in an open-roof vehicle. A large mass of humanity surged around the car, chanting "Give votes! Give votes!"

Sayak looked on with distaste.

"Why beg from the top of a vehicle? Fall on our feet!" he shouted.

His voice died in the chants.

He returned back to the kitchen and checked the taste. Perfect. He grinned. *I'm a chef now*. Then he remembered, almost. Just one step away.

He spent the next ten minutes clicking a picture and posting it on Instagram. Finally, he was a chef.

LALBAZAR, 03:06 PM

Dipta's face fell. "But sir, the media is getting more focused on the elections."

DCP Biswas gave him a look. "Questions will arise, Inspector. We have to continue investigating."

"We don't have anything!" Dipta almost cried in despair.

"Talk with his family again. Get his phone records. Do what you have to do, Dipta. I'm counting on you."

Dipta nodded.

LAKETOWN, 11:00 PM

"I..I want an ambulance..as soon..as soon as you can," Mr. Bose panted into the phone.

"Alright, sir. I've written down your address. The ambulance is on its way. Please take care till then."

The phone clicked.

Mr. Bose sat in his chair, his face pale. He felt his gut wrenching. He lurched towards the basin again. Another round of blood vomit.

He splashed water on his face, panting, gripping the basin with both hands. Then he looked up at the mirror, horrified. Blood was oozing out of his nose.

He splashed water again.

"Ohh!" He cried out in anguish. "Help me God!" Then he collapsed on to the floor, and everything around him grew so very dark.



27 JUNE, LAKETOWN, 01:00 PM

"He was a brilliant man who always stayed at least a kilometre away from politics," the Chief Minister said with a faint smile. "I'm not saying this because he was my brother, but I've never seen a man more caring and loving than Tapas", he paused, scanning the crowd of journalists.

Dipta watched him from the window. The man had a way of speaking. All the media people thrust their mics toward him as he went on.

"We will get the person or persons behind this.

We have dedicated people looking into this.

Whoever it is, they can't reduce my love for my

brother, or my love for my citizens. Through everyone's love, I'll gain everyone's support once again. The election is in—"

Dipta moved away.

"So we have the motive," he said to the DCP.

DCP Biswas was still looking at the body on the bathroom floor. He turned, surprised.

"What motive?"

"To reduce the love of the CM for his brother," he paused, "and for his citizens."

The DCP gave him a look and walked off, shaking his head.

How quickly everything had been done, Dipta noticed. The hospital got the call from Mr. Bose at 11 p.m. The ambulance arrived within ten minutes. The post mortem was finished by the next morning, and by 1 p.m. the crime scene was sealed and ready.

"Sir!"

He turned. A constable was holding up a polythene bag. "The bag of mushrooms, Sir!"

Dipta raised an eyebrow. "Any more mushrooms in it?"

The constable smiled excitedly, "No Sir. But—" He lifted out a notepad.

A blood-red notepad. On the cover, scrawled in blue dot pen, was a single word:

‘Dos’.

Everyone turned to the constable. Dipta took the notepad from him and flipped through the pages.

"All blank except the first," he said.

The room held its breath. There was deafening silence.

He frowned. Only two words. He read them aloud.

"I, Claudius."

NEW ALIPORE, 04:25 PM

"Hello," Mrs. Gupta smiled.

"Hello, Ma'am," he returned the smile.

"Please, have a seat. Shalini said you wanted to talk to me. I asked her but she didn't give any rea-"

"Ma'am," he cut in gently, still smiling, "I have my car outside. Why don't we drive while we talk? I'd like that much better."

Mrs. Gupta blinked, taken aback. Then she smiled again, a touch uncertain. "Of course. Of course. Why not?"

"Thank you," he said warmly, stepping ahead. She followed him out to the waiting car.

ALIPORE, 07:10 PM

"I would say I saw this coming," Jahnvi said.

Sayak shrugged. "Come on."

They pushed through the office doors and started down the stairs.

"Do you know where Lalbazar is?", he teased.

"No I don't. Red areas aren't really my expertise".

Sayak stopped mid-step, eyebrows raised.

"Wow," he mouthed.

She smiled and tugged her collars up like a shield, smiling proudly.

As they left the CID building and stopped a yellow taxi, clouds rumbled. The air was heavy with rain still trapped in the sky.



28 JUNE, LALBAZAR, 11:00 AM

"Okay, I got it. The police secured the room as a potential crime scene *after* the post mortem was done," Sayak said while he stood at the window, watching the sunlight peeping through the leaves of the coconut tree.

"Yes, sir," Brijesh replied, a post mortem-file in his hands.

"Alright. Fill us in," Jahnvi said.

Brijesh nodded. "The cause of death was due to ingestion of Amanita mushrooms. The report talks about *massive liver necrosis* and *acute kidney damage*." He shrugged.

"What did he tell the hospital?" Jahnvi asked.

"He said he'd been vomiting blood and passing blood in stools. He said he felt uneasy, then gave them his name. The hospital sent an ambulance right away," Brijesh explained.

Before Jahnvi could speak, he added, "He bled through his nose too".

"All of that is due to the mushroom poisoning?" Sayak asked.

Brijesh nodded.

Sayak turned. "So we've got two crimes, but only because of the notepads. Beyond that, there's no evidence to label these as crimes".

"Sir, the starvation case? If that wasn't a murder then what else? Suicidal starving? Accidental?"

Brijesh gave a short laugh.

No one else laughed.

Sayak changed the topic. "Where are we with the notebook writings? And the family?"

"Sir, Buddha is looking into the writings. He'll report soon. And about the family.." Brijesh paused. "Suranjana has gone to talk to the servant. As for Mrs. Bose, she's on a school trip. We're waiting for her to call us back."

"She's a school teacher?"

"Yes, sir. She works at a local school in Laketown."

"Ask her where she bought the mushrooms when you speak to her".

"I'll do that, sir."

01:00 PM

Suranjana returned, gave Dipta a quick briefing and left. Within minutes, Mrs. Bose returned the call. Dipta spoke with her at length and took notes. He asked her to return to the city as soon as possible. Then he waited for the CID officers to return from lunch. He gave them the address of the bazaar and went out for lunch.

MACHUABAZAR, 07:35 PM

They parked the car and stepped out. Splitting up, the three of them moved in different directions, asking around about mushrooms. It was Jahnvi who made the call. Dipta and Sayak reached her within two minutes. She was speaking to a middle-aged man selling pomegranates. She turned to them.

"He knows. But he needs some..incentive." She fixed her eyes on the man.

Sayak pulled a few notes from his pocket and handed them over. "Start talking, brother. Next time, an empty hand will provide you all the incentive you need."

Jahnvi glanced at the Inspector, gauging his reaction. He was smiling.

A small crowd was beginning to gather around them.

The man started. "It was raining heavily that night. I was covering my goods when I saw the car stop. Gaur was the one who sold the mushrooms to the lady."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, sir. I know the car. She always buys mushrooms from Gaur".

"Where is this Gaur?"

"Over there, beside the banana stall," he said, pointing.

They started walking. A group of people trailed behind, curiosity pulling them along. Sayak glanced back at them. The crowd hesitated, then kept following.

As they neared the banana stall, someone suddenly burst out from the next stall. He darted past the detectives and smashed into one of the men following the detectives. He broke free

from him and tore through the crowd.

People shouted and moved out of his way as he ran. Muddy water splashed, pebbles crunched under his pounding feet.

Then, just as suddenly, someone stepped in front of him. As the stranger's hands caught his flanks in a crushing grip, he let out a cry of pain and fell into the man's arms.

It all happened so fast. The detectives didn't even have to move as the stranger held the man and delivered him to them.

"Thank you so much, sir," Sayak said, clearly pleased. He turned to the silent crowd, which was now a huge one. "Maybe you all should learn something from this man."

"It's alright, sir," the Good Samaritan replied with a faint smile, then he vanished into the crowd.

The detectives dragged the mushroom seller to their car, Sayak gripping his collar and mocking him along the way. They shoved him inside, climbed in and drove off. The bystanders dispersed, now that the drama was over.

If you had shown the detectives a photo of the helpful stranger a day later, they would have frowned, and told you that he was the very

man they were hunting, wanted for the murders of Mr. Umesh Trivedi and Mr. Tapas Bose.



29 JUNE, LALBAZAR, 11:45 AM

"There you go." Dipta handed a cup of tea to Sayak.

Jahnvi was still staring at Brijesh and Suranjana.

"Your theory is mind boggling," she said, then paused. "What about Mr. Bose? Was he also involved in something?"

Brijesh nodded. "Let's not forget that Mr. Bose was the Director of Standards at FSSAI two years ago."

Suranjana opened her notes.

"The scandal happened three years ago. It involved milk and infant formula, along with other food materials and components being adulterated with melamine," she read aloud. "About thirty thousand people were affected. Three babies died of kidney damage, and an estimated five thousand more were hospitalised."

She stopped and looked at Brijesh.

"About fifteen people were chargesheeted, and their trial is still ongoing." Brijesh looked down. "Nothing touched Mr. Bose."

"I know about this scandal," Sayak said, "but there's no evidence Mr. Bose was involved."

Dipta threw up his hands. "That's what I've been trying to drill into their heads. You can't make baseless allegations off rumours!"

Sayak nodded in agreement. Jahnvi was not convinced.

"Maybe they have a point. A person involved in a food scam dies by starvation, and now someone linked to food adulteration dies from mushroom poisoning," she countered.

"And the mushrooms were *adulterated* with poisonous ones," Suranjana added.

"And the labelling of the victims as *Uno* and *Dos*? That says a lot. I'd bet more are coming," Brijesh concluded.

03:50 PM

"Let's recreate the timeline," Dipta said, rising to his feet. "Based on Mrs. Bose and the servant Poltu's accounts, we've got three days. On the night of 24 June, Mrs. Bose buys the

mushrooms and gives them to Poltu. He cooks, then leaves. Mrs. Bose says she doesn't eat mushrooms so she had a different dinner. This was confirmed by Poltu."

Suranjana joined in. "Next morning, Mrs. Bose leaves with her school students on an excursion to Shantiniketan. Mr. Bose complains to Poltu of diarrhoea, vomiting and stomach pain. He takes digestive pills."

"On the third day, he asks Poltu to cook lunch early and leave as he has some private meetings. That night the hospital gets the call from him."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, gathering their thoughts.

"I have two questions," Jahnvi finally said.

"First, who were the people he met on the third day? And second, why didn't he call a doctor earlier?"

Everyone nodded.

"That is indeed very strange," Dipta agreed. "I feel we can't exclude Mrs. Bose and Poltu from the suspects' list."

Everyone nodded again.

"My questions," Brijesh said, "are, first of all, how did the notebook end up inside the packet of mushrooms. If it was there when Gaur sold it, then Mrs. Bose would have noticed. And even if she hadn't, Poltu would have. But both deny noticing any notebook. One of them is lying, or both."

Sayak shifted in his chair. "Maybe they're telling the truth. It could have been slipped in by any one of the visitors on the third day."

"Good point." Dipta stood up. "Check for any CCTV footage from that day. Also, how long do we have the mushroom seller in custody?"

Brijesh had already left the room by then.

07:42 PM

Brijesh found the CCTV footage from the Boses' residence. It was tedious work, but he sat through them one by one. He paused and printed stills of each visitor.

The last visitor was different. Odd. He looked straight up at the camera and grinned, flashing a victory sign.

08:24 PM

They made calls everywhere, alerting police stations. Dipta met the DCP in person and briefed him. The DCP passed it up to the CP, who in turn whispered it to the CM backstage during an election rally.

The picture was being sent to almost every division. There he was – smiling, flashing a victory sign.

Dipta and Jahnvi had gasped when they recognised him. The same man who had helped them catch Gaur at the market. After that, they made call after call, tracking down the visitors. Each one confirmed they had indeed visited Mr. Bose that day. All except the last man. No one knew him. No one could even place him.

They began calling him *The Last Visitor*. Soon, it was shortened to *TLV*. His face was everywhere on the news. Shaved head, dark sunglasses and a thick beard. Smiling and flashing a victory sign.



30 JUNE, LALBAZAR, 10:45 AM

Buddha was ready with his notes. They waited, sipping tea. Sayak set his empty cup down just as Dipta walked in.

"Sorry," Dipta said. "Traffic, you know." He glanced around.

Everyone nodded, nothing new.

"You may begin, Buddha." Dipta sat and poured himself some tea.

Buddha started. "*Dos* is the Spanish word for two, of course. That's it. Now, the contents. *I, Claudius* is a novel by Robert Graves. It was also adapted into a TV series. The book is based on the Roman emperor..." He checked his notes.

"Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus."

"That's longer than all our names put together," Brijesh laughed.

Buddha smiled and continued. "He was the one who annexed Britain to the Empire. Now, the reference, Claudius' fourth wife was his niece, Agrippina. Two historical accounts exist. In the first, Agrippina tried to poison Claudius with mushrooms, with the help of his taster, Halotus. But the plan failed. Claudius forced himself to vomit by putting a feather down his throat."

"Wow. Amazing." Sayak threw up his arms.

"And boring." He yawned.

"The second account", Buddha went on, "Says that Agrippina herself served poisoned mushrooms, and failed. In the second attempt, she fed him poisoned gruel. It was a lingering, painful death for Claudius."

He stopped and set his notes down.

"Okay," Jahnvi said. "We get the meaning completely."

Dipta was lost in thought. "Does this point to Mrs. Bose's involvement?"

"Exactly. Also the reference to the emperor's taster, that could be a reference to the servant," Buddha said.

"Mrs. Bose returns today. We will have to interrogate her and Poltu again".

"Okay, let's call it a day. We've done enough for now," Sayak said, yawning.

BARABAZAR, 04:40 PM

The sun was merciless. With the humidity, the air itself felt heavy. He wiped his face again and again, but the sweat would not stop. At last, he bought a lemonade and sipped it.

"Fifteen more minutes, babu," the man said with an apologetic smile.

He nodded that it was fine and waited. Today, he wore a cap, and the bushy beard was gone, replaced with a neatly trimmed goatee. A packet rested in his hands. His legs bounced impatiently as he sat.

He glanced at the Howrah Bridge, then decided to walk across. Telling the man he would be back in thirty minutes, he left.

05:00 PM

He walked back slowly, leaving the bridge behind. Cars and buses honked, people blabbered among themselves, many shuffled along the sidewalks of the bridge. The view from the bridge was striking. Some leaned on the railings and gazed at the river below. Couples held hands and blushed. Tourists snapped pictures from a plethora of angles. People laughed and talked and shouted. He stopped walking and simply stared. Just stared

at all of it. The still-glowing summer sun, the sunlight playing on the river ripples, the boats and ships scattered across the river.

Conductors shouted as buses reached their final stop, Howrah Station. Vendors pushed their carts piled with fruits and vegetables, wiping their faces with gamchhas draped around their necks.

The traffic policeman manning the entry to the flyover

watched the man. The man was standing still, staring back at the bridge, a faint smile on his lips.

People brushed past him, some casting irritated looks as he stood in their way. The policeman took out his phone and clicked a few pictures of him. Then he sent them to his boss, who checked with the Detective Department of the

Kolkata Police, Lalbazar. The policeman's hunch was right.

It was him.

By the time the confirmation came through, the man was gone.

The detectives were on their way. The policeman was told to wait. He took out his notebook and started writing because he did not want to forget and miss a detail.

Black cap, black t-shirt, blue jeans, carried a packet marked 'Shriram Enterprises'.

Bought something from the Navin Steel Craft Suppliers.

06:12 PM

"This policeman saw him buying from you!"

Jahnvi was furious.

The man looked at everyone. His lips trembled and he almost broke into tears. "I..I don't know who you're talking about!"

"We'll wait here till you answer us." Jahnvi pressed. "So why waste time?"

Then the detectives sat down on the benches and waited. A crowd was gathering, people drifted in from nearby shops and stood, watching them.

The man gasped for breath. He gulped and choked before a fit of coughing shook him. They waited quietly.

"Alright." He finally croaked after a few minutes. "He paid..he paid me thirty-five thousand."

Jahnvi leaned forward. "What did he buy?"

"He..he ordered something. I just made it as he wanted," the man's voice shook as he wept. Jahnvi tightened the grip on her patience.

"What did he want?"

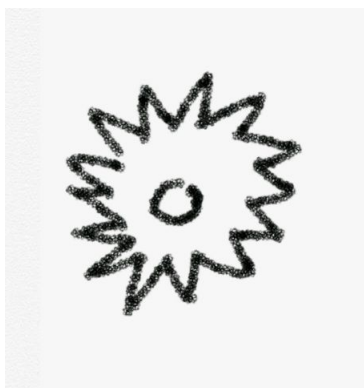
"A chakra".

Her eyebrows furrowed. "What?" She thought she had misheard.

"A chakra," he repeated, his eyes getting bigger, "like that in the hands of Lord Narayana."

"Can you sketch it? The way he wanted it?" She couldn't believe her own words.

He drew, his hands shaking, his tongue darting nervously over his dry lips again and again. The bystanders craned their necks, watching with rapt attention.



It was a chakra, its rim carved into sharp crests and troughs. It was like the Sudarshan Chakra of Lord Narayana.

"What did he want it for?" Brijesh could not help it.

"I don't know." The man was trembling.

Brijesh patted his back and looked at Jaharvi. She gave a small gesture, nothing more to be gained from this man.

They walked. Again, the crowd followed. Three hundred meters later, they entered 'Shriram Enterprises'.

The man at the counter froze, dropped everything he was doing and rushed to them, his teeth clenched tight.

"Yes," the man answered when shown the pictures. "He ordered a tapestry. White.

Completely white. No designs, no inscriptions, nothing. Just a blank white sheet of cloth."



01 JULY, LALBAZAR, 10:40 AM

"I hope you'll close this case soon. Wish you all the luck, detectives. I am always with you.

Thank you." He walked off, and the crowd of people walked away with him.

Sayak let out his breath. Dipta was still stunned.

"It's good you didn't tell him your theories,"

Jahnvi teased Brijesh and Suranjana.

They only shrugged.

The DCP returned. His voice cut the air flat.

"You heard the Chief Minister. No surprises.

Close your case. ASAP."

"Sure. We just need TLV. Small task, isn't it, Mr. DCP?" Sayak stood up, his stare sharp.

The DCP smiled thinly. "Of course. For the best of WB CID, it sure is". He left without looking back.

Sayak stood there a bit, his eyes glaring.

Outside, it was raining again. But his stomach was growling. And he needed to cool off a bit.

"I'm going to get some breakfast. The dimwit must be gone by now." He rushed out of the room.

Dipta blinked. "Did he just call the DCP a dimwit?" He stared at the door closing behind Sayak.

"He called him a dimwit!" Brijesh repeated, laughing. "I'm not letting this guy eat alone."

Jahnvi shook her head. Suranjana mouthed *dimwit* twice, wide-eyed, then she quickly went back to her notes.

Outside, Sayak dashed across the street, trying to shield his head from the rain with his hands.

"Hey!" Brijesh yelled after him. "Wait up!"

Sayak threw a disinterested look. "Oh come on quick."

They walked side by side on the footpath. The rain was getting stronger and the wind blew in gusts.

"That was a strong word," Brijesh chuckled.

Sayak shot him a glance, and broke into a smile himself. They walked, giggling wildly.

"Hey!" Brijesh suddenly clasped his arm.

Sayak spun and followed his gaze. A car had stopped outside the police building. The constable at the gate struggled with his raincoat, with one hand he was trying to cover himself from the rain as he talked to the driver. With the other hand, he was taking a plastic

bag from the driver.. Brijesh knew the bag. The packet screamed in bold red letters *Shriram Enterprises*.

Brijesh's voice rose over the rain. "It's the tapestry bag!" He bolted.

Sayak took two seconds to understand, then he cursed and tore after him.

"You have great eyesight!" He shouted after Brijesh, his voice wavering as he ran, weaving through honking cars.

They ran across the street back to the building, the rain hitting their faces. The driver caught sight of the two men running in the rain towards him. He jumped off the seat, abandoning the car, and sprinted into the downpour.

"Sir!" A constable rushed into the room. He was soaked to the skin and his voice was

unbelievably hoarse. "Sir, a man came and told me to give this to you," he said, panting. "The CID officer and Brijesh Sir ran after him."

Dipta stood up. "What!"

The others ran up to him.

Buddha ran out. "I'll go check for them!"

They all stared at the packet on the table.

The man had rushed into an alley. Brijesh was on his toes, panting. Sayak was behind Brijesh, rain dripping down his chin and forehead.

The man then smashed into the door of a dilapidated house, slamming against the stair rails as he climbed. Brijesh followed, his wet shoes slapping against the stairs. Sayak's legs were burning from fatigue. He stopped in front of the house and gasped for breath. Then he staggered to the side of the house, looking for exit points.

Upstairs, the man slipped into a room and stopped. His back pressed against the wall, hidden by the half-open door. He waited there, patiently.

Brijesh almost collided with a terrified family in the corridor. He raised a finger to his lips. *Stay quiet*. Slowly, he took his handgun out and walked up the stairs silently.

It was so deadly quiet all around. Just the monotonous sound of the rain pattering. The dark hallway smelled of damp plaster and kerosene. He checked all the rooms, one by one. Then he reached the end of the hallway. He tried to be as quiet as possible. He checked the room on the left. Empty. Only the door of the right remained. It was slightly ajar. He shifted his weight, raised the gun. Sweat mixed with the remaining raindrops and rolled down his face. His heart thundered. He held his

breath and stretched out his arm, his teeth clenching, his body sweating in the humid atmosphere of the house.

The man could see his shadow, he thought. But he had a gun. He kicked the door and rushed in. The room was dark and empty. Almost too empty. He let out his breath and lowered his gun. That was exactly when a wire bit into his throat. Two hands yanked back the wire with merciless strength. He gasped for breath, his legs kicking against the ground. He had lost his voice, only a distorted sound came out of his mouth. He tugged and jumped for air as the darkness intensified around him. Then he collapsed on the floor.

The last thing he saw in the hazy darkness was a hand reaching out for his handgun.

The detectives stared at the cloth on the table. It was a white tapestry. There was a black inscription on it. It said *WB 03 S 4576*.

"Find out this vehicle!" Dipta shouted and bolted out of the room.

They had not yet returned. Dipta ran down the stairs and out into the torrential rain.

Sayak waited on the street outside the house. That man had to come this way.

There he was. The man stood at the window, checking the street. Sayak quickly moved out of his sight. He stood behind the thick lamppost, gripping his gun harder.

The man made up his mind. Then he jumped down onto the road.

Sayak could not see his face, it was raining too hard. Sayak waited, his breathing rate

increasing. He peeped from behind the lamppost, and the man was gone. He was surprised. He ran forward and stood in front of the house , his eyes scanning every inch of it. The window from which the man had jumped was still open. He was so surprised he didn't see the figure behind the dustbin. Sayak looked around the road, finding it hard to believe that a man could just vanish like that.

He saw the figure run from behind just at the right time. He turned, his gun pointed. Then he noticed the man also had a gun pointed at him. They stood in the storm, barrels levelled, rain dripping down steel.

"Let's be sensible here," Sayak began. "We need —"

The man lunged suddenly. A blur of motion. Sayak panicked and froze. Then his gun spun from his grip as they crashed to the ground. He

cried out in anguish. In an instant, the man wrestled the gun out of his hand and sat on his chest.

Then he pushed the gun into Sayak's mouth. His mouth was filled with a raw, metallic taste of the gun.

The barrel slid out of his mouth. For a second, Sayak thought it was mercy. Then a fist came. A white flash. Another. His head snapped back, blood mixing with the rain and asphalt on the road. The man punched his face, again and again.

Through the ringing in his ears, he heard the man's lips move. The words got lost in the storm. Then he hit him again. Sayak's vision blurred. Then he was gone. Hands in his pockets, walking into the rain as if the city belonged to him.

Sayak stared at the receding figure. He coughed, felt his blood draining down his face. The man got lost in the rain. Only his silhouette walking through the torrential downpour remained. Sayak stared up at the dark sky, the drops falling and hitting his face, again and again.

Chapter 3

THE CENSORED VOICE



2 JULY, GOLPARK, 04:17 AM

The body was lying neatly on the front seat of the car. The doors were not locked. The clothes

were in the back seat, also neatly folded.

Nothing else was there in the car. Except the notepad, of course. The blood red leather cover, a blue dot pen inscription, saying *Tres*.

All the pages were empty except the first. It read '*The Censored Voice*'.

Sayak stood beside the car and watched. The sun had not yet risen. Lights had been set up, a perimeter made. Reporters and a few curious people were standing beyond the perimeter,

trying to snatch a look. The identity had been confirmed. Mrs. Shobhaa Gupta, Minister of Backward Classes Welfare and Tribal Development. There she was, naked, numerous scratches and cigarette burns everywhere on her body, the wire around her neck, the protruded tongue, the blood between her legs. Sayak felt a gust of nausea.

He walked off to Jahnvi. She was talking to residents of the nearby houses. They had been woken up, pulled out from their houses and brought here. He listened to the people muttering about having dinner, about nothing unusual, about not hearing or seeing anything out of the ordinary. Dipta stood near the car, talking to the DCP, who was unusually quiet today. The CM would be here in a short while, they have been told. Meanwhile, journalists

were swarming in large numbers, their cameras flashing like vultures circling.

Sayak ducked into a police car. His jaw was still bandaged, his temple ached every time he touched it. He clenched his fists and sat staring blindly at the strobe of blinking ambulance lights, the bark of the policemen shouting and ordering, then hum of the detectives interrogating, the murmur of the sea of people beyond the perimeter staring and talking among themselves.

The CM came, the commissioner came. They talked to the DCP, to Dipta and to the media. Cameras captured every word exchanged, every nod acknowledged. The sun dragged itself up. The crowd thinned. Traffic reclaimed the street. When Jahnvi shook him up from his sleep, it was seven-thirty.

LALBAZAR, 01:20 PM

An uneasy silence hung in the room. Dipta sipped cups of tea. Sayak and Jahnvi spoke, agitated, then left for lunch. After some time, Brijesh and Suranjana also went for lunch. Dipta stayed behind, sipping his tea. By the time everyone returned, he was ready to announce.

"Mrs. Bose and Poltu. I'm removing them off the suspects' list."

It didn't create the kind of controversy he had expected. Everyone nodded.

"We need to talk to Shalini Gupta, *Tres*' daughter."

Everyone looked up, Dipta referring to Mrs. Gupta as *Tres* caught their attention.

"Well, whatever," he said, throwing his hands up and shrugging.

"And Buddha, start working on the historical angle," Sayak said.

"I'm on it."

Brijesh sat quietly. The bruise on his neck said more than words ever could.

07:10 PM

"Good evening, Sir," they said, standing up.

The Chief Minister settled into a chair.

"We're not advancing, detectives," he said, looking at each of them in turn.

They looked down.

"The elections are around the corner. And someone is killing my party people, detectives. You know where to look," he added, his gaze sharp and meaningful.

Sayak looked up, ears red, then stood. The CM turned to him.

"You see this, Sir?" he pointed at Brijesh's throat. Then he pointed at his jaw. "And this?"

The CM looked on. The Commissioner, DCP and everyone else shifted on their feet. Dipta cleared his throat.

"Yes, I do," he replied calmly.

"This is what the man did to us", Sayak said, pausing mid-sentence, "and why did he do that?"

The CM shook his head and smiled. "You tell me."

"Because we are already looking in the right place," Sayak said.

The CM stared at him for a moment. "That was very well answered", he said. "But I want results." His voice rose slowly. "At least find out why they are being killed, for God's sake! I can't keep losing my closest people to some psycho out there!"

He calmed down almost instantly. "These people matter to me, detectives. I want justice for them."

He stood up and walked towards the door.

"All the best," he called over his shoulder. Then he left, the others right behind him.

Sayak went to the door and watched them leave. Dipta sat down, about to say something, when Sayak gestured.

"Not now," he said. "The boot-lickers are returning!"

He returned to his table as the Commissioner and two others came back into the room.

"All the best, detectives. No one wants to be in your shoes right now," he laughed.

The others gave a fake laugh in unison.

"I want to know your theories tomorrow," he said, looking at Dipta. "No more holding back."

"Yes, sir," Dipta replied, his eyes lighting up.

They left.

"That didn't sound like a boot-licker," he said, turning to Sayak.

"Yeah," pat came the reply, "because it ain't your boots that are in question."



3 JULY, HAZRA, 10:40 AM

"Why didn't you let the police know that she had disappeared and wasn't returning your calls?"

"I..uh.." Shalini stammered. "I thought she was away on some work related matter."

"But she was at her New Alipore house the last time you talked to her?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She is so quiet, Suranjana thought. "Do you have CCTVs at the New Alipore house?"

"I think we do. I'll have to check," Shalini said calmly.

LALBAZAR, 12:15 PM

"The CCTVs were switched off that day. I can't believe it," Suranjana shook her head.

"Okay." Dipta stood up. "I will let the CP know of our theories. And, you wouldn't believe it, but they're doing a press conference tonight. They'll be revealing the theories to the public."

"What!" Sayak was genuinely surprised. "That's incredible!"

"I know it is." Dipta smiled. "Well done guys!"

"Suranjana and the CID missed the morning brief. Tell them," Dipta urged Brijesh.

Brijesh nodded happily and began. "A year back, a tribal man staged a five-day protest outside *Tres'* house, claiming there was widespread corruption in the chain and no development has occurred in his community in the past three years. He said his village had been promised electric supply a year ago, but that never happened."

He looked up, watching their reactions.

Everyone was all ears.

He continued. "The Minister—this Minister, our *Tres*—bashed all his claims. The man didn't move and continued his protest. On the sixth day, the teenager wife of this man was arrested by the local police. After questioning, they let her go."

"Detectives, she never returned home. Her dead body was found the next day on the road, raped and strangulated. Surprisingly, the man returned to his village and never protested again."

"Also, no arrests have yet been made in this case," he added, pausing.

Everyone remained quiet. They did not know what to say.

Dipta broke the silence. "We checked *Tres'* phone records. We talked to her daughter, her secretary and her closest circle. Nothing, detectives." He sighed.

"What about the postmortem report?"

Suranjana asked.

Jahnvi opened the file. "Seminal stains in vaginal and anal openings, finger marks on neck and limbs, suction-type bite marks on

neck, breasts and thighs. Bruises in the same areas. And cigarette burns almost everywhere". Suranjana shook her head and looked down.

BABUGHAT, 06:18 PM

He sat and gazed at the river, leaning against a pillar with eyes closed. He finished his Coca-Cola can and placed it beside him. The wind was cold, maybe rain was coming again.

He started weeping, tears falling silently down his cheeks. These were the moments of self-doubt. He questioned everything he was doing. He wiped his face and cleared his throat. The dark river, its soft ripples, soothed him. People sat in groups, chattering, eating jhalmuri, or sipping tea. He heard bursts of laughter and the names of political leaders—discussion about the coming elections.

Slowly, the wind gained strength. Dust blew, and the waves smashed against the ghat with

greater force. The men stood up, covering their faces from the dust, and hurried away. He got up too.

The jhalmuri and papri chat vendors pushed their carts and started walking. He could see the State Bank building with its mesmerising lights. He inhaled the smell of the coming rain and stood still. The men walking off, laughing among themselves, the vendors hurrying, the buses and cars turning beside Eden Gardens..he watched it all, his eyes moistening.



4 JULY, LALBAZAR, 10:40 AM

Buddha went through his notes again, clearing his throat and flipping the pen in his hand repeatedly.

"You look excited, Buddha," Jahnvi said as she entered.

"Okay," he stood up. "I'll begin now." He cleared his throat again.

Jahnvi took her seat. All eyes were eagerly fixed on Buddha.

He began.

"The reference is to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Tereus was a Thracian king. He raped his sister-in-law, Philomela, and when she threatened to tell everyone about her ordeal, he cut off her tongue so she couldn't speak of it to anyone.

Then he raped her again and left her imprisoned in a cabin in the woods. Unable to speak, Philomela wove her story into a tapestry and sent it to her sister, Tereus' wife, Procne.

Procne was infuriated. She found her sister and brought her to the palace. Procne killed their son, Itys and put his pieces into Tereus' dinner. She entered with Itys' severed head in her hand, enraging Tereus. Procne and Philomela fled in fear and were transformed into a nightingale and swallow. Tereus, in turn, became a hoopoe."

"Woah," Sayak said. "That was some good work, Buddha. And a long story, too."

"What is a hoopoe?" Brijesh asked.

"It's a bird." Buddha pointed out.

"Ohh. Why didn't I think of that?" Brijesh mocked.

"Alright," Dipta cut in. "This explains the tapestry and the notebook writing. But what is the point of all these historical allegories?"
The room got quiet. Nobody had answers.

"What do we do now?" Suranjana asked at last, somewhat naively.

"I've given this some thought," Sayak said, "the picture that we have of TLV isn't his real face. When I saw him, he looked different. That could have been a disguise as well."

"So?" Suranjana shrugged.

"So we start to look out for his face. The real one. We talk to people who know about disguises and their weaknesses. One thing you all must have noticed, TLV never has any problem luring his victims into his trap. What does this say?" Sayak stood up.

"That these people knew him." Jahnvi observed calmly.

"Exactly!" Sayak punched the palm of his other hand.

"So we find out his real face, and maybe many people out there know him!" Dipta stood up too.

Sayak smiled and nodded. "Yes."

It was a strange time. Every news channel in the nation was talking about the murders. Powerful people being killed in the same ways they had taken part in scams—starvation for the food-scam tainted, poisoning for the food adulteration tainted, rape and murder for the rape-and-murder tainted. The country was shaken.

The new thing about the politicians, especially those of the ruling party of West Bengal, was that for the first time ever, they were the ones who were scared. They were terrified. They didn't know whose turn it would be next. Most stayed at home, claiming illness.

With the elections only two weeks away, many had to continue their campaigns, but they were scared to death, they all were.

Then something began in parts of Kolkata.

Protests. The tainted men and women had exploited their power without fear for so long, and now the faith of the common people in them was dead. The citizens were finally aware of the crimes committed by those who wore the mask of leadership.

The CM on his election campaigns maligned the victims—even his dearest brother—as much as he could, distancing himself from these very people, who were once the closest to him. He praised the police and CID and promised he wouldn't hide any facts from the public.

It was such a unique situation. The politicians were afraid, but couldn't show it. The protests spread like wildfire.

Roadblocks, burning effigies and marches erupted across the state. The opposition sensed an advantage and poured oil on the flames. Two weeks before the election, West Bengal was crying out for justice.

Everything was in turmoil.

PARK STREET, 09:20 PM

From here, they could hear the cries of the protesters. They walked into the restaurant and sat down.

"It's been a long time." Aaditri smiled.

"Yeah." Sayak shrugged. "I need your help. This isn't about anything else." He looked down.

"Cool."

He ordered without glancing at the menu. Then he slid the photo across the table.

"I saw this picture. Everyone has," she said.

He slid another one across. Hazy due to the rain, but the face was visible.

Aaditri raised her eyebrows. "You all have another picture of him?"

"Yeah. This is a CCTV grab from my personal encounter with him." He looked stern. "And I'm not giving it to your channel. This is for your eyes only."

She rolled her eyes. "What do I get out of this, then?"

"Well, for one, you're helping society get rid of a psychopath."

She smiled. "You heard the slogans? People all over the country are with this *psychopath* of yours. According to them, he's doing good work."

"Well, looking at the facts, he is killing people from one particular political party. This isn't justice, Aaditri," he hissed.

Her smile vanished and her eyes widened.

"This is the first time this thought occurred to you, right?"

"Yes," Sayak said nonchalantly.

Then it struck him. His expression changed. He cleared his throat and drummed his fingers against the table. *Why didn't I think of this before!* He swore softly under his breath.

"Someone still needs Aaditri to think bigger," she said, trying to keep a straight face. The waiter arrived with the food.

"Thank you," he said, genuinely, looking at her. She gave a mock bow in response.

"Alright, you can have the picture." He stood up.

She stared, open-mouthed. "You're not doing this again, are you?"

"Well, I..I can't wait. I'm sorry."

He almost bolted out of the restaurant. This clue could be the turning point for this investigation.

The door opened for a second, and the restaurant was flooded with faint cries from the protests outside.

Chapter 4

LEX MAIESTATIS



5 JULY, LALBAZAR, 07:20 AM

Dipta had talked to the DCP. He talked to the CP and he in turn to the CM. He agreed that the CID detective was right.

He ordered his secretary, and the police were provided with pictures of every member of his party.

Sayak's theory was a breakthrough. That TLV was someone from the CM's party itself had changed things drastically. They all sat hunched over their computers, checking pictures. It was a painstaking job, but the endless cups of tea provided the much needed boost.

The protests soon turned nationwide. Suddenly, there were so many whistleblowers. People talked about their own personal experiences with scams on social media. Even some politicians spoke out. The media were thrown into a frenzy. They couldn't decide their stances. Some of the channels were the ruling party's mouthpieces and some were of the opposition's. The opposition oiled media overworked, turning speculations into 'comments from exclusive sources', protests into revolutions and the ruling party into Nazis and Fascists. The pro-government media cut as much facts as they could but it didn't help, though they understood that the ruling party was done. Protestors sat in groups at every important junction. People came to Kolkata to join the protests. Everyone was demanding justice, all over the nation.

03:40 PM

The police raided three houses, arrested fifteen people. But they seemed innocent. The detectives waited for the forensic reports. The detectives worked on, crossing off faces from the list given by the party.

05:24 PM

The list was exhausted. Dipta again called the DCP, who called the CP, who nudged the CM. The detectives wanted a list of family members and closest friends of the party members. The CM was already shaken. He was doing campaigns but he was greeted with huge protests everywhere. He agreed to give the list immediately.

The detectives were back. They again hunched over their desks and worked, trying to match faces. On any other day, they would have laughed at themselves. This was just grasping at straws, this was not good police work. But there was no other way.



6 JULY, LALBAZAR, 08:00 AM

Sayak's patience wore out. He left to eat something and to clear his head. When he returned, he had a missed call from Aaditri. He didn't want to deal with anything about her

right now. But it could be about the case. So he called back.

In seven minutes, he rushed out. The others looked up at him. Jahnvi asked where he was going but got no reply.

EXIDE MORE, 09:15 AM

"Alright, thank you." Aaditri shook her head.

Sayak punched the car seat.

"Be patient," she said as she called another number.

Sayak stared at the photo in his hand. There he was, the real face. Clean-shaved, bushy hair, a bright smile. The resemblance was breathtaking. It was a newspaper cutting. The caption read *'Kumardeep Roy, the son of the honourable CM of Bengal, Karun Roy, at the test match yesterday in Eden Gardens'*.

Sayak was thrown out of the reverie. Aaditri was pushing him.

"You won't believe this. He is with his father, going to Howrah for a campaign."

Sayak took a second to register. "Let's go. Calling for backup will waste more time."

Their car sped towards Park Street.

The car waited at the traffic lights at Barabazar.

"What is he doing there? Is one of his targets there?" Aaditri asked.

Sayak shrugged. "I don't know," he said, then his face lit up. "But that's a good question. Can you find out who's attending the campaign today besides the CM?"

HOWRAH STATION, 10:05 AM

The car stopped. Sayak looked up. They were still on the Howrah Bridge. There was a long line of cars waiting in front. He shook his head. A traffic jam at a moment like this.

The driver suddenly shouted, excited. "That's the convoy! See the people there near the station? I think they have blocked the roads."

Sayak opened the door and ran out. Aaditri followed him.

They swerved past cars and ran across the bridge. People stared at them from their vehicles. At one point there was no space to run, vehicles blocking every part. Sayak was desperate. He pulled out his badge.

"Move it! Quick! WB CID!"

The car driver in front swore at him and didn't budge. In two seconds, he had a gun in his face, and he moved the car obediently.

They ran again. Sayak put the gun back. He didn't want to be mistaken. As they neared the convoy they saw the protesters. People were shouting slogans, they had blocked the road and they stood about twenty metres away from the convoy, separated by the police.

Sayak showed his badge to a policeman. "I need to speak to the CM. Please show him my card, he knows me."

The constable took the card and waited.

"Do it! Now!" Sayak shouted into his face.

The policeman looked at Aaditri. Sayak took her hand. "She's with me. Go now!"

The constable went off. They stood in the sun, watching the drama unfold. The policeman went to a car and talked with someone, handed the card. The car door opened and a man stepped out of the car.

Sayak's time froze for a second.

Aaditri whispered, "Why is *he* coming?"

The man smiled at them.

"Hello, detectives. Let's walk over to that place."

He pointed. "It looks quieter."

Sayak and Aaditri stood while Kumardeep Roy sat on the edge of a pillar. White kurta-pyjamas, dark sunglasses.

"Do you support these people?" he asked.

They remained quiet.

A commotion arose near the convoy. Someone had broken into the perimeter, pushing a policeman onto the ground.

They watched as the man was beaten with a *lathi* by four cops and dragged away. A policeman was saying something using an announcer.

Kumardeep stood up and walked close to them.

Then he clasped Sayak's hands in one hand and Aaditri's in his other. Sayak knew the look in this

man's eyes. People who have conducted interrogations knew this look. The man was nearing his breaking point.

"I have one last job left, detective," he said, softly. Then he walked away.

Aaditri looked at Sayak. Sayak stood like a statue and watched the man walk and then get into his car, never looking back.

He sat down on the ground. The protesters shouted even louder, the policemen suddenly went into the offensive and lathicharged. The protesters ran to and fro as the convoy went away, the road cleared in five minutes. The jam cleared and the vehicles moved again. The protesters sat on the ground, some staring up at the skies, some holding their injured limbs. Some chased the convoy, shouting "Resign! Resign!" The traffic moved. People leaned out of their windows and stared.

Aaditri sat on the pillar, holding Sayak's arm and whispering, "Why did *you* let him go?"



7 JULY, HOWRAH, 07:20 AM

A sea of people had gathered outside the small dhaba. Cameras flashing, reporters talking live, people talking among themselves. No-one shouted slogans. They were stunned. Everyone was. Aaditri watched from a distance.

There stood Sayak, inside the perimeter, his hands on his waist, head hung low. Deepak and his team had just arrived.

Dipta stood by the dead body, talking to the CP.

"The trachea, the carotid arteries and the jugular veins have been cut in the blow," Deepak said, looking up. "He was sitting, leaning against this bamboo pole, sipping tea, when he was attacked."

Deepak went to check the four more bodies in the grounds. "Gunshot wounds, of course," he said after a few minutes. "They had to be taken down in order to attack him alone."

"One assailant?" Dipta asked.

"Yeah it's absolutely possible. These four bodyguards were shot in the back, they didn't see the assailant coming. As for the CM, he saw him. He didn't resist, though," Deepak shrugged.

The chakra was found, blood caked, beside the bench on which the lifeless body of the CM sat.

The notepad was beside him, on the bench.

Blood red, blue dot pen inscription.

The cover read 'Cuatro'.

All pages barring the first was empty. The first page said:
'Lex Maiestatis'.

LALBAZAR, 12:15 PM

Buddha raised his hand. Dipta nodded.

" 'Lex Maiestatis' is the law of treason. It is one of the several ancient Roman laws."

Dipta nodded. "What treason did he commit?"

Jahnvi raised her hand. " When he was an MLA-"

Dipta interrupted her. He said softly, " I know what you'll say. The communal riots, right?"

Jahnvi nodded, "He was a very active person, fuelling unrest among one side."

The room grew quiet.

"About seventy people were murdered, twenty burnt and more than two hundred injured", Jahnvi stopped and gave a short laugh. "Official

figures say seven deaths and fifteen injured.

Local gangsters were arrested who are now out on paroles."

Sayak and the Commissioner of Police sat quietly and listened. It was Suranjana's turn. She was ready to drop the bombshell.

"The *chakra* was used as a murder weapon here, it being the Hindu part of the murder," she paused.

"And the method of murder, the cutting of trachea, carotids and jugulars, is called the *halal* way, that being the Islamic part."

The CP stared at her, speechless. Dipta's head was in his hand. Sayak cleared his throat and stood up.

"What Suranjana said makes sense. Our murderer gave punishment because of his involvement in the communal riots," Sayak said.

"Punishment?" the CP was astonished.

"Let's not beat around the bush here, sir," he said.

"I found something."

He laid down three pictures on the table.

Everyone came to the table to have a look. The CP stood up and walked out, his face blank. The hunt began for Kumardeep Roy.

Chapter 5

CINCO



8 JULY

T*he protests did not die. The protesters wanted the CM's resignation. Now with the CM in the morgue, they didn't know what to do. Many people thought the aim was served and returned home. Some held on, fed by the opposition. The situation got international media attention. The CM assassinated by his own son? Makes ripples everywhere.*

The police searched everywhere, raided every known property of the Roys. They got nothing. The police had people looking over every asset of Kumardeep. The moment he made a move, anywhere, he would be busted. They waited for the move. They thought the move would be some

error, some phone call or money transaction, but they never expected that a videotape would be his move.

LALBAZAR, 06:40 PM

The Action Force commandos sat and waited. Ready to run. Instead, they were called by panicked constables. It was an opposition supported news channel. It was airing a videotape. The detectives had their faces in their hands.

Kumardeep read from a piece of paper in his hands. He talked about numerous people from his father's party. He talked about murders, rapes, instigations and of course, corruption. He even named the new CM. Then he said how all would

meet their punishments. He stopped here to catch his breath and then continued again. He talked about justice. He talked about the power of revolution. He was beginning to talk about punishment when they stopped airing the tape. To the fury of thousands of people watching the tape, an ad appeared instead.

CAMAC STREET, 07:10 PM

The DCP shouted, "You can't aid a criminal! Hand over the tape to us now!"

A huge armed police force stood and watched as an altercation broke out. Finally, the furious DCP left. The channel agreed not to air, but they didn't hand over the tape.

LALBAZAR, 10:30 PM

The detectives went out for dinner, their heartbeats racing. Commandos and armed police were gathering all over. In a short while, two hundred policemen would rush over to Rashbehari. It was raid time.

Sayak looked up, rain was coming again, he could tell.

The police had gone over the recordings of the aired tape again and again, searching for clues. They struck luck in an incredible way. A calendar could be seen in the tape. The calendar had the name of an enterprise on it. 'Gita Enterprises, Baghajatin'. Police went and rounded up the manager of the enterprise and made him remember who he had gifted the calendars. They checked all the places he named. Finally, they struck gold. One of the calendar receivers was a

local leader of the ruling party. He was asked and when he refused to answer, he was taken into custody. The leader was driven to the hospital one and a half hours later, suffering from broken jaw, ribs and a concussion. But he had told the police what he knew.

BHOWANIPUR, 11:25 PM

Fifteen vehicles and one truck moved in the light rain. All were unmarked. Sayak sat in the second with Jahnvi. No one talked. He felt his pocket, his teeth clenched. It was there. It provided assurance. He looked at Jahnvi. She wasn't looking. He sighed.



9 JULY, RASHBEHARI, 01:30 AM

They ran softly along the lane, guns in their hands. Sayak, ran, his bulletproof vest a little tight. His heart was racing. He stopped at the door of the marked house. It was a yellow house, the paint new. The drizzle hid their silent footsteps.

Another row of policemen came running from the other end and stood on the other side of the door. They waited. It was eerily silent all around. Even the rain made no sound. Sayak could only

hear the breaths of the the cops all around. The cop on the other side of the door nodded and Sayak nodded in return. He pushed the door a little, it was locked. He called up the cop with the sledgehammer. Sayak went forward and raised his hand as with a giant **baam**, the lock was broken. Sayak rushed in, his eyes adjusting to the darkness.

In front was a dining table with two chairs. A staircase went up on the left. Three cops behind him moved to the dining table as he silently walked up the stairs, his gun pointed. He felt something whizz past his ear and he saw the cop behind him fall with a crash.

He swore loudly and fired twice into the bend of the stairs. Then he raced up. He ducked again as two more bullets whizzed past him.

He heard Jahnvi swear just behind him. He turned.

"Go down!" he hissed. "I don't want you here!"

He pushed her down the stairs. He stared at her infuriated face for a millisecond. Then he ran up. There was a room on the left. He stood on the edge of the door. A cop ran and stood behind him. Sayak moved his head to peep into the room. Two shots were fired immediately from inside. Sayak clenched his teeth, his heart in his mouth. The cop behind him panicked. He stretched his arm into the room and fired five times.

Sayak crouched, his ears hurting. Something fell in the room. He and the cop looked at each other for a second and then they ran in. A pool of blood was on the floor, Kumardeep at one end of it. His lifeless eyes stared.

02:03 AM

Sayak acted fast.

"This is a scene!" he shouted.

Then he screamed at the cop, "Leave!"

The cop was surprised. But he left. Jahnvi ran in.

Sayak clenched his teeth. He held her shoulders and pushed her to the door.

"No one enters!" he hissed. Then he ran to the body. He felt his pocket again.

Jahnvi watched, her jaw dropping, as Sayak took out a red notepad from his pocket. He placed it on a chair. Then he took a deep breath and shouted, "He is alive! He is alive!"

While shouting, he took out another gun from his socks and placed it under Kumardeep's chin.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The cops burst into the room in a second. Sayak was standing, dazed.

"What happened! Who fired!" Dipta darted into the room.

Sayak was panting. "He..he..was alive," he paused and took deep breaths, "then he smiled at me..and..and shot himself!" He collapsed on to the floor.

Dipta dashed to him and held him. "Easy, Sayak..take it easy.."

EPILOGUE

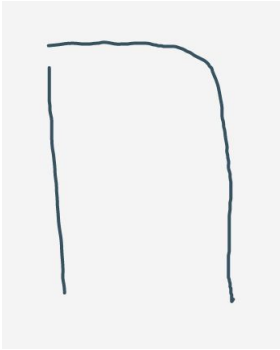
Everyone considered Kumardeep a hero who died in his own hands, his fifth and final kill. The streets filled up with thousands of people on funeral day. It rained a lot. They walked silently with the hearse van. Years of oppression, corruption, he ended it all. He was a hero.

The opposition won a landslide victory in the elections. The new CM took oath and promised to end all corruption and provide equal justice. As he spoke, he mispronounced justice. He ignored and continued.



15 JULY

People read a special column today in one of the leading newspapers of India. 'Cinco', the headline said. Aaditri Biswas was the writer. The article explained the inscription found in the notepad beside Kumardeep's body.



'The symbol is called 'He'. It is the fifth letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It also looks like 17. The seventeenth Roman alphabet is 'S'. And the seventeenth alphabet of modern English is 'Q'. After this, two possibilities arise:

1. 'He' which can be seen as 'H' translates to 'Forever Empire' or 'Hercules', which is symbolic of the lasting strength and power of the Roman Empire.
2. 'S' and 'Q' mean System and Coup d'état, signifying the current political system being overthrown.

Buddha Sarkar of the Detective Department, Kolkata Police, who found out the meanings, said, "Looking at all the things that happened, the second possibility seems correct to me. Cinco staged a coup d'état against the government. Though his ways are not approved, his actions, well, I agree with him on that."

Buddha Sarkar resigned two weeks after his controversial comment. Some said it was pressure from above, some said he had family problems.

Jahnvi didn't talk to Sayak after the night of 9th July, but Sayak could see her look at him in an altogether different way. It was respect. And terror.



17 JULY, BABUGHAT, 06:05 PM

The sun set slowly. Sayak leaned against the pillar and took another sip of his lemonade.

"Is that a ship or a steamer?" Aaditri asked.

"It's a bus."

They laughed. A group of people sat three feet away from them, sipping tea and talking politics. Sayak was making an attempt to pull Aaditri's hair

when a gale rose. In seconds, the cold wind blew dust all over. The people stood up, covering their faces from the dust.

"Come on!" Sayak stood up, his eyes frowning.

The dust storm was soon accompanied with cold rain drops.

Aaditri pulled him and sat him down, laughing.

The *jhalmuri* and *papri chat* vendors pushed their carts as fast as they could. The conductors shouted as the buses stopped at the signals, their tyres screeching as they turned beside the Aakashvani Bhavan.

"Look at that!" Aaditri exclaimed.

He turned and gazed at the State Bank building, looking majestic in the colour-changing lights.

The rain came. Sayak ran to a shed and watched Aaditri laugh and get wet in the rain.

A dust covered Coca Cola can beside the pillar caught his attention. *Disgusting*, he thought, as he carried it to the bin. Suddenly, Aaditri came running and pushed him into the rain. He laughed and hugged her.

The can fell. It lay there, a million drops falling on it and scattering. The dust on it got washed away and its blood red colour came out.

The laughs of two people, the flashes of thunder, the sounds of the buses and of the pattering rain reflected from that little can.

AFTERWORD

1. The plot was written before the COVID-19 outbreak, so, fortunately, it's not there in the novel.
2. The characters are completely fictitious, but their actions are relatable. The novel is set in West Bengal, but the problems that come up during the course of the novel are found anywhere in the world. The scams and crimes perpetrated by the victims of Cinco in the novel are based on true incidents.
3. The first scam, a food scam, is based on the Uttar Pradesh food grain scam which took place between 2002 and 2010, where an estimated food grain worth Rs. 350 billion was diverted into the open market.

[Source-BBC News]

4. The second scam, a milk adulteration scam, is based on the 2008 Chinese milk scandal. The scandal involved milk and infant formula along with other food materials being adulterated with melamine. Of an estimated 300,000 victims, 6 babies died from kidney stones and other kidney damage and an estimated 54,000 babies were hospitalised.
5. The third and fourth crimes. Well, there are multiple examples of these types of crimes. Though I doubt how many have come into light.
6. Finally, Cinco's actions are not justified, but his demands are. Well I don't have a Kolkata Police job to lose, just saying.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dibyaraj Sinha. He likes to read a lot but writes occasionally even though he has a lot of plots ready. Guess he is just lazy. Besides writing, Dibyaraj loves to cook and travel. He wants to become a chef someday. He is also a doctor.