

# THE PULWAMA AFTERMATH

PRATIK SHAH







**COLLECTION OF VARIOUS**  
**-> HINDUISM SCRIPTURES**  
**-> HINDU COMICS**  
**-> AYURVEDA**  
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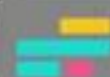
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**KAPWING**





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The story and characters in **The Pulwama Aftermath** are fictitious. Certain facts, events and the names of public offices, agencies and institutions are real.

**PRATIK SHAH**

**THE  
PULWAMA  
AFTERMATH**

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## **The Pulwama Aftermath**

This book is a work of fiction and imagination and the author has no intention to malign, harm or cause disrepute to any public institution, party, name, ideology, religion or place. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Pratik Shah

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**Also by Pratik Shah, in the series**

Operation Jai Mata Di – The Second Freedom at Midnight



*Saam, Daam, Dand, Bhed* every approach would be considered, every method would be tried and every opportunity would be snapped up. No stone would be left unturned.

And if this required a massive sacrifice, so be it. For no one is above the nation's interests.

*Not I.*

*Not even the Prime Minister*

# DAY 1

## 1

The biker in the black helmet looked like any other ordinary rider as he wound his slow way on a ubiquitous black 150 cc motorbike through the crowded Amboli thoroughfare in Mumbai's suburb of Andheri West. Thanks to the multiple 'no-go' zones in the area coupled with dozens of lazy police personnel staring indifferently at the hapless commuters while ostensibly 'standing guard' for the *big event*, traffic was badly snarled and showing no signs of improving anytime soon. The biker finally heaved a sigh of relief as he finally was able to take a right onto JP Road, at the main Amboli-JP Road junction.

This was not the route usually followed by political processions in years past; neither was this the route of the Prime Minister's cavalcade today. But the security ring was wide. According to press reports, the PM was assigned a 360-degree security blanket that stretched a distance of half a kilometre in all directions of his travel route and that of the final venue from where he was to address the *aam aadmi* (common man). Besides the police personnel securing the roads, a number of them also stood guard above-ground, on the tracks of the Mumbai Metro (which needless to say, had suspended operations for hours). Despite the deafening noise of the traffic and the teeming humanity of this small part of the big city, a couple of helicopters overhead still made their presence felt, whirring and swooping while reconnoitring the area.

The biker continued along JP Road and took a left at the narrow lane leading to the *Sheetla Mata Mandir*, a Hindu temple dedicated to the *devi* (goddess) Sheetla Mata. The *devi* is believed to be the patron-goddess of contagious diseases and praying to her can supposedly protect her devotees from the ravages of measles, small pox and chicken pox. As a result, it is not unusual for parents to bring their young children to the temple and solicit the *Devi's* blessings for their continued good health. The biker rode past the *mandir*, oblivious to the crowd of devotees and to one of the most recognizable landmarks of the area, and about 50 metres past the structure and chaos, he stopped and parked his bike behind an old, white, run-down

ambulance that was itself inconspicuously parked among a fleet of run-down green garbage dumper trucks and vans.

He opened the driver's-side door of the ambulance and made himself comfortable inside, taking off his helmet and checking his appearance in the rear-view mirror. The man looking back at him appeared calm and relaxed; he had reviewed the plan a number of times in his head.

From the driver's area, he easily stepped into the patient's compartment – normally isolated from each other – thanks to the recent modifications he had carried out himself. The compartment was set up with the usual medical equipment – oxygen mask, a defibrillator and a heartbeat monitor. The biker was not particularly knowledgeable about these devices, nor did he care. On one side of the compartment stood a dull, grey-coloured patient bed. On the other side was a small rectangular berth to seat patient's relatives, friends and loved ones. There was also a seat for an attendant nurse to keep an eye on the patient.

The biker had dismantled the original berth and replaced it with a new, customised version that had been provided to him by his 'client'. It was a simple rectangular box around five feet in length, longer than the original berth. He had also cut the large, fixed-glass rectangular window near the patient's bed and placed knobs to make it easy to remove the glass as and when required. Working from an isolated garage in the remote suburb of Dahisar, it had taken him less than two days to make the requisite modifications. And strangling the drunk driver of the ambulance was even easier. The body now lay submerged somewhere in the mangrove swamps near Dahisar. He sat on the new berth and ran a gentle hand over it. Nothing could tell it from the original. After a few minutes, he came back to the driver's seat and once again studied his reflection in the mirror. The false white beard and salt-and-pepper wig made him look years older and wiser too. He smiled at himself.

A soft knock sounded on the driver's-side door. Ram Charan, the short, medium-built 27-year-old ambulance nurse stood at attention, ready to start his first day on his new job. Until two days back, Ram Charan was an employee at a local hospital. He had been hired for this job mainly because he had a reputation for being very particular and extra-ordinarily passionate about his patient-care duties – his passion would come in handy while negotiating with the security forces as the biker stayed behind the scenes, confined to the driver's seat. Besides, he was also a competent and level-



headed driver himself, a critical quality for navigating Mumbai's traffic-choked, pothole-ridden roads. The biker opened the ambulance's back doors and let Ram Charan into the patient's compartment. Just then he received a call on his cell phone, and he listened briefly to the voice at the other end. The motorcade had been delayed by 10 minutes.

## 2

A few hundred metres across from the Sheetla Mata mandir, near a small mosque by the side of Bhavan's College sports ground, a small group of construction labourers was enjoying its morning tea and biscuits at a roadside tea stall.

Just down the long road, Abdul waited in a parked car, a sparkling white Ford Endeavour that he had stolen late last night from a parking lot in upscale *Powai*. The anonymous caller had insisted on this specific car for the job and had given him the license plate details and the address where it would be found. He ran gentle fingers over the car's plush beige leather of the passenger seat. The vehicle's new-car fragrance was both distinctive and soothing. *It would be a sin to let such a car go to waste.* For a few seconds, he was tempted to forget the plan and escape with the car. As a teen, Abdul had been involved in petty crimes like thievery and breaking and entering, and as an adult, he became involved in more serious crimes with a few murders and burglaries attributed to him. However, it had been some time that he had been out of touch with his life of crime, and the realisation of the work that he was about to do in a few moments from now had sweat breaking out on his forehead. Three days ago, he had received an anonymous call. At the time, he was surprised that anyone even knew his identity, let alone his criminal history back in his home town of *Gorakhpur* in the northern Indian state of *Uttar Pradesh*. About two years ago, he started to feel the noose of the law closing in around him and to get away from it he absconded to Mumbai where he started a new crime-free life as a security guard. The building society he worked for was not the most generous of paymasters, so the 50 lakh rupees the voice on the phone offered him for a 'simple' job was a lure even the human part of him could not resist. *In this city, people die like insects every single day. So what if I am responsible for the death of a few more? It hardly matters in the long term, does it?* At least this is what he told himself.

The instructions given to him were clear. *Hit and Run. Abandon the car and simply disappear. Don't go to Gorakhpur or anywhere in the northern part of the country. Go to Odisha. Travel general in train and bus. Don't reserve tickets. Break your journey.* The voice gave him the address of a remote village in the state of Odisha where he would be handed over the remaining money. He had already received his first instalment of 20 lakh rupees.

His phone rang and he counted the number of rings before it stopped. Four. *It's showtime!* He rubbed his palms together – nervousness and excitement both vying for a place inside his chest – put on a red monkey cap that covered most of his face, put on his seatbelt, took a deep breath and finally started the car. He stomped on the accelerator and in moments the fancy white car was hurtling towards the tea stall and its unsuspecting patrons. He braced himself for the collision as the car ploughed into the group of labourers with a sickening, bone-jarring impact. As some of them fell under the car's tyres, he could almost feel the bodies squelching and bones cracking, the streams of blood and tea and spatters of gore now decorating the car's windshield like a macabre modern-art painting. The screams of horrified watchers provided an almost-fascinating backdrop to the ghoulish drama rapidly unfolding in the usually quiet neighbourhood. A few dozen feet away, Abdul pressed hard on the brakes, threw open the driver's-side door and rushed out, an almost matter-of-fact, preternatural sense of calm on his swarthy face. As he sprinted away, he could hear the sirens of an ambulance piercing the air as it rapidly approached the scene of the bloody carnage.



### 3

Deepti Vyas was just a small drop in the vast, undulating sea of humanity that had gathered along the junction of JP Road and Link Road in the Andheri suburb, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Prime Minister. For the past day or so, the entire area had been blockaded by policemen as part of the security protocol for the PM's upcoming visit. Deepti herself was a resident of Andheri, and she couldn't remember a time when JP Road had literally sparkled and glowed the way it did today. To her normally critical eye, the erstwhile dusty, patchy, rural-y kind of road now looked like a beautiful, clean, well-maintained street straight out of Singapore or Paris! No potholes, trash or illegal hutments as far as the eye could see. With less than 2 days' notice, the authorities had managed to get rid of all illegal hawkers, repair the pavements, scrub and paint the pillars supporting the Metro tracks and even remove all illegal hoardings. They had even planted flowers on a road that had not seen greenery for at least two decades or more! Watching the grand spectacle unfolding along the road, Deepti thought wryly to herself that this widened, new-and-improved road was an infrastructural marvel in more ways than one; seeing as it suddenly took form, not to benefit the common man, but to simply paint a falsely rosy picture of authoritarian competence and work ethic for the Prime Minister's benefit. The cynical yet realistic part of her was sure that the PM would only see such orderly, well-maintained – even shining! – roads all along his route. He would not be privy to what passed for 'normal roads' in the city – rubbish-strewn thoroughfares riddled with potholes, open manholes and a confused medley of vehicles and people all jostling for space, and edged by broken, unmaintained footpaths, illegal hawking zones and pitiable hutments. The Prime Minister's India would be truly shining, but only *from* his armoured motorcade. No, only *for* his armoured motorcade!

Deepti had been an ardent believer in the Prime Minister and his ideas, going back to her college days over a decade ago (although he was not the PM then). When he was elected PM, she had cheered and even taken her friends out for a meal. She still believed that he had good ideas and that he meant well. However, despite the many schemes he had launched, laws he had changed and measures he had introduced over the past five years, the common man really saw very little improvement in his quality of life. As a well-known TV journalist with her own news show, Deepti did her best to

draw attention to the glaring gaps between the PM's exalted top-down ideas and the poor results of faulty bottom-up implementations. Through hard-hitting interviews with ordinary men and women, she tried to shed light on their real concerns and day-to-day problems, hoping that her message would be seen or heard by the Prime Minister or at least someone in his close circle. She even wrote emails and letters directly to the PM's Office and sent them links of her most well-received interviews and opinion pieces. To her continuing regret, none of her efforts had so far yielded any response from the PM or his coterie.

The cavalcade from Link Road would turn right onto JP Road at the junction and then stop at Andheri Sports Complex where the Prime Minister was scheduled to hold his election rally. The PM's election goals were aggressive this time around: he wanted his party to bag more than 400 seats in the Lower House (Lok Sabha)! Of course for all intents and purposes, this was an unrealistic target, but most political analysts believed that this show of aggressiveness might ultimately help the party win a larger number of parliamentary seats than it had last time.

For the next episode of her show, Deepti was covering the Prime Minister's visit to Mumbai and as was her wont, also interviewing the excited, worked-up crowd. Her show's producer had ordered her to remain near the JP Road – Link Road junction as he believed that it provided the best vantage point to put their disruptive plan into motion. Despite a faint flutter of anxiety at the base of her spine – she was taking a risk after all, one that might come back to haunt her in future – she could also feel a shiver of excitement thinking about the plan they had devised. After all, nothing like this had ever been done in the past! Deepti herself believed that the strategic nature of the location was apt for the plan; she could almost see her show's ratings hands-down beating all the other clichéd, run-of-the-mill news pieces that would surely litter the news media landscape tonight.

*Today this country will see how 'sensitive' this government is towards the aam aadmi. Is the VIP culture, inspite of several denials by the government, still over and above the common man on the street? India will know today!*

As Deepti waited for the cavalcade to come into sight, the fine hairs on the back of her hands stood on end. Right on cue, she heard the high-pitched wail of a not-too distant siren, indicating the sluggish approach of an ambulance trying to navigate its way through the swelling crowd of humanity. She turned to her cameraman and raised her eyebrows, cueing him

to be ready for action.



## 4

A.P. Durga, the Deputy Commissioner of Police, had not slept a wink in the past 48 hours. But then, neither had his team of senior inspectors, inspectors and constables attached to the DN Nagar and other Police Stations of the city. In conjunction with troops from the State Reserve Police Force, they had surveyed the entire area along the PM's route on Link Road and JP Road – and its half a kilometre surrounds – at least three times. Although the entire exercise was painful in the extreme, years of experience had taught Durga that it was one of the most critical elements of VVIP security.

There were dozens of bigger, grander, *posher* venues in the city for the Prime Minister – a man with a well-earned reputation for his fluent, expressive communication style in three different languages – to deliver a speech. However, most of these venues were in the southern part of the city. The manicured ground of the Andheri Sports Complex in west-central Mumbai was not necessarily the best choice for a high-profile speech like this one was expected to be. Still, the choice was deliberate. More importantly, it was *strategic*. The PM wanted to “reach out to the masses”, the people he hadn't “met before”. Over the past few weeks, the PM's speeches had taken on a more aggressive, even vitriolic turn and with two weeks to go for the general elections, the PM was busier than ever, hopping from city to city and even addressing crowds in far-flung areas he had never visited before. His aim was to speak to as many members of the *aam aadmi* populace as possible. Unsurprisingly, self-aggrandisement was a part of this aim. He would shed some illumination on his government's achievements over the past five years, the multiple schemes he had launched and its benefits to the *aam aadmi*, and he would go on to explain the grand plans he had laid out to continue bringing about a rosy future for the country. And being a consummate politician and cunning strategist, he naturally would not let go off any opportunity to explain to the people why other political parties, especially the main opposition, were anything but the right choice to lead India now or in future. Of course, all accompanied by vitriolic of a statesman's calibre!

Overworked, stressed and seriously sleep-deprived, Durga had hoped that the event would go off without a glitch, when his radio crackled ominously. It was one of his inspectors stationed near Bhavan's College reporting in with the disturbing news about a gruesome accident near the college just minutes

ago. Durga barely had time to process the horrifying news when the inspector continued his report, stating that an ambulance stationed nearby had already responded to the emergency and it was driving towards the Link Road – JP Road junction check post.

As per the carefully laid-out security protocol, the entire road had been declared a ‘no-go’ zone until the PM’s speech had ended and the motorcade travelled back. Absolutely no vehicular movement was allowed beyond the temporary placed police check posts. The ambulance, to reach the government-run Cooper Hospital at Juhu, would have to take a left at the junction onto Link road and then drive further on. However, that was not possible for this would mean opening the carriageway in the opposite direction of the motorcade. The other option was to cross the junction and drive straight to Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital, but this was riskier and even more unlikely as under no circumstances could anyone be allowed to cross the PM’s path. The opposite carriageway was probably a better proposition from security point of view, given there was a concrete divider between the two sides for most of the length of the Link Road, and forces had already been stationed at the gaps.

The PM’s motorcade was now moving towards Juhu Circle from the Western Express Highway and would soon turn right on Link road in its approach to JP Road. He would have to block the ambulance at the check post itself. In New Delhi, the country’s capital, some attempts had been made in recent times to ease the common man’s traffic woes and have the PM’s motorcade travel along one side of the road, with the other side open to regular traffic. On a few occasions, the PM had also tried to travel incognito and as part of the ‘regular’ traffic; but his security consultants determined that the threat level was too high at this time to take any more such chances.

While still trying to figure out the security nightmare unfolding in his world, Durga was horrified to see a white ambulance approaching his check post through the sea of people. His pulse rate increased, sweat popped out on his forehead and his entire body went cold with dread as the ambulance stopped at the post, its blaring sirens piercing a hole in his guts. A TV crew, probably sensing the makings of a juicy story unfolding before their very eyes, was already moving towards the check post. Durga knew that other TV crews would not be far behind. Soon they would all be converging upon the area like a wake of vultures fighting for first dibs over a rotting carcass. While he would personally permit the ambulance to take the opposite

carriageway on Link Road to the hospital, he knew that any decision here was beyond him; the Special Protection Group and the Prime Minister's Office would be directly involved.

As the ambulance stopped at the check post, Durga conveyed a curt message over his wireless to his boss, the Deputy Inspector General of Police. "Sir, we have a situation here, and it's not good. I repeat, not good."

Deepti and her cameraman Farhan were in position and already rolling the camera as the rear doors of the ambulance slammed open, and a male nurse, completely soaked in blood, rushed out to approach the police manning the check post. The gruesome sight of five badly mutilated bodies lying scattered on the ambulance floor like piles of discarded garbage had Deepti, Farhan and many onlookers recoil instinctively. The ambulance floor was covered with the crimson life-giving blood that was flowing every which way in macabre patterns of carnage and gore. Two of the poor men lying on the floor were not moving, probably dead. Three others were still alive. However, they were in obvious pain; their twitchy, uncontrolled movements and tormented groans testament to their extreme agony and fear.

Deepti was aghast. She had understood for this to be an act, a harmless ploy, but she didn't know her producer had planned for an actual accident, *a massacre!* She frantically called up the producer on his cell phone, but it turned out that he too had been caught unawares. He was as much in a state of shock as she was in, and he promised to dig this down further with the NGO he had been coordinating with and report them to the police without the slightest delay. Tears appeared in her eyes as she placed down the phone in disbelief. *Fuckkk!*

She said a quick prayer for the victims' souls and quickly turned around from the disturbing sight. Her hand shivered as she held on to her mic and wiped the tears off her face. Farhan quietly urged Deepti to get herself under control, and at her slight nod – a signal that the disturbed woman was once again buried under the stoic facade of a detached journalist – he aimed his camera for a closer shot of the ambulance while Deepti stood in front of it and started her live reporter's spiel. As she spoke, the ambitious mediaperson part of Deepti suddenly realised what a windfall this event was for her show and the TV station.

*. I have to take the lead on this story before my competitors do.*

“Take a good look at the ambulance right behind me. We have already shown you the visuals of the carnage inside - five severely injured men lying for dead, but this vehicle has been stopped at the check post for the Prime Minister's motorcade! Here's more evidence that an event organised in honour of a VVIP has caused the *aam aadmi* of this country to suffer yet again. How many more common citizens will have to die in sheer ignominy

before our esteemed politicians realise that...” As she continued with her live report – a blistering diatribe against the country’s VVIP culture – the sound of sirens of the police pilot vehicles leading the Prime Minister’s cavalcade could be heard in the distance.

“This is another incident of the VVIP movements causing the *aam aadmi* on the streets to suffer... to die...,” she continued in shock, as the sirens of the pilot vehicles could be heard loud and clear now, adding to the cacophony made by the siren still emanating from the ambulance, and the rage-fuelled and intermittent sloganeering of a large crowd building up quick behind her, demanding that the ambulance be not blocked by the security forces.

## 6

The Secretary of the Bhartiya National Party (BNP), Asit Patel, leapt off his chair in shock as he saw the visuals of blood and gore being broadcasted on Kal Aaj Kal TV news channel. Such visuals weren't helping his party's case and were needless to communicate the point across. He made a mental note to take this up later with Keyur Shenoy, the owner of the channel. The crowd seemed to be getting larger with every passing moment, and angry at the policemen for blocking the movement of the ambulance for the Prime Minister's passage.

*The whole nation is watching. This is the opportunity!* Just a month back, with the government's decision to strike the terrorist camps at Balakot, deep inside Pakistan, support for the Prime Minister and the BNP was at an all-time high. With the 'national adrenaline' now having settled down and opposition-driven controversies and issues taking the top-of-mind attention, the tables of BNP had turned back to what they were a couple of months ago when they had lost elections in three heartland states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. Getting even a simple majority of 273 seats in the upcoming general elections would be a challenge. *But they were to win over 400 seats!*

*Action has to be taken before the crowd goes out of control.* He rang the Principal Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office. The Principal Secretary would convince the Director of the Special Protection Group (SPG) to allow the ambulance to go through.

Disconnecting, he made his next call.

To the Prime Minister of India

The Prime Minister looked out the dark-tinted bullet and shatter-proof window of his BMW 7-Series 760Li Security Edition armoured car, as his cavalcade slowly moved down the streets of Mumbai. Thousands of people had lined the streets waving at him, even though they could barely see him behind the dark glass. The sight took him back to his younger days. When he was still just a lowly worker in the party's organisational structure, one of his tasks was to ensure that there was sufficient crowd presence to greet the party's bigwigs, especially during parades and party rallies. In fact, this was one of his Key Result Areas in the organisation. He had doled out money, liquor, gifts and food to appeal to the *aam aadmi's* sense of greed (and



perhaps desperation too). And he had cajoled, begged and even threatened people to attend his party's rallies to show their 'support'. With the larger influencers who could bring in hundreds of attendees to the rallies, and more importantly, votes, it was mostly a quid pro quo arrangement; so the party, if it won the elections, would award lucrative contracts to these influencers, or help some of them become the village heads - *mukhiya* or *sarpanch* of their villages. The Prime Minister knew that he was a popular orator and usually well-received wherever he went. Still, he often wondered, knowing what he did about the true motivations of people who attended such rallies, if the sea of people waving merrily at him was truly a sign of his popularity or simply yet another political manoeuvre efficiently contrived and planned by Asit Patel and the party cadre. He was occasionally discomfited by the overly laudatory manner of his portrayal in the media by BNP's brand and communications team plus millions of his online *bhakts* (devoted followers). He was considered an assertive leader and given his response to Pakistan-based terrorists' attacks at Uri and Pulwama, he had only grown in popularity. But hoardings and banners all over India that screamed *Our honourable PM is the next 'iron man' of India after Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel!* was a little bit too much. He had expressed his displeasure to Asit Patel and the BNP brand team but this was only an election ploy as they explained and the hoardings would be pulled down right before the elections began. Privately though he liked him being compared to Sardar Patel, whether this was true or not, only time would tell.

He waved back at the crowds not sure if the crowd was actually able to see him through the dark tinted glass as he settled deeper into the comfy cushioned seat of his ultra-luxurious car. Personally, he preferred his new Range Rover to the BMW 7-Series, but the Special Protection Group (SPG, his personal security detail) insisted that he use the latter when he toured the country. The BMW was better armoured and it didn't have a sunroof, a non-feature they were grateful for, especially now when threats against him were at an all-time high. The PM had a worrying tendency to ignore his security advisors and suddenly emerge out of cars' sunroofs, all so he could acknowledge and greet the crowds that always gathered to see him. The last time this happened – understandably in Surat, a city in his stronghold state of Gujarat – the Director of the SPG almost had a seizure. Although the PM well understood the threats to his person, he still missed interacting with the public; the sunroof of the Range Rover was his escape...

Many years back, he used to move about in open jeeps in abandon, touring villages and towns, gathering men and votes for his party. But that wasn't possible now. As the Prime Minister of India, his motorcade is long. Pilot police vehicles lead the way and drive much ahead of the main convoy ensuring correct navigation and confirming the security of the route for the movement of the main convoy they are piloting. The police escort jeeps follow the pilot vehicles at a distance, and make the first ring of protection for the main motorcade. A Tata Safari signal jammer van follows right behind them, its roof dotted with antennas of all shapes and sizes. The main role of the van is to counter guided attacks on the convoy by 'jamming' radio signals that could remotely be used to trigger improvised explosive devices (IEDs) or bombs placed in the path of the convoy, even thwart guided missile attacks. The jammer van is followed by black BMW X-Series vans and Toyota Fortuner SUVs carrying the SPG teams for proximity protection of the Prime Minister. The PM would be somewhere in the middle – in a BMW 7-Series 760Li Security Edition armoured car or a Range Rover. At times, the SPG would also have a decoy BMW 7-Series in the motorcade for enhanced security, and the Prime Minister would be seated in one of the two cars. Sometimes the SPG would have him sit in one of the BMW X vans or a Toyota Fortuner, and the BMW 7-Series would only be a decoy. Not until the last moment would even the Prime Minister know which vehicle he was going to be seated inside. The Prime Minister's vehicle would be followed by more SPG vehicles and a Mercedes Benz Sprinter Ambulance, a state-of-the-art ambulance towards the end, that could provide armoured, tactical medical support to the Prime Minister in case of emergency. Police vehicles would finally form the tail of the convoy.

The Prime Minister's eyes registered on the satellite map on one of the BMW's display screens, and he looked out the window. The Tata Safari Jammer was taking a right at the Juhu circle. The BMW 7-Series he was seated in was the sixth vehicle in the motorcade today, right behind two BMW X vans, two Toyota Fortuner SUVs and the Tata Safari. Another BMW 7-Series followed his car, the decoy.

He quickly went through his prepared speech on his phone, although it was hardly necessary. He took an active interest in writing many of his own speeches and memorised them easily, well before he delivered them with his usual panache and flair. He especially excelled at delivering extempore speeches, his eloquent and impactful style often compared to that of the

former Prime Minister, late Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In a rare moment of self-criticism, the PM told himself that he had scope for improvement. *My speeches are dry. They lack the poetic flair and the poignancy that were the hallmark of the speeches of the late Prime Minister Vajpayee.* Today, he wanted to review his speech because of the additional paragraph that had been added by his team of speechwriters just the previous day, a paragraph that aimed to give a hard-hitting response to the opposition party's latest vitriolic attack.

The BMW's other monitor was tuned into a news channel which was broadcasting a live report on an accident that had occurred somewhere along his route. A woman reporter was passionately admonishing him and his government on their failure to adequately address the troubles of the *aam aadmi*. Weary to the bone, he closed his eyes for a quick meditation break, but before he had a chance to reach for some much-needed calm, his phone rang shrilly, rudely jerking him out of his reverie. He was unsurprised to hear Asit Patel's voice at the other end. No sooner had he finished this call than he received a joint call from his Principal Secretary, the National Security Advisor and the Director of the Special Protection Group. The three cabinet-ranked secretaries informed him that they had jointly decided not to allow the ambulance to pass. "The ambulance will not be allowed on the thoroughfare till the motorcade passes, Sir".

However, this was not what he had in mind. *I must get this right!* The three politicians were still talking over each other when they were stunned into silence by his terse, unambiguous command, "Allow the ambulance to pass. I will not have any deaths on my conscience."

And soon enough, the reporter's narrative changed on TV. "In an unprecedented move," she was saying, "the Prime Minister has ordered his security personnel to allow the ambulance to pass, so it can take the injured to the nearest hospital without further delay. It appears that in giving more importance to the lives of common men over the lives of pampered VVIPs – even if he counts himself among that cohort – the PM's sense of humanity has reasserted itself. Every VVIP of this country is here to serve the *aam aadmi*, not the other way around. And the Prime Minister has asserted once again that he's the *pradhaan sevak* of each and every citizen of this great country. It is truly heartening to see the country's leader taking steps to eradicate the deeply-rooted privileged VVIP culture that has caused so much damage to the country's social fabric since independence..."

The biker, in his new avatar as driver of the ambulance, finally received the clearance he had been waiting for. He was relieved. *About time.* Any further delays would have infuriated the large crowd even more, possible inciting them to violence and mayhem, or even worse, a delay would have derailed their carefully thought-out plan. The ambulance attendant, Ram Charan, was now standing right outside the driver's window, waiting for instructions from the police. The check post was soon cleared for the ambulance to pass.

"I'll take care of the patients. You drive," the biker said to Ram Charan.

An armed policeman quickly boarded the driver's compartment and sat beside Ram Charan. Three police escort bikes, one in the front, one on the right and one behind flanked the ambulance as Ram Charan promptly switched on both the engine and the siren (which had been silent for a while now). The small ambulance convoy turned left onto Link Road at the junction just as the pilot police vehicles that were part of the PM's cavalcade turned right onto JP Road. The PM's vehicle along with the rest of his motorcade would be trailing a fair distance behind these pilot vehicles.

The biker drew the curtain separating the driver and patient compartments and temporarily pulled down the hospital mask that he had on his face. Given the number of dead and barely-alive bodies piled into the patients' compartment, he didn't have enough space to move around. With no compunction whatsoever, one by one he hefted a couple of the writhing labourers in his sinewy arms and dropped them unceremoniously on top of the corpses. *The dead don't care. And I don't care about the live ones!* He was literally walking in a pool of blood, but to his warped yet brilliant mind, blood was sacrifice. Every cause needed a sacrifice. The sufferings of a few are nothing compared to the agony suffered by the thousands of murdered women, children and men of this country.

He needed to quickly take care of one thing. The police bikes around the ambulance did not bother him as much as the lone policeman in the driver's compartment.

"Can you help me in here?" the biker peeked through the curtain and called for the policeman as he opened the defibrillator box.

As the policeman stepped into the patients' compartment, he found

himself staring at the barrel of a gun. Before he could react, a bullet made its way through his temple and lodged itself in his brain, the already-silenced gunshot further muzzled by the screeching siren of the ambulance, adding one more to the tally of corpses in the moving vehicle.

The policeman taken care of, the biker tore through the soft seat on the passengers' berth and pulled out the package secreted there, ripping it open and laying bare an RPG-7. He was well-familiar with the hand-held rocket-propelled grenade launcher, having used it multiple times before, and each time awestruck by its brute power and deadly reputation.

By now, the ambulance had picked up speed. The motorcade was approaching fast from the opposite direction on the opposite side of the road, making the target's effective speed even higher. Beside the continuous, small concrete structure that divided the thoroughfares, large alternate pillars of the Mumbai Metro made his job even trickier. Then launching the grenade from a small window of the enclosed space of the vehicle would be even complex, he thought, but nothing that was out of his *range*. He was known to be among the best with RPGs.

If everything went to plan, the distance between the ambulance and the target would be less than 25 meters. *Perfect, and lethal*. He smiled.

He only had a single window of opportunity. *BMW 7-Series car right behind the fourth and fifth BMW vans* was what the caller had told him. He peeked through the rectangular window just above the patient's bed and pulled at the knobs, removing the glass completely. The policeman on the escort bike flanking the side of the ambulance noticed the glass being pulled off, but before he could raise an alert on his wireless, a bullet ripped through his chest, throwing him off-balance and crashing the speeding bike onto the central divider.

The biker quickly heaved the RPG-7 on his shoulder. The Prime Minister's motorcade was right across. The jammers in the Tata Safari would be ineffective against hand-guided missiles, the biker rightly thought, as it passed by. The second and the third Toyota Fortuner vans followed the Safari, the group of vehicles moving past in an arrangement that was as well-choreographed as it was intimidating. The BMW X-Series vans appeared and he placed his index finger on the RPG's trigger, pressing it just as the BMW 7-Series appeared, letting the grenade launch at well over 100 metres per second.

As Ram Charan drove on oblivious to the events, the biker looked back.

He was gratified to see the heavy, armoured BMW sedan lifting high into the air, on fire and surrounded by thick plumes of acrid, lung-searing smoke.

Moments later, a bullet ripped through Ram Charan's skull at point-blank range. Before the ambulance could go off the road, the biker quickly got behind the wheel, pushed the corpse off the seat and stepped on the accelerator crashing the ambulance into the police bike escort riding right ahead.



Deputy Commissioner Durga's heart skipped several beats and dread tightened his skin in unwilling reaction to the deafening explosion. Almost as one, he and his team of three sub-inspectors and constables crammed into the police jeep, turned on the sirens and immediately took off in the direction of the ambulance. A number of other police teams from various intersection points along the cavalcade's route had also jumped into their vehicles in an effort to chase the rogue ambulance down. AP Durga's jeep crossed the dozen or so vehicles in the PM's motorcade which was now stalled on the opposite thoroughfare. Confusion and shock were as thick in the air as the plumes of acrid smoke pouring out of the PM's customised car in a foul-smelling miasma. The Mercedes Benz Sprinter ambulance that was part of the convoy had been pressed into service - probably for the first time in its history - to take the injured to the nearest hospital. The PM's BMW 7-Series luxury car was almost completely destroyed, giving the lie to its hitherto 'armoured' status. Within seconds of the explosion, the highly-trained personnel of the PM's personal security detail, the Special Protection Group, surrounded the vehicle in an effort to extricate the Prime Minister and block any chances of remnant attempts on his life.

Parts of police escort bikes were strewn on the road, and a separate medical team was on its way to help the dead or injured policemen. Durga's heart sank in a mixture of panic and despair. He knew one thing for certain - although official investigators would draw up a list of people likely responsible for this fiasco - terrorists, separatists and the like, the fact that the attack occurred on his watch would ultimately matter more to him, because the court of his conscience and that of his colleagues in the police force, would assign blame to one person most of all. HIM.

The ambulance driver glanced into the rear-view mirror and laughed out loud in undisguised glee. He pulled up the hospital mask to cover his face again. By now, a number of police jeeps had picked up the chase, trying to run him down. It had been a while since he had been pursued like a rabid dog. The last time was in Kabul when the holier-than-thou Americans had chased him through the streets for his supposed role in the bombing of a mosque preaching tolerance and inter-religious unity. At the time, he was on a bike, but even then, as now, the experience had adrenaline pumping through

his veins in waves of untrammelled sadistic delight.

His laughter abruptly died as bullets started raining on the ambulance from all directions. *Expected! The bulletproof glass won't be able to hold on for long.* With a grim sense of purpose, he leaned forward in his seat and floored the accelerator as far as it would go. *Let's do this!*

The crossroad at Juhu Circle, further down the Link Road, looked deserted. It was a vantage point for the security men. He was sure roadblocks had been set up in all directions to stop him from going through. A hastily set up roadblock was already visible to him straight down Link Road, right across the Juhu Circle crossroad. Several policemen stood at the ready, their guns drawn, and eyes trained on the ambulance approaching them. The tense tableau was completed by the sudden appearance of two helicopters suspended in mid-air like giant bees a short distance above the ground, sharpshooters ready to fire, and commandos ready to drop down at a moment's notice. *So that's how you want to play it huh?!* Once more he smiled.

Chuckling quietly to himself at the predictability of their actions, he drove the ambulance straight past Juhu Circle towards the roadblock without dropping his speed. With his left hand on the wheel, he quickly reached for a small black cloth bag and picked up a fistful of caltrops from the bag; small, spiked metal devices designed to burst vehicles' tyres. Ignoring the pinch of the sharp spikes digging into the flesh of his palm, he opened the driver's window just enough and threw the caltrops to his right out of the open driver's window ensuring the spikes landed well behind the wheels of the ambulance. *That should buy me some time.*

Just before hitting the roadblock, he took a sudden, sharp left turn and crashed into a narrow, closed gate of a housing complex that abutted the Juhu Circle crossroad, catching the lone, unsuspecting security man at the gate and the police personnel manning the roadblock unawares. He drove through the building complex and past its open exit gate onto a narrow, wooded Juhu by-lane, throwing more caltrops out the window at regular intervals. To his utmost delight, a large, boisterous wedding procession - with the groom sitting astride a horse, no less! - was slowly moving towards him on the narrow road. *What a wonderful opportunity this is!* With a suddenness that surprised even him, he violently turned the wheel so the ambulance ran straight into the path of the oncoming procession. As it crashed into the unsuspecting crowd, the music and joyous chanting of just a few seconds ago

suddenly metamorphosed into a bewildering cacophony of pain-filled screams that sounded almost inhuman. *Fear not my brothers and sisters. Your sacrifice will not go in vain!*

A few metres behind, a number of police jeeps that were chasing the ambulance entered the by-lane and came upon a sight of bloody carnage and total destruction. But before the police drivers could even realise, their vehicles' tyres burst upon the sprinkled caltrops like popping balloons. Unable to stop or even veer out of the way, the drivers completely lost control of their vehicles and ploughed into the remaining crowd of people that were still alive. Some jeeps turned turtle. People were thrown into the air like bizarre parodies of trapeze artists at a circus.

Just a few moments ago, the road echoed with the joyful sounds of celebration and was strewn with flowers. Now it echoed with the distressing sounds of crashing vehicles and despairing screams, and was strewn with mutilated corpses and crimson rivers of blood. The deafening roar of the rotor blades whirring above the dense cover of trees added more chaos to the cacophony and portended an epic tragedy in the making.

Taking advantage of the chaos and confusion all around him, the ambulance driver jumped out of the ambulance and sprinted away. He crossed a few intersecting paths and by-lanes and after about 300 meters, he approached a multi-building housing colony that had a large trash dumpster placed by the boundary wall. Looking furtively around to make sure he was alone, he stepped behind the dumpster and picked up a well-known food delivery company's delivery bag that he had placed behind the dumpster early in the morning. He quickly removed his white blood-stained hospital uniform to reveal the nondescript grey t-shirt and black jeans he had on underneath. He also removed his face mask, blood-stained shoes, his wig and fake beard and placed all the paraphernalia into different plastic bags that he removed from the food delivery bag. Dumping the plastic bags into the dumpster, he removed a jacket and a helmet from the delivery bag – both prominently displaying the company's logo in front – and a fresh pair of sneakers and put them on. With the bag in hand, he stepped through a small hole in the boundary wall that was not immediately apparent to the casual observer, hidden as it was by the dumpster. Straightening, he assumed the confident, laidback posture of a young food delivery man and made his way

through the building colony's courtyard. He walked out of the colony's front gate and headed over to a red and black bike that he had parked there barely two hours ago.

Oblivious to the events that were unfolding around them, the guards at the gatehouse near the front paid no attention to him or his actions. As more and more people chose to have their food delivered to them instead of cooking it themselves, delivery persons were now a regular sight in the colony. To them, he was just one among an interchangeable horde of delivery persons doing their job of bringing food to the hungry and the lazy.

*Just as I thought!* He laughed quietly to himself at the foolishness of his unwitting accomplices and quickly drove away.

The super-ambitious producer of the TV show on ‘Kal Aaj Kal’ TV was beside himself with joy when Deepti and Farhaan were in position to broadcast live visuals of the ambulance stuck at the police check post. *No other TV channel was covering the event live, and by the time they joined the ‘party’, our TRPs would go through the roof!* But his elation didn’t take long to fizzle out and be replaced by shock. As soon as he realised that he was staring at actual bodies on his live studio monitor, a chill ran up his spine and he felt a sense of foreboding that he hadn’t felt since his earliest days as a journalist. *Is this for real?!* A little while ago, he had spoken to Deepti on the phone. In a trembling shock-filled voice, she muttered over and over, *“this wasn’t the plan, this wasn’t the plan!”* And for once in his life, the producer didn’t know what to say in response. The NGO they had been asked to work with had come from a high reference. It had seemed like a genuine organization with a long history in the cause it espoused; even stronger credentials. The NGO’s President had even come across as a polished man of high stead. Then the ambulance was only supposed to carry a fake cardiac-arrest patient, two fake family members, a driver and an attendant – that was the plan! The disturbing broadcast with its vivid visuals and heart-clenching sounds had rendered him numb. To add to the feeling of unreality, he discovered that the mobile number of the NGO’s President, a man he had been referred to and met all of twice, apparently was ‘not in existence’. He tried calling his boss who had referred the NGO, let the phone ring for as long as it could but got no response. And as the attack on the Prime Minister’s convoy unfolded, he realised with a sinking heart that both he and Deepti had become unwitting pawns in a larger plot, a sinister game whose goals were as yet unclear to him. *What shit have we got ourselves into?!*

With his body numb but brain going at a mile a minute, the producer decided to get some air. He stepped outside his office in the Kamala Mills Compound area of Lower Parel to get himself a cup of strong filter coffee at one of the cafes nearby. He nervously patted his pockets for a cigarette, his not-so-secret vice. With shaking hands, he lit one even while a wave of self-disgust almost overwhelmed him with its intensity. *Shut the hell up*, he yelled at his nagging conscience. As he crossed the busy road, he took deep drags at the coffin stick, his trembling hands and darting eyes giving away his anxiety. He once again tried to call the NGO’s President on his mobile phone

but got the same dead-sounding recorded response: *The number you have dialled does not exist*. He made one more frantic call to his boss but again no response. As he disconnected and almost growled in frustration, he suddenly realised that someone was following him. With a quick look behind but seeing nothing out of the ordinary on the crowded street, he increased his pace. He felt a pinch on the exposed nape of his neck and assuming it was an insect - *bloody mosquitoes!* - he tried to shrug it off. Before he knew what was happening, he felt a choking sensation followed by intense pain. As he clutched his throat in agony and struggled to draw in his next breath, a large man suddenly materialised next to him – *NGO's President?* – and placed his hand on his shoulder as if he were a friend helping another friend. The large man supported the producer's weight and helped him along the street, still choking and gasping for air. As they turned the corner into another lane, the producer was close to collapsing from the lack of oxygen to his lungs and brain. By the time they stepped into a nondescript house on the street, he was almost unconscious, blood flowing from his nose and mouth in a steady stream. Within minutes, he was dead. The large man carried the producer's limp body to a corner near the back of the house, opened the door set into the floor and dragged it down into the basement. The final indignity for the producer's mortal coil was having his body flung onto the flea-infested rickety bed in the basement, not unlike a sack of yesterday's garbage.



The food delivery boy turned the red and black bike onto the road running parallel to the railway tracks and leading to Andheri West railway station. He parked his bike in the parking area of Nadco Shopping Centre and got off, nonchalant as ever. Delivery bag in hand, he made his way into the building, just as if he was delivering another order to another hungry customer. He made his way up the multiple filthy, *paan*-stained flights of stairs to the near-empty, reeking fourth floor. Wrinkling his nose in distaste at both the sight and the smell, he opened the creaky, partly-splintered wooden door leading to the terrace. The terrace was huge but like the rest of the building, a complete mess, with its broken tiles and construction debris strewn all over.

He opened the door of a small, filthy room just a few steps across the entrance whose only apparent use seemed to be as a dumping ground for construction materials from some bygone era. The rubber soles of his cheap running shoes left another set of distinct prints in the thick layer of dust covering the floor of the room, the first set left by him only last night. He removed his nondescript delivery person uniform – clothes as well as the helmet – and stuffed everything back in the black food delivery bag, wrapped the bag in one of the dirty-yellow, once-white plastic sheets littering the space, stepped on a large piece of concrete and threw the package towards the far end of the overhead attic. To make sure its existence was effectively concealed in the space, he moved some of the other junk around and also threw a few tiles over on top of the bag. Satisfied with his work, he stepped off his concrete step and walked over to a wall where a small, dust-covered, rusted mirror occupied pride of place. He picked up an ordinary plastic bag from the corner and pulled out some items that he had jokingly dubbed his ‘all-in-one disguise kit’. After putting on the beard – a neatly-trimmed, black one this time – and black wig and a new pair of clothes, he decided that he looked like any average man in Mumbai, an unmemorable *aam aadmi* going about his day just like millions of others. He left the building and briskly made his way to Andheri Station where he bought a local train ticket to Borivali, a suburb in the northern part of the city.

At Borivali, security forces had taken over the station. The news of the attack on the Prime Minister had obviously spread and the Railway Protection Force was out in full gear, scrutinizing anyone and everyone in their tracks, hoping to find someone or something out of the ordinary. The

tension in the air was palpable. The biker hesitated for a minute but disembarked from the local train and left the station from the Western end. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of an under-construction office building not too far from the station, he opened the door to an as-yet incomplete toilet where he retrieved yet another ‘disguise kit’. He quickly changed into scruffy, second-hand khaki trousers and a threadbare blue T-shirt. An untidy wig and untrimmed moustache completed the dishevelled yet fairly common look of a poor working-class man in Mumbai. He placed his old clothes and accoutrements into three black trash bags and walked out of the building the same way he came in.

As he walked back to Borivali station, he threw each bag into a different trash can along the street. He thought for a moment that his multiple disguises could be an overkill, a needless exercise in over caution, but with a high profile case as this, he could take no chances. It won’t take long for the cops to figure that the ‘food delivery guy’ was the one they were looking for, and they would eventually recover the bike. They would reach Nadco too. *That’s when it would get trickier.* He smirked at the thought. Once at Borivali station, he bought himself a train ticket and crossed over to platform number 7 where passengers travelling out of Mumbai embarked on their journeys. The BDTs Kutch Express arrived from Bandra Terminus at its scheduled time of 3.20 in the afternoon, and under the ‘watchful’ eyes of the many security men on the platform, he boarded the train; another casual traveller finishing his Mumbai errand and travelling back to his town. To his surprise – and relief – the unreserved general compartment was not too crowded. He found an empty seat, climbed onto the top berth, closed his eyes and promptly fell asleep.

It was a long way to Bhuj.

The aide to the National Security Advisor (NSA) requested Vijay to take a seat on the enormous brown leather sofa in the foyer. Earlier in the day, her boss had asked her to add a 4 PM meeting with Vijay to his appointment calendar. Knowing Vijay's penchant for promptness, the NSA had also instructed her to ask Vijay to wait if the 'big man' himself was delayed. The name Vijay was familiar to the aide, thanks to her penchant for keeping her eyes and ears open! According to the political grapevine, Vijay was somehow involved in the massive terrorist incident at Vaishno Devi, that had rocked the nation a few years back. Carefully yet covertly observing the sharp-chiselled features and steely eyes of the man sitting quietly on the sofa a few feet away, the aide thought that he didn't seem to fit the mould of anyone who could be involved in a security or a terrorist operation in any way, shape or form. He looked just like a boy – rather a man - next door. He was medium-built and looked gentler; not of a taller, larger frame accompanied by an aggressive visage that she had in mind for how an average looking man in such a dangerous operation should be. Realising the direction her thoughts were veering in - *what do I know about terrorists and security men anyway* - she laughed at herself in gentle self-mockery and shook her head wryly. *Why do I even care? Each and every corner of the Prime Minister's Office is a treasure trove of secrets and grapevines and it always will be. Meanwhile, it's time I got back to work.*

Vijay sat on the sofa, waiting patiently for the National Security Advisor to put in an appearance for their appointment. Prahlad Dev's message to Vijay had been brief and taciturn, like the man himself, "See me at 4."

While looking around at the waiting room, his eyes fell on the stack of newspapers on the glass table and imagined each one screaming the same story from their front pages tomorrow: *The attack on the Indian Prime Minister*. The resignation of the Director General of the Special Protection Group was one of the immediate consequences of the incident. *Well, someone had to take the blame, so why not the SPG? He was in charge of the PM's security after all.* As per the information he had, the Prime Minister had been taken to the nearby Kokilaben Dhirubhai Ambani Hospital in Andheri for immediate care. He would be airlifted early tomorrow morning to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi for further treatment. The government had made no official statement to the press regarding the

extent of the PM's injuries or his condition yet.

A few minutes past 4, the secretary escorted Vijay to the NSA's office. With a soft knock, she opened the door and ushered him in with a smile. As Vijay smiled his thanks, she shut the door behind him and retreated to her desk. Vijay stepped into the large cabin, the acrid stench of cigarettes overpowering him and making him feel light-headed for a few minutes. As the smoke cleared somewhat, he looked around the chaotic space. Bundles of papers and files lay in untidy heaps everywhere, particularly on the politico's large wooden desk where they competed for space with a pen tray, two large display monitors and more than a few massive hardcover books on economics, history and international politics. A number of flat-screen TVs covered almost the entire wall facing the table. Vijay's quick perusal of the room took less than 10 seconds. As his gaze came back to Prahlad Dev, the man sitting behind the desk, he was startled by the dark circles ringing his normally lively eyes. His usually animated face now looked dull and lifeless, and his thick white hair, usually well-groomed and his most distinctive physical feature, now looked unkempt and unwashed. However, it was the worry lines etching deep grooves into his forehead that were the most telling sign of his extreme agitation. All in all, Vijay realised with a shock that this powerful man looked years older than his true age. When he heard the door open, the short, heavysset man with the forceful personality stood with an effort and extended his right hand to Vijay, his left holding on a lit cigarette like a lifeline. Smiling to himself at the irony of that thought, Vijay strode forward to return the handshake. Reaching the desk, he noticed that the NSA's once-pristine Western-style suit was now rumpled, stained and reeking like a cigarette factory. Wisely, he refrained from commenting and waited quietly for Prahlad Dev to open the conversation. He had come across the man only a few times earlier, mostly in joint meetings with the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and other Prime Minister's Office (PMO) department officials, with him representing the Change India Department, a profile he had been holding for the last few years. Once the Prime Minister had himself introduced Vijay to the NSA during a formal gathering. Prahlad Dev was reckoned to be a powerful man in the PMO; the brain behind India's counter strikes in Uri and Balakot, he had heard, and a close aide to the PM.

“Good afternoon Vijay and thank you for coming in at such short notice.

I'll get straight to the point. The Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister speaks highly of you and has recommended you to me. You would have heard about the attack on the Prime Minister. We are immediately assembling a task force with representatives from various agencies to centrally drive the investigations. The Directors of the National Intelligence Agency, Defence Intelligence Agency, Intelligence Bureau, Military Intelligence and RAW will be here in just a few minutes to discuss our joint plan of action. Before they walk in, I want you to know that we need your hands-on involvement here. I want you to drive this from my and the PMO's side because..." His words trailed off as he stubbed his cigarette out and gulped the smoke instead of exhaling it. Vijay was already familiar with the NSA's peculiar habit of swallowing cigarette smoke in the presence of other people. Nonetheless, as always, the sight made him wince with disgust and also a fair amount of unwilling fascination. The NSA pretended not to notice Vijay's reaction and continued his stilted monologue. "I know of your involvement at Vaishno Devi, Vijay – in Operation Jai Mata Di ...the Secretary trusts you. And because he trusts you, I trust you too. I need someone to drive this centrally with me. Someone I can trust. They knew which car he was in. He could have been in any car... so how did they know Vijay? How?!" His anguish was plain to see but Vijay kept quiet and waited for the Principal Secretary to finish his impromptu speech. "And even if it were possible to know the car, well, it is not really impossible, honestly, but getting an RPG in the middle of the city, the whole ambulance thing, knowing the exact route and planning it all... It *has* to be an insider; it just *has* to! I know I don't need to tell you this but I'm going to anyway. Keep your eyes and ears open Vijay, at all times. Do not trust anyone. Drive the joint investigation. I'm banking on you. The *entire country* is banking on you. You understand that, don't you?!" Vijay knew that the question was rhetorical so he didn't reply. But seeing the half-crazed look in the man's eyes, he nodded his head to signal his acquiescence to the plan and hopefully calm him down before the fireworks began. Finished for now, the NSA lit a fresh cigarette from the almost-empty pack on the table and once again took a deep drag. As always, he gulped down the smoke and sighed.

The door opened once again and both Vijay and the NSA stood as the heads of every national-level intelligence agency in India strode in en masse. They shook hands with the NSA and then with Vijay, murmured curt Hellos and then walked over without invitation to the large, round table at the other

end of the room. As they all took their seats around the table, the NSA opened the discussion with a curt, “Gentlemen, I’d like to introduce you to Vijay.”

Vijay settled in the chair and if someone could have read his face then ‘discomfort’ was written all over it. The Directors of the intelligence agencies he was meeting with the NSA were obviously more experienced and knowledgeable than him in matters of national security and intelligence. However, all of them seemed bothered by the fact that no one seemed to know of his antecedents. All they seemed to know was that he held an important profile in the Change India Department, the Prime Minister’s pet administrative project to bring about a *movement, a change* in the country in many of its regulations and social aspects. *If they know about Operation Jai Mata Di, they are not showing.* And of course, this irony did not escape Vijay that for these men ‘intelligence’ and ‘knowledge’ were the currencies of power. *So, unlikely they do not already know!*

The meeting continued for over two hours. And if the Directors were honest with themselves - if not each other - they were initially somewhat uncomfortable with a stranger’s high level involvement in the project. “Is the NSA giving him carte blanche here?” they all wondered in silence. But by the time the meeting ended, his presence was accepted by all the Directors. His competence was no longer doubted, and his words carried more weight than they did a couple of hours ago.

“The Honourable Finance Minister – who you all know is the current acting Prime Minister – has requested to see us all at 8 PM. Vijay could you summarize what we’ve discussed in a report?” the NSA requested.



It was 9 PM and the Joint Task Force (JTF) control centre that was temporarily set up in the PMO building was a hive of hectic activity. The open-plan room was large enough to comfortably seat 20 people at open desks that had been placed in a random arrangement to enable effective communication between different teams, and in Vijay's opinion, to facilitate and enhance out-of-the box thinking. A large wall-mounted LED monitor looked out over the room, broadcasting continuous live feeds from various Indian and Pakistani news channels. The monitor would also be used by various intelligence agencies' personnel in the JTF for taking three-hourly periodic updates from their respective agency headquarters as the investigations progressed, the sole purpose to ensure that everyone in the JTF had access to the most relevant and up-to-date information that could help centralize and direct the investigations. Vijay was managing this 20-member multi-agency team consisting of senior and mid-level personnel from the Intelligence Bureau (IB), Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), Military Intelligence (MI), National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), National Investigative Agency (NIA) and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) as well as some officials from the Defence and Home Ministries, each team investigating a different aspect of the attack on the Prime Minister and coordinating with various internal teams of their parent organisations. In addition to this 'central' Joint Task Force, other temporary multi-agency joint teams had also been formed in six other cities in the country for efficient coordination and quicker dissemination of new information, their work reviewed and coordinated by the JTF in the PMO.

The team strategy had been defined and a plan of action had been set in motion. Every morning at 7 AM sharp, the Joint Task Force would go over the status reports submitted by investigators and also review the many leads coming in from various parts of the country and from different investigative agencies. Then they would collate all this information and determine how they could collectively achieve a sharper and more cohesive direction.

At 9 AM, Vijay would provide a status report to the National Security Advisor, the three Defence Chiefs as well as the Directors of various intelligence agencies of the country. They may ask for specific updates which would be provided to them prior to their meeting with Rajendra Singh, the

Finance Minister, and the acting Prime Minister, at 11 AM. This would be followed by two more status reports at 3 PM and 9 PM.

He was now representing Prahlad Dev, the National Security Advisor and the PMO's team in the task force, a no mean feat by any stretch of imagination. Going forward, the Joint Task Force would centrally drive and coordinate across multiple agencies, ministries and departments across the country, and lead the investigations on the attack on the Prime Minister. Tonight it was just about getting the JTF started, getting to know each and every member of the team as they came up with the reports from their respective agencies. And probably the last night that the men and women in the team would still be able to visit their families and homes for the foreseeable next few days.

Vijay carefully made notes as the teams reported on the progress. Throughout the country, police personnel, intelligence agencies, the coast guard, armed forces as well as security forces manning the railway stations, bus stations and airports had been placed on high alert. Shelling had begun on the western front, along the country's border with Pakistan, its hostile neighbour. The ambulance driver, who was the prime suspect of the attack on the Prime Minister had crashed his vehicle into a wedding party near Juhu Circle, killing and injuring dozens of revellers and leaving behind a maelstrom of tragic destruction in his wake. Police jeeps chasing the ambulance lost control and crashed into the same crowd creating a tragedy of epic proportions. In the chaos of death and destruction, the ambulance driver somehow managed to escape. Now, he could be just about anywhere in the country. Although his image was caught on many of the city's CCTV cameras (at least those that were still working!), none of them had managed to capture his face with any degree of clarity. The driver had a hospital mask covering half his face! And a white beard, covering most of his side face didn't help either. He had grey hair.

The stolen Ford Endeavour, an instrument of carnage that had wrecked the lives of so many poor, helpless labourers near Bhavan's College, Andheri earlier in the day was found to belong to an influential and outspoken Muslim industrialist-politician from the Powai area of central Mumbai. He belonged to the opposition party and was known to have links with the underworld gangs operating out of Dubai and Thailand. It didn't take long for the police to trace the vehicle and descend en masse at his plush residence. He was

taken in for ‘questioning’ and was being grilled for information by both the local Mumbai police and the Mumbai branch of Intelligence Bureau. To no one’s surprise, he pled complete ignorance about the incident and claimed to be nothing more (or less) than the unfortunate victim of a crime. Knowing his history for mischief-making and his unsavoury reputation for rabble-rousing, naturally, none of the investigating officers believed his protestations of innocence. They were hopeful that as interrogation progressed, he would crack under the strain and provide useful information that would help them make some headway into their investigation.

The ambulance used in the attack and recovered from the scene of what the media had started dubbing ‘the marriage mayhem’ was found to belong to a government hospital in Dahisar, a suburb in the north of Mumbai. The ambulance had been missing in action, and as expected, the face with the white mask and beard didn’t match the profile picture on file of Narayan, the ambulance’s original driver and a trusted employee of the hospital. Initial investigations revealed that Narayan had not been seen at his cramped Nalasopara residence for the past 2 days.

The body of the ambulance’s attendant, Ram Charan was found in the mangled ambulance at Juhu, shot dead in the skull from behind at a point-blank range. An ID had been recovered. An investigation into his background revealed nothing criminal nor even vaguely illegal. He seemed to be an ordinary man; simply one among millions of other Indians who aspired to overcome the challenges wrought by poverty and desperation in order to improve their own lives and the lives of their families. He had shifted to Mumbai from Bhubaneshwar, the capital of the eastern state of Odisha, two years back and lived in the slums of Dharavi with his elderly aunt and uncle. The local Intelligence Bureau (IB) team in Bhubaneshwar had been pressed into service to dig further into Ram Charan’s background and report to the Mumbai team with their findings.

The police bike escort of the ambulance had been a total disaster. Two out of three bikes had crashed, with two men grievously injured. The body of the policeman shot inside the ambulance had been sent for post mortem, the gun recovered and sent for forensics.

There was little question in the investigators’ minds that the supposed ‘accident’ at Bhavan’s college and the attack on the PM were connected in some way. The Ford Endeavour’s driver had run away from the scene of the incident. The white shirt and red monkey cap that witnesses said he had been

wearing were found discarded behind some bushes about two hundred meters away. Scientists from the Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL), Pune had taken over this case and the ambulance was being combed for DNA and other genetic material leads.

The blast radius was massive, as evidenced by the huge crater that had formed at the blast site. The SPG and Mumbai Police had cordoned off the area to prevent panicked civilians from contaminating what was obviously now a crime scene. The Mercedes Benz Sprinter ambulance in the PM's convoy was pressed into service to take the injured PM and his aides to Kokilaben Dhirubhai Hospital. The PM's motorcade included a decoy car so the first thing that occurred to the investigators was "HOW did the attacker know which exact vehicle to attack? With two BMW 7-Series cars - one of them a decoy - the probability of him striking the right car was 50%. So, was he just lucky in hitting the right car, or did he have precise information that allowed him to make a deliberate choice? If the latter, how did he get this information? Was it passed on to him from an inside source?" This last thought chilled them to their souls. After all, how do you deal with betrayal, if it comes from within?

The Special Protection Group proximity teams and a few of its brass had been de-rostered by the cabinet, and the top officials placed under investigation. Protecting the country's Prime Minister from harm was the SPG's prime responsibility and the reason why the organisation even existed in the first place. And it was obvious that they had failed spectacularly at carrying out their sworn duty. Mumbai's Commissioner of Police had resigned, citing 'moral culpability' as the reason for his decision – a spectacular failure of the Mumbai Police to preventing the attack in the first place and even failing to nab the attacker. A.P. Durga, the Deputy Commissioner was under a cloud of suspicion thanks to his failure to ensure the Prime Minister's safety. He had been temporarily suspended and was probably being interrogated by the intelligence agencies. The host and the producer of the live TV report on Kal Aaj Kal TV which covered the ambulance blockade in Andheri were also to be called for questioning anytime now. Vijay would be flying to Mumbai early next morning to review the investigations.

It was almost midnight when he reached home, and right after an unusually late dinner, Vijay placed a pillow under his head and lay on the bed

reviewing his notes from the day. The JTF session was long and his head was now swimming with so much information, details and plans that he was struggling to keep them all straight. Exhaustion was pulling at his bones and sinews but he forced himself to stay awake. Night had fallen very quickly and sleep was pulling at his eyelids but thoughts and ideas were still clamouring for attention in his tired brain. Putting his notes aside, he gently ran his right hand over his belly, feeling the slight bulge. Although he kept himself fairly fit, his workout sessions were not as intense as they used to be till a few years back, and his muscle mass was nowhere his previous levels. And of course, his sedentary civic/administrative role in the Change India Department of the PMO had taken its toll on his body structure as well. He felt his tummy again. *This is so not good! I should start working out from tomorrow. Wait; after the investigations are done...*

An involuntary smile curved his lips at the sight of the woman now making her way towards him. With one hand on her expanding belly, Geetika carefully lowered herself onto the bed next to him. Fidgeting until she got into a comfortable position, she snuggled close and closed her eyes with a tired sigh of relief.

Now in her third and final trimester Geetika was preparing to bring another precious human life into the world. For the past couple of weeks, the baby had been kicking as if impatient to come out and greet the larger world outside her mother's womb. With a loving glance at his wife, Vijay put one arm around her so she rested more comfortably against his chest. He ran his other hand gently over her belly and thought back to the past few eventful years of his life. He had met Geetika just after Operation Jai Mata Di and almost immediately, they each recognised a kindred soul in the other. As their love and respect for each other grew, the decision to get married became inevitable. Now they were expecting their first child together. Not for the first time, it occurred to him that with his two children from his first marriage, there would now be three precocious children in the household - a blessing to be sure, but still more than a handful. *Who has three children nowadays?*

He missed his two children who were currently vacationing with their *dadi* (grandmother) in Pune, especially during times like these when the house was so quiet and calling out for the unrestrained laughter and unstinting cheer of young people. At this hour of the night, they'd be clamouring for their story session and sleepily requesting for "Just one more story, Papa, please!" The thought made him smile.

Realising that Geetika was no longer asleep; Vijay turned his head and whispered, “The case has become really interesting with lots of new developments, twists and turns. Do you want to hear about them?” He had hoped that given her background in intelligence, she might be able to help him with a cue.

“No, I don’t want to know anything,” was Geetika’s sleepy yet firm response. With the baby scheduled to make an arrival soon, Geetika was determined to keep all the negatives of the world including crimes and investigations away from the precious new life inside her. Hopes dashed, Vijay decided not to pursue the conversation further. He gently pecked her on the forehead and turned in for the night, hoping that he would get some guidance from his dreams, if not his wife. Vijay was certain he won’t be able to make it home for the next few days. Everyone in his team had been instructed to stay at the PMO. He had already explained the situation to his mom and asked her mom if she could come back home from Pune with the kids.

Sleep had almost claimed him when his mobile buzzed from the nightstand where he had placed it earlier. With an irritated huff, he turned on the bedside lamp and picked up the slim state-of-the-art device. The email was from one of his colleagues on the PMO Joint Task Force. *The report from the weapons forensics team has come in.* Vijay continued to read the message in growing disbelief. According to the report, the projectile that hit the Prime Minister’s armoured car was a High Explosive Anti-Tank (HEAT) warhead, a superplastic jet used to penetrate thick tank armour, and immobilize, even destroy tanks.

The HEAT grenade was fired from an RPG-7, a reusable, shoulder-fired, rocket propelled grenade launcher weapon that had now been recovered from the ambulance. While this was all already known, another bit of information got Vijay off the bed with a rude jolt. The weapon was found to be stamped with the manufacturing impression of OFT, the Ordnance Factory at Trichy!

Sleep was just a distance memory now as he rushed back to the PMO. *The RPG-7 belonged to the Indian army!*

Ranjitsinh had boarded the Double Decker Express from Mumbai Central station which reached Ahmedabad's Kalupur railway station at its scheduled time of 9:45 PM. Throughout the 7-hour journey, he barely looked up from his mobile phone, constantly checking his news feed and catching up with the sudden surfeit of memos being circulated among the various teams of the Intelligence Bureau, IB. The organization was in a state of emergency after the attack.

From Kalupur station, he got into a ride-hailing cab which dropped him at his apartment complex in the posh locality of Satellite, located in the western part of Ahmedabad. Without taking the time to remove his shoes, he switched on the TV in the front room, a mixture of excitement and anxiety fighting for precedence in his gut. With a shaking hand, he flicked through a number of 24x7 news channels, feeling like an aeronautics engineer finally witnessing the nail-biting launch of the rocket he had worked on for weeks on end.

It all began with an anonymous phone call he had received in 2001, almost 17 years back, when he was still just a sub-inspector in the Ahmedabad Crime Branch. Although the caller refused to divulge his name or other personal details, he did say that he had heard about Ranjitsinh from some mutual 'friends'. The purpose of his call, he said, was to test Ranjitsinh with a small project. Ranjitsinh was both annoyed and intrigued and almost about to slam the phone, but rather than dismissing the caller as a prankster, he decided to hear him out and satisfy his own curiosity. To this day, he congratulated himself for his decision. The project the caller proposed to Ranjitsinh on that distant day in the past revolved around instigating a small-scale communal riot in the city of Vadodara, just before a local election. Two people were killed in the ensuing violence and election results affected, a triumph for which Ranjitsinh was handsomely compensated. His success in that project cemented his standing and reputation as the 'go-to person' in the murky world occupied by his mysterious caller. He was 'assigned' even more such projects in various towns and districts of Gujarat and eventually, even outside the state. Many of the assignments he took were high profile in nature and he believed that his subsequent promotion at his 'real' job at the Ahmedabad Crime Branch and eventual transfer to a high-profile job at the Intelligence Bureau (IB) in Ahmedabad was somehow directly linked to his off-job performance. The generous payments for his efforts, or as the

anonymous caller described them – *his contributions to the nation* - continued to his delight and glee as he took upon more projects. And as he grew in stature within the Gujarat IB hierarchy, his network of contacts widened and his clout and standing increased exponentially. Soon he was the Assistant Central Officer with the Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau in Ahmedabad, looking after covert intelligence gathering operations in North-West Gujarat, the region bordering India's arch-nemesis, Pakistan.

But that's where it stopped. He had reached a point of stagnation in his career. This sense of boredom was compounded by the sure knowledge that he could not be promoted any further than Assistant Central Officer. He was now ruining the fact that he was a regular Gujarat Police officer rather than an Indian Police Service (IPS) or Indian Revenue Service (IRS) alumnus who could have expected to rise further through the ranks of the Intelligence community in India. To further compound his feeling of professional and financial stagnancy, the big monies from his previous side hustle had almost completely stopped coming in. The projects from the anonymous caller had reduced to just once or twice a year, a massive drop from the eight to ten that he used to receive every year till a few years back. In a rare moment of self-introspection, Ranjitsinh realised that he missed hearing the sound of the caller's voice - the deep baritone that always rang with the powerful authority of a man who was both thoroughly experienced and supremely confident of his position and his plan. Each time the caller would call from a different number. In the beginning, Ranjitsinh had tried to track the numbers to their source, but he soon realised that each calling number was 'spoofed', probably with the help of one of the many illegal spoofing software available in the black market. The caller also seemed to be using a voice modulator to change the timbre and pitch of his voice. *No one can have a voice that deep*. Finally, he gave up trying to trace the number because he quickly realised that it would be a mighty task – and probably a huge waste of time – well beyond the limited means at his disposal. And he decided that the less he knew, the better. Even a calculated guess could be dangerous for him. He was well-paid for his side projects - at least for a few years - and he made valuable 'contributions towards the nation' and he was happy with that. *That's all I know and that's all I need to know*.

When his mobile rang two months ago, Ranjitsinh had instinctively known that it would be *him* at the other end. A chill ran up his spine upon



hearing the caller's request. Immediately he knew that the project and the tasks he was being asked to undertake were complicated and even risky. And he had very little time for execution. However, his payment at the end of the project was generous and more than enough to make up for the complexity and risk of the project, and for all the lost years.

He lost no time in putting the wheels in motion. Being an important cog in the wheel of the Intelligence Bureau - particularly its border intelligence operations - came with its own benefits. Among them, the secrecy and autonomy that were necessary elements of his role had helped him create and maintain a 'parallel', off-the-radar database of known criminals and extremists across the country that could be put to his use at any given time. He would use their services for executing many official and even unofficial requests, even pay them generously for the unofficial assignments. Now he would once again tap into the resources from his *off-the-radar army* to carry out certain aspects of the new project.

The anonymous caller had a specific request. Ranjitsinh had to hire Razzak – and Razzak only – for the task. He was given a number to call. Ranjitsinh was intrigued at the request but he let it pass. He called the number and met up with Razzak. He had readily agreed to be on the project, for a hefty fee of course that the anonymous caller later agreed to in a subsequent call.

Over the next month, Ranjitsinh made several trips to Mumbai from Ahmedabad. He would study the venue that the Prime Minister was scheduled to speak at, and the route he would take to get there. He was known for being meticulous, attentive to detail and a stickler for perfection, a reputation that had stood him in good stead in both his official and unofficial work circles. The anonymous caller phoned him regularly with more details as the planning progressed towards the execution stage.

Apart from Razzak, Ranjitsinh had enlisted two more men in his plan. His group of mercenaries would function like a typical terrorist cell, where no single person on the team would know the complete plan, its overall objective or how its different pieces would eventually come together. Like worker bees in a honeycomb, each man would do the task or tasks assigned to them and then exit.

He continued flicking through the news channels. Strangely, none of the news channels had an update on the Prime Minister's condition: was he dead? In a coma? No one seemed to know. The anonymous caller had also

been quiet since the explosion, not calling him again since the time he provided information about the Prime Minister's car.

The scenes of nation-wide mourning and hysteria had Ranjitsinh congratulating himself on his performance. Still, he felt some regret that he couldn't announce his part in the nation's 'tragedy in the making' from the rooftop of his big, plush apartment. At times like these – when he felt triumphant and all-conquering, he acutely felt the absence of someone special to share his happiness. His elderly parents had moved back to their small village and he hadn't seen them in years. His wife had deserted him years ago and taken his two young children with her. Despite being a big-shot Intelligence officer with access to reams of information, he didn't know where they were now and he preferred not to find out. Occasionally he missed having a family, especially when he was trudging back to his apartment with only his loneliness for company. For the most part however, he was glad to be alone and happy to have the freedom to plan and orchestrate riots and anarchies, sit up late smoking cigarettes, drinking his favourite scotch and binge-watch thriller movies with improbable plots and cringe-worthy dialogues. *Hollywood razzle-dazzle, pfft! My ideas are much more ingenious than the crap these movies dish out!*

He was proud of himself and his band of misfits. *Now it's time to put the exit plan in motion.*

The plan to take care of the TV producer had already been executed without a hitch. Others would be taken care of too. Razzak was the main guy though. He had hoped that he would be killed in the encounter with security forces in Mumbai – it wasn't so difficult after all with thousands of men after one guy – but the incompetent men lost him and instead crashed into a wedding party. *Bloody blockheads!* He had been keeping a tab on the communication channels of the Intelligence Bureau ever since – there was no trace of Razzak. He had just vanished into thin air.

He was sure that if Razzak was still alive, he would contact him. After all, his final payment was pending. Though he prayed in his heart that he'd never hear from him again.

## DAY 2

### 14

Vijay was a part of the audience gathered in the small room, watching the woman intently for any signs of guilt or remorse. He had rushed to Indira Gandhi Airport directly from the Prime Minister's Office and taken the early morning flight from New Delhi to Mumbai. On landing and disembarking at Terminal 2 of the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Airport, he had headed straight to the Mumbai Police Headquarters on DN Road near Crawford Market in South Mumbai. After a hurried tea and a small snack of Mumbai's famous *vada-pav*, Vijay and the new Mumbai Police Commissioner, Mr. Rao, both headed to one of the interrogation rooms in the HQ building where the TV reporter was being investigated.

The soundproofed room had no lighting fixtures except for the large, bright incandescent bulb that hung in the centre of the square, spartan room, right above where Deepti sat in an uncomfortable, straight-back chair. She had got home after her broadcast, in complete shock from the events of the day and remained at home, scared to her guts, refusing to venture out. And just as she feared, she was picked up by a squad of dour-faced police officers and brought to this location late in the night. To compound her distress, she was left sitting in this chair with the harshly-lit bulb dangling just above her head, all through the remaining hours of the night.

"This wasn't supposed to happen! So much blood... so much fear... real injuries and killing were not part of the plan...", Deepti mumbled over and over to a non-responsive audience. Her protestations started off strident and even shrill, but as the night wore on and she became more and more sleep-deprived, her vociferous objections petered out to exhausted, barely comprehensible mutterings. And it was only now, several hours later that her sobbing – whether driven by self-serving fear or genuine sorrow, no one could tell – had finally abated. The unremitting harsh yellow light was hurting her eyes and causing a burning sensation over the surface of her skin. "How many times do I have to tell you people?! Are you all deaf or stupid or both? I don't know, I DON'T KNOW! All I know is what my show's producer, Vinay, told me. He was approached by a Non-Governmental

Organization a few weeks ago. I never met the NGO guys myself so I don't know where they're from or what they do. Hell, I don't even know if they exist! Vinay told me he met with them a couple of times and I had no reason not to believe him. We both wanted to create some much-needed publicity for the critical issues that the common man faces in this country. And we thought that highlighting these problems during VIPs' visits to the city would be the most effective way to make the bastards listen! It was only supposed to be a dramatization, a simple heart attack, not this... this..." As tears overcame her again, she covered her face with her hands and hunched over in her chair, lost to the world in her misery and abject regret.

Watching the pitiable figure in the uncomfortable chair, Vijay couldn't help but believe her story. By now, he was convinced that this young woman was definitely not a genius masterminding some well thought-out and brilliantly-executed plan. In fact, whatever he had seen so far pointed to one thing and one thing only – she was just a dumb pawn in the whole game. He wanted to shout at the inept interrogators still trying to elicit some useful information out of her – *you're wasting your time! She's going to be of no further help!*

A team of officers from Mumbai police had also raided the producer's house late last night, about the same time Deepti was picked up from her home, only to find that he had not returned home after his work day. His family was starting to get worried because he never stayed out late without letting them know when he'd be back. Going incommunicado with them for so many hours was just not like him. When the interrogators questioned Deepti, she drew up a blank as well. Unable to trace the producer, a group of officers went to the TV studio and questioned some of the people working on Deepti's show. To a man they informed the interrogators that the producer had seemed tense and extremely anxious as soon as the live coverage of the ambulance was aired. Then at the news of the attack on the Prime Minister, he had panicked and thrown a fit. One of them remembered seeing him rush out of the office, presumably for a smoke break. It wasn't unusual for the producer to take smoke breaks when under stress or work pressure, so the man didn't wonder about it until hours later when he realised that the producer never returned. In fact, no one had seen him since the broadcast. A city-wide search was on to locate the producer who was now considered a 'person of interest' in the case. His phone records and his digital assets like social media and email accounts were also being investigated. The

investigators were hoping that he would be able to lead them to the so-called NGO that was supposedly behind the whole saga, at least according to Deepti, another important person of interest.

CCTV records from JP Road, Juhu stretch of Link Road and the nearby areas had already been collected and reviewed at least twice. So far, the investigators had found absolutely no trace of the white-bearded man who had been driving the ambulance. It seemed he had simply vanished into thin air. CCTV records from all the housing societies in the surrounding neighbourhoods were currently being analysed by experts, especially the society which was found to have a large hole in its perimeter wall. Police wondered if the driver simply walked through the wall to the other end of the society and escaped from there. He could also have dashed through on foot to another street, and then another. In this upscale area of Juhu, the streets were tree-lined and the helicopters had a limited line of sight. To top off the mess, the police itself was embroiled in the legalities and additional investigations post the wedding ‘accident’ at Juhu wherein its jeeps had also crashed into the wedding party after the ambulance had deliberately rammed itself into the revellers’ party. A large, frenzied crowd had gathered at the scene of the carnage, and the situation had spiralled out of control very quickly. The officers were forced to call in reinforcements to help them at least manage this situation and perhaps do some damage control. Thirteen people from the wedding party were reported dead and the injured were taken to nearby hospitals. The condition of many was reported to be critical. This on top of the five labourers killed in the Ford Endeavour accident.

Vijay looked in on another room where the Ford Endeavour’s politician-owner was being interrogated. The man’s arms were cuffed in front of him while his legs were tied to the legs of an uncomfortable-looking high, heavy backless stool. He was in a half-reclining position with no back support, hanging off backwards from the edge of the stool. He would have to use his stomach and leg muscles to stay half-reclined on the stool without falling to the hard floor. Every time he fell, he would be slapped and kicked in the stomach and thigh. As he cried out in pain and humiliation, the policemen would forcibly bring him back to his backward-leaning position on the stool. It was obvious that the ‘interrogation’ had been going on for some time for all of a sudden, the man slid off his stool and stayed on the floor despite the interrogators screaming obscenities in his ear and kicking him in the guts. The politician – his eyes wide open despite the harsh light falling into them –

was now a lump on the floor near the stool, a listless creature that bore very little resemblance to a living, breathing human being. The officers, seasoned at the art of interrogating witnesses for information (or confessions), would have to be careful not to leave any marks on the man's body that could be construed as 'torture' by human rights advocates or the courts. And of course they had to be doubly cautious because the man was an opposition politician, that too from a minority community, and such a 'case' had to be handled very cautiously and sensitively.

So far, the politician's interrogation had not revealed anything useful. The only thing the interrogators were sure of at this point was that his SUV had been stolen from his residence and he had no idea how it ended up Andheri. His connections with the mafia in Dubai and Thailand had exposed a few skeletons in his closet which were being investigated. Mumbai Police had also reviewed its own list of pending criminal and civil cases against him for clues – a list that went back years if not decades – hoping to find some connection that could lead to the Prime Minister's attack.

His phone records had also been extracted, and agents from Research and Analysis Wing, Central Bureau of Investigation and Intelligence Bureau were going through them digging for clues that could help unravel the mystery. So far, they had found no direct leads from either avenue. However, they refused to give up, mainly because a full 24 hours after the attack on the Prime Minister, this corrupt, pathetic little lump of humanity lying on the floor of the interrogation room was still their only lead.

Every intelligence agency and the police force were under immense pressure to deliver a breakthrough. At this point in the interrogations, they were all still hoping to find a break in the case. The only exception to the hope fest was Vijay. He was not too optimistic that they would find ready answers. He was sure that this was a well-planned operation being masterminded by an evil creative genius. It can't be so simple. *The politician was only a stratagem; a ruse to drive the investigation off-track.*

“*Arraa arraa arraa... chal Badal...*,” the man with the cold hazel eyes pulled at Badal’s reins and nudged him in a special man-to-beast language that the camel had grown to understand over the many years he had been the man’s exclusive beast of burden. The camel picked up speed and the ten guests crammed onto its cart experienced an occasionally-bumpy joyride as Badal clip-clopped his way over the dusty, salty terrain of the Rann, leaving his slower brethren behind in his wake.

Badal was the fastest and the most handsome working camel in Dhordo, a village near Bhuj, Gujarat which hosted the annual *Rann Utsav*, the White Rann Festival of Kutch. His elongated face and lanky body were decorated with beautiful, monochrome *Kutchi* artwork that established Badal’s provenance as nothing else could. Razzak’s maternal aunt was a Kutchi artist and Badal was her living, breathing art portfolio that left everyone who saw Badal in awe of her skill and talent.

Most of the afternoons while the Kutch Festival was on, Badal would line up with ten other camels at the Tent City, near the village of Dhordo, and ply tourists to the Great White Rann. Thanks to the *Rann Utsav*, a festive atmosphere reigned over the entire area, which was vibrant, colourful and pulsing with every shade of beauty life has to offer. However, come end of February, the festival would draw to a close, all the guests would be gone and the Tent City and other temporary resorts in the region would fold up. From March to October – summer and monsoon seasons in the region – this temporary hub of festivity would go back to its barren, desolate existence, filled with salt water in the monsoon months, eagerly awaiting the return of the Rann Utsav in November.

*Rann* in the local Gujarati language means desert and as a naive child, Razzak always thought that the White Rann would be a desert with fine, white sand, but it wasn’t until about 10 years ago that he realised that his assumption was incorrect and the term ‘White Rann’ was but a misnomer. In fact, the White Rann was simply a huge white salt marsh. This beautiful geographical marvel lay spread over several hundred kilometres and was exposed to the air only for a few months when water from the Arabian Sea receded far inland. A part of the Thar Desert, and covering an area of about 7500 square kilometres, the Great Rann of Kutch is one of the largest salt marshes or *deserts* in the world.

The seasons had been changing, and the White Rann Festival which typically used to fold up by January till some years back had been extended, for many years now, by the government of Gujarat till the end of February. It had been a move welcome by the local Kutchi community – the festival meant continued earnings and livelihood for the local communities of an otherwise barren land.

Razzak parked his camel cart at the designated spot about 100 meters from where the White Rann actually began. “I’ll see you all back here in an hour,” he said to his passengers. The guests would get off here to walk some distance along the Rann and witness the sunset. Once they got back, he would drop them back to their individual tent-resorts and they would retire for the evening. Then all the camel owners and their beasts would get on trucks and ride back to the nearby villages of *Dhordo* or *Bhirandiyara* to which they belonged. And of course, they would come back the next day at 3.30 PM for another round of tourist pampering.

Although it was an unusually brisk evening for March, Razzak could hardly feel the cold. His mind was on other more important things. He had arrived in Bhuj by train at 7.30 AM and then taken a bus to Bhirandiyara located on Gujarat State Highway 45. He stayed there with his *mama* (maternal uncle) and *mami* (maternal aunt) who jointly owned a *mava* shop right on the state highway. Bhirandiyara was famous for its *mava*, also known as *khoya* in many other parts of India. Usually, foreign tourists who first heard about mava – which is nothing but reduced dried (though not completely dehydrated) cow’s or water-buffalo’s milk – couldn’t make sense of the product or its uses. But once they learned about its nutritive qualities and about its uses in preparing Indian sweets, they usually asked for a taste. Once they did, they would invariably love it and often ask and pay for more.

Razzak spent his morning at the shop helping the staff make fresh mava. At 2:30 PM, right on schedule the pickup truck arrived and he hopped onto it with Badal. After the Rann Utsav officially ended – as it had – and the main Tent City resort shut, the tourists in the area would mostly focus on sight-seeing and shopping. Of late however a number of smaller tent resorts had sprung up which would continue operations till April and though there were fewer tourists at Dhordo now that it was near end of March, camel rides were in demand by those still staying at these smaller tent-resorts.

Razzak was not concerned though because every year by the time the



festival ended in February, he would normally have disappeared from the area. Some people would assume that he had found work at one of Gujarat's big cities, Ahmedabad or Surat. Others would think that he was somewhere in the neighbouring state of Rajasthan, probably working with a trucking company as a truck attendant or helper, a job that would take him to various parts of the country. In any case, no one would wonder or ask questions if he disappeared for months on end, resurfacing only when the festival came around once again. Then he was also known to be a withdrawn person, not encouraging many questions from the small community of Sindhi-Muslims around him at Bhirandiyara.

What Razzak would do one evening in late February is take the state transport bus to *Kalo Dungar*, the highest mountain in the Kutch region and a popular tourist spot. After disembarking, he would follow the rough trail behind the centuries-old *Dattatray* temple and continue on foot across the mountains and across the rann. By this time, darkness would have fallen and offer an effective camouflage for his clandestine meeting with a contact provided by *Ummah* – the group that had helped him choose 'right' many years back, and led him on the path to fighting for the Muslim brotherhood. He would meet the man at a pre-designated location close to India Bridge, the last bridge on the Indian side along the India-Pakistan border. The man's role was to ensure that Razzak was able to cross over into Pakistan without fear of being caught by either the Indian or Pakistani security forces.

Once Razzak got through into Pakistan, he would continue on foot until he reached *Tooh* village close to the *Tharparkar* desert in the industrial region of Sindh. Tooh was where his family – his wife, Saida, and 3-year-old daughter, Ayshah lived. He would spend some time with them, and buy them goodies from the local markets. He was astonished to know that around 40% population in the Tharparkar district was Hindu, and the first time Saida mentioned it to him, he couldn't believe it. It would also occur to him often that the Sindhi-Muslim culture was strikingly similar across both sides of the border. *No wonder I feel at home across the border too.*

After spending about a fortnight or at most a month with his family at Tooh, he would endure a 5-hour bumpy bus ride to the Pakistani city of Hyderabad and meet up with his Taliban blood brothers from Afghanistan at an Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI, Pakistan's intelligence agency) facility, spend a week on planning the next tasks in Afghanistan, and begin the journey towards Afghanistan. He would wrap up his work in Afghanistan by

the middle of October, come back to Tooh village with more goodies and money for Saida and Ayshah and spend another fortnight with them. By the time November rolled around, he would reach out to Ummah again. They would help him cross the border back into India into Kashmir or Punjab or Rajasthan or Gujarat. Once inside India, he would painstakingly chart a path – so as not to leave any trace for Indian intelligence agencies – to Bhuj where he'd 'disappear' and stay with his mama and mami. These simple village folks had raised him since he was a 11-year-old orphan, lost and confused by the upheaval caused in his young life by the sudden deaths of his parents. His double life was rife with complexities and dangers, but so far, it had worked out to his benefit. On the Pakistan side of the border, he was known as Ahmed Salaam.

This time was different though. He had overstayed. He took his mobile and dialled for Ranjitsinh.

Next Razzk dialled for Ummah

“Ali bhai?”

“Yes?”

“I’ll cross the border in the next few days.”

“The situation’s not too good at the border. But let us know when” said the voice on the other end.

Razzak’s dispassionate amber eyes took in the vast white expanse of the starkly beautiful rann as his tall, lanky frame rested against the cart. The guests had started trickling back to the cart, chattering excitedly but more than ready to get back to their quarters for a well-deserved rest. Once everyone in his group had arrived, he mounted his seat and with a loud “Arraa arraa arraa... chal Badal...,” bade the beast to take them all back to their quarters hurriedly.

The cold wind was hitting his face with needle-sharp intensity but it also kept his mind off the anxiety building inside him. He had met with Ranjitsinh two months back at a nondescript tea-stall just outside the *Laxmi Vilas Palace* in the city of Vadodara, the Royal Family of Vadodara’s residence and the largest private dwelling in the world, four times the size of the Buckingham Palace. For some reason, Razzak found it impossible to trust the tall, bulky, vaguely creepy-looking man and had watched him carefully as if he were a ticking time bomb. The meeting at the tea-stall lasted about 30

minutes because that's how long it took to seal the deal. In their conversation it also came to light that Ranjitsinh was from Ahmedabad. *I was right to distrust the man. He is from Ahmedabad after all!*

Razzak would normally have been in Tooh or Hyderabad, Pakistan at this time of the year. But here he was at the end of March soliciting visitors on his camel cart. His tasks were yet unfinished. He had already been paid 2 crore rupees in advance. In just two days' time, he would receive his remaining payment of 3 crore rupees. He was hoping that that would be the end of this entire saga. More importantly, it would be the end of Ranjitsinh, both literally and figuratively! Razzak already knew that at this point, he couldn't afford to keep Ranjitsinh alive. He knew too much and had the power to bring down a heap of trouble on Razzak's head.

Then given the stakes in such a high profile attack, he was also acutely aware that Ranjitsinh wouldn't want to keep him alive either. He had noticed a man trailing him in Vadodara the day he had agreed to work with Ranjitsinh on the project. He had quickly changed his routes and shaken him off his trail. And over the course of his trip back to Bhuj, he had changed at least two buses and a train to lead anyone else that may be following him off-track as a matter of caution. What Ranjitsinh did not realise is that he too had a man and a woman trailing him... all the way to his residence at Satellite and his Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau office at Bodakdev, Ahmedabad.

Razzak had become extremely wary after knowing that Ranjitsinh was from the Intelligence Bureau. He was a threat he couldn't possibly live with. *Well I've had enough of Afghans and Americans; it's time I get the world rid of one creepy Amdavadi.* He hated Ahmedabad and its teeming masses with a passion. The city was the very reason that he became a *jihadi* in the first place.

## DAY 3

### 16

The two police jeeps and a Mercedes sedan came to a screeching halt outside the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) building. The police personnel stationed at the main building quickly fell into position to protect the VVIP from the crowd that quickly gathered around the entourage and escort him inside. A grim-faced Asit Patel, the Secretary of the ruling Bhartiya National Party (BNP) stepped out of the Mercedes to face the barrage of questions he knew would shortly burst forth from the sea of reporters barely held at bay by the policemen.

Asit was concerned about the Prime Minister's health but he was also relieved that a few things at least were now turning in his party's favour. The arrest of the opposition party's industrialist-politician in Mumbai was good news indeed. Asit had used his clout to influence the news media and encourage them to question the opposition's possible 'role' in the attack on the Prime Minister. Headlines all over the country screamed, "*Attack on Prime Minister! Is the opposition hand-in-glove?*" Others shrieked, "*What is the opposition hiding? The people of this country demand to know!*" The hashtag *#oppbehindpmattack* had been trending on Twitter for the past 12 hours and showing no signs of abating, thanks to the seeding and activation efforts of BNP's digital team and its millions of loyal social media influencers.

Some TV channels had started playing short documentaries celebrating the life and times of the Prime Minister, as if his death was a foregone conclusion and they wanted to be the first to pay 'homage' to his courage and grace under fire, qualities no other PM in the history of independent India could claim to have had.

"Sir, do you have any information on the Prime Minister's condition?"

"Mr Patel, any comments on the opposition's possible role in the attack?"

Asit squared his shoulders and faced the reporters dead-on. "Neither my party nor I have any comments on the Prime Minister's current condition. I'm sure I'll know more after I visit him. Regarding my opinion about the opposition's possible role in this heinous act, all I can say is that an arrest has

been made, something you all know already. Now it's up to our intelligence agencies and police forces to unravel the puzzle and find the person or persons responsible. The legal machinery will take care of the rest.

This is a time of great tragedy for us but I know that each and every person of our great nation is with our Prime Minister, praying for his full recovery. I am also confident that the nation and the Bhartiya National Party will stand together side by side and successfully resolve this crisis. We are after all, one family, the family called India. Jai Hind.”

He folded his hands together in front of him in a demure *namaste*, and surrounded by his bodyguards and the policemen, continued unmolested to the AIIMS' main building.

The team of highly-qualified doctors and nurses attending to the Prime Minister in the Intensive Care Unit paused for a moment as they noticed a visibly tense Asit Patel standing next to the Director of AIIMS just outside. Grim-faced and hollow-eyed, he was looking in through the thick, bullet-proof glass of the room, nodding along to whatever the Director was saying without actually saying anything in return. He was the first visitor to have been allowed a bedside visit to the Prime Minister. Visitation requests by a number of other dignitaries had been flatly denied as the medical team decided that their time would be better spent stabilising the PM's condition than giving umpteen updates to the interfering VVIPs with their own hidden agendas. The AIIMS' doctors didn't care that they were alienating such powerful people. All they cared about was saving the PM's life. And as one senior doctor put it, “It's well within our scope to take such tough decisions in the interest of the patient. The patient comes first, not meddlesome big shots with mouths bigger than their stomachs!”

Standing outside the ICU, watching the unconscious Prime Minister, Asit felt helpless. Tears gathered in his eyes. The sight of this dynamic leader of the world's largest democracy now lying helplessly on a sterile hospital bed, his damaged body pierced with multiple drips and tubes and surrounded by inanimate monitors keeping a close check on his vitals, was impossible to believe yet disturbingly real. Both his legs were in casts to keep them immobilised and protected from involuntary movements. Still, Asit was surprised to note that despite his multiple injuries, the PM's face was calm in repose, almost as if he were just taking a well-deserved break from the chaos and pressures of life in politics. With his eyes closed and his chest moving up and down with each breath, a casual observer might even assume that the PM

was in the middle of practising *Shavasana*, the relaxation Yoga pose usually performed at the end of a Yogi's routine. As the Director laid a compassionate hand on Asit's shoulder, Asit let out a soft sigh of relief.

He and the Prime Minister went back a long way and shared common beginnings as well as a compelling mutual political history. Several decades ago, they had both started as lowly grassroots workers for the party, joining at about the same time, albeit in different locations – the PM in Junagadh and Asit in Ahmedabad. During the intervening years, they bumped into each other during rallies and party meetings and often exchanged ideas as they both aspired to drive the party into the big league. They became great friends and remained mutual confidantes and supporters even when the PM rose through the ranks, first to party General Secretary in Gujarat and then the Chief Minister of the state, and then, the PM.

Asit Patel reemphasized to the Director on the need for secrecy around the Prime Minister's health. *No one should know*. The PM's medical condition was a matter of national security – an extremely sensitive matter for the government and the country as a whole. Therefore, the AIIMS management – headed by its Director – was under strict instructions not to release any medical updates to the media. No information on the Prime Minister's health was to leak out either to the media or any person. The staff attending to the Prime Minister would stay incommunicado and cordoned-off from the world for as long as the information ban remained. And of course, absolutely no one was allowed to visit the PM unless the clearance came directly from one of only two sources: the acting Prime Minister, or the Home Minister.

As the Director left to resume his other duties, Asit waited a while longer outside the PM's room, praying that he would regain consciousness, open his eyes and see him, even if only for a bit. When his prayers went unanswered, his despair and hopelessness found a voice through the tears flowing unheeded down his ageing cheeks. Finally giving up his bleak vigil, he wiped his tears with his monogrammed snow-white handkerchief, straightened his shoulders and sedately walked out of the cordoned, highly secure VVIP floor. He maintained his composure as he stepped out of the main building and pushed past the army of reporters still waiting outside and finally into his car. As soon as the car took off down the driveway, his tired eyes once more filled with tears for the man who was dearer than a friend and closer than a brother. *Hey Ram! Don't take my only family away from me!*

Over the past five years, the BNP had done what no other previous government had managed in over 70 years since independence – it had achieved positive momentum in moving the country closer to the elite league of powerful developed nations. It had also taken giant steps in making the country more industrialised, socially cohesive and technologically sophisticated. Of course, this was just the start, a yet-to-be-completed foundation upon which so much more needed to be built if the nation were to truly be considered developed on the world stage.

However, despite the BNP's many recent successes, years of experience told Asit that the clock was ticking down on the BNP's future in the national government. Covert surveys and analyses conducted by party-approved independent research agencies as well as party workers predicted a below majority win for the BNP in the upcoming general elections. Polls in popular media weren't presenting a pleasant scenario either. The results were worrying, but they could have been much worse. In fact, the BNP would probably have suffered an ignominious drubbing had it not inflicted timely and assertive counter-strikes at Balakot, Pakistan, in retaliation against this neighbouring country's heinous attack on Indian soldiers at Pulwama, Kashmir. Thanks to the BNP leadership, India had for the first time shown to the world – particularly its arch-nemesis Pakistan – that a no-holds barred fight against terror would now be fought inside Pakistan's own territory.

The *gathbandhan* (coalition) formed by the opposition parties had been relentless and aggressive in their attacks on the BNP government. They left no stone unturned in stirring up an already -explosive political and social situation by sowing doubt regarding the veracity of the Balakot attacks. And even before Pulwama and Balakot ever became hotbeds of fierce political dissension and debate, they had achieved some success in creating an issue out of a non-issue of the acquisition of 36 multirole fighter aircrafts – the Rafale Jets, from the French company Dassault.

Any step the BNP took, even with the best of intentions for the larger good of the society and the country, the opposition seemed to have a single agenda – stir up controversies, seed doubts and engender fierce public opposition and protests.

The main opposition party had introduced the politically untested daughter of a previous Prime Minister as one of the party candidates to contest the elections. Then recently it announced a fiscally imprudent, Minimum Income Guarantee Scheme that would guarantee 6000 rupees per

month to over 50 million ‘poor’ Indian families, if voted to power. Both moves were expected to drastically affect BNP’s performance in the elections.

Something had to be done and it had to be done now. *I cannot let my party down under any circumstances!* And damage control after the opposition’s attack was not the only required strategy. The BNP also needed to win the numbers game. The party needed to get a decisive majority in the upcoming elections and not rely upon its fair-weather, fickle political allies. At a high-level party meeting attended by him, the Prime Minister and the core committee of the party, a decision had been taken to ‘target’ over 400 Parliament seats during this election.

Although this was a huge challenge and one that met expressions of disbelief among the party seniors, it was one that he and the PM had consciously set for themselves. After all, for them, the nation’s inexorable and unstinting progress was the only reason they even existed. Apart from this overarching *raison d’être*, there was no other higher purpose for these two party luminaries. And to achieve this goal, they were prepared to take every risk and bear every cost.

*Saam, Daam, Dand, Bhed* (cajole, bribe, punish, divide and rule): every approach would be considered, every method would be tried and every opportunity would be snapped up. No stone would be left unturned.

No one was above the nation’s interests. And if a massive sacrifice was needed, so be it.



“...yes,” Rajendra Singh was speaking at a media briefing, “I would like to assure the country’s citizens that the investigations into the attack on our Prime Minister are on at full swing. Our intelligence and security agencies are diligently investigating some very strong leads... very soon we will solve the case, and the culprits, whoever they are, inside the country or outside, would be held accountable and brought to book. I would also like to assure each and every one of you that the nation’s borders...”

Vijay muted the large monitor streaming Rajendra Singh’s press conference in the JTF room. After a hectic, highly-stressful day on the second evening after the attack, Vijay and the members of the Task Force knew that the acting PM’s claim of strong leads was only partially true, and only made to play to the gallery. There were some positive developments, yes, and some of the leads were promising, but it was too early – and even naively optimistic – to call any of them ‘strong’. Earlier in the day, the JTF had been at the receiving end of a stinging earful in a meeting with Rajendra Singh. The Acting Prime Minister was highly concerned about what he perceived was a lackadaisical pace on the investigation. More than 2 days had passed since the attack on the Prime Minister but in his view, and there was nothing to show in the way of progress. The onus was on the agencies and the Joint Task Force to keep things moving along at a brisk pace and they were under tremendous pressure to deliver results.

Vijay didn’t have an investigative background but he understood that patience was a prerequisite for a thorough investigation, so he was learning to be more patient while coordinating with multiple members of the JTF who were all looking up to him for leadership and direction. Leads had to be investigated, followed up and then closed. In other words, each lead had to be taken to its logical conclusion. More often than not, the end of each such investigation was fuzzy and at times even abstract, and yet every input, irrespective of where it would eventually lead – to success or to yet another dead end – required diligent, pain-staking investigative work. If investigators did their job well, a particular clue might pan out, and if they were especially lucky, a number of clues would all connect in a way that would help them draw useful conclusions and build a more complete picture. But all of this required the luxury of time, which is what they didn’t have. *Investigators never have the luxury of time!*

By attacking the Prime Minister, the terrorists had hit the very core of the nation. This below the belt assault, that too right on the heels of the murder of dozens of Indian soldiers at Pulwama, was unforgivable. The armed forces, already deployed in forward positions on the border since the incidents at Pulwama and Balakot, were in full fight mode. Once again, shelling had intensified along the India-Pakistan border and the villagers in the border areas were asked to move to safer shelters that were away from the direct line of fire. When interviewed, Rajendra Singh, Asit Patel and few other BNP ministers alluded to a Pakistani hand in the attack. Some media reports were even hinting at a possible unholy nexus between Pakistan and the opposition party. True to form and to no one's surprise, Pakistan vehemently denied any connection with the attack whatsoever.

Deepti, the TV reporter who had been questioned in connection with the attack, had been finally released on a bail. The opposition party politician with shady links to international mob groups had also been released, albeit on a hefty bail. As expected, the authorities were unable to glean any useful information from him. The ruling party had milked this particular arrest and used the man's political affiliation and religion to circulate stories alluding to the opposition's 'role' in the attack on the Prime Minister. These stories had been picked up and played over and over by every media outlet in the country even after the politician was released.

The other story making the rounds was about random violence in some parts of the country between workers belonging to the BNP and those from the opposition party. As is always the case, there was plenty of collateral damage – innocents had been caught in the crossfire, some had been killed or maimed for life, property worth tens of crores destroyed – and curfews had been imposed in high-tension areas.

The Pakistan angle was clear in the Pulwama attack. But in the attack on the PM, the idea that the enemy across the border had a hand had taken root suddenly. Unsurprisingly, it had also led to a huge wave of patriotism sweeping the nation. This wave showed no signs of abating although there was almost no evidence so far that this 'hand of the enemy' theory had any merit whatsoever. Regardless, Asit Patel and Rajendra Singh were shouting themselves hoarse in the media, exhorting patriotic Indians to take the fight to the enemy. In their view, a war was the only solution now. To keep a lid on what was already a highly volatile situation, the armed forces, particularly in the state of Kashmir and elsewhere along the Indo-Pak border were on high

alert.

The rocket propelled grenade weapon, RPG-7, used for the attack had been traced to the Ordnance Depot in Pune. The Military Intelligence was conducting its own independent investigation to try and trace the RPG-7's journey from the Ordnance Depot to the location of the attack. Investigators found that the Depot had issued the weapon to the Punjab Regiment in Bhuj seven months back. One line of thought was that someone within the regiment itself, maybe a soldier from the artillery or infantry units, took it out during training, never used it and instead supplied it to the attackers. However, this would have been noticed by the ordnance unit at Bhuj as the soldiers are supposed to return the weapons and ammunition issued to them or prove usage if they can't return. All the information is logged by the unit. Alternatively, the missing weapon could be the handiwork of someone in the Punjab Regiment's ordnance unit itself – the RPG-7 stealthily secreted out without anyone knowing.

"Gentlemen, the results of the fingerprint analyses are in," a member of the Home Ministry team announced to the Task Force.

"And....?" Vijay wanted to know.

"The driver of the Endeavour – the vehicle that ran over the labourers near Bhavan's College – his name is Abdul Khan and he is wanted in connection with at least three unsolved murders in Uttar Pradesh, plus a number of open cases of arson, robbery and other crimes. We traced him to Lokmanya Tilak Terminus, Mumbai where he was seen on CCTV boarding the 22885 Antyodaya Express to Tata Nagar, Jharkhand. The train stops at 13 stations on the way to Tata Nagar. We have shared his photograph with our teams in Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, and all over India. At every station between Mumbai and Tata Nagar, the Railway Police would be reviewing the CCTV footages to see if he's disembarked anywhere en route. A police team has also been dispatched to his hometown in Uttar Pradesh to apprehend him if he turns up there."

Vijay was pleased with this report. Finally, some progress! "What about our main guy – the man who drove the ambulance? Do we have anything on him yet?"

"No, Sir. There is no hit on his fingerprints in any official database. However, we should receive the DNA analysis report by tonight. That might yield more useful clues."

"And if the DNA report is negative as well...?"

“In that case, it gets complex for us and we’ll have to figure what other leads do we have at that point. Moreover, since this attack could have a cross-border terrorism angle, we would follow an established protocol and share all available forensic information with our international allies. Hopefully they could be of some assistance.”

“What about the Internet? And voice communications analysis? Anything there?”

“Yes and no Sir. Plenty of chatter, especially from across the border, but nothing that can be called a ‘concrete’ lead,” a member of the CBI Cyber Crime team replied.

“Updates from the Mumbai Police? Anything from their investigation into the Juhu housing societies where our guy went missing?” Vijay asked the Home Ministry team.

“Yes Sir, they have locked on the society. And they have cordoned off the shortcut into the society that they believe the attacker took to reach the main road after his easy ingress from the parameter wall. There were a few people going in and out of the society at the time, including food deliverymen. A particular deliveryman was caught on the CCTV near the main gate. He already had his helmet on while exiting the society gate, even though his bike was parked some distance away. Prima facie it appears that the man had something to hide, which is why the police’s suspicions were aroused. They’re coordinating with the delivery company to identify the man and bring him in for questioning.”

“Sir, an update has just come in from Mumbai Police,” another official spoke up without taking his eyes off his computer screen.

“Yes?”

“Someone reported a foul smell emanating from a residence at Mumbai’s Lower Parel area. Police has confirmed the corpse’s identity. It’s Vinay Sharma, the missing TV producer. His body has been sent for post-mortem.”

“It is likely that all the people involved in the attack – whether actors or possible witnesses – would eventually meet this fate. Any mastermind worth his salt would know not to leave any loose ends, especially for something so high-profile. Which means that the man who actually attacked the Prime Minister, the driver of the stolen Endeavour, and everyone else who is involved in the plan is possibly in danger of losing their lives,” a senior team member from the National Investigation Agency commented.

Vijay’s anxiety level was already sky-high by the time he walked down

the corridor to Prahlad Dev's office for his evening briefing. The warning by the NIA guy was ominous – everyone associated with the crime would be killed. The attack on the PM did seem to be a meticulously-planned and well-executed operation. The planners would have certainly found ways to cover up their tracks and lead the investigators on a merry chase. Still, the JTF didn't have the luxury of time so they needed to crack the case urgently. Vijay sighed and thought to himself: it's going to be long few nights at the PMO.

It was evening when Abdul Khan, the by-now infamous driver of the stolen Ford Endeavour, reached the town of Sonepur in the eastern state of Odisha. He was running late for his rendezvous but he couldn't find it in himself to really care. It had been a long journey from Mumbai and he was exhausted. He alighted from the run-down Odisha State Transport bus at the Sonepur bus stand and walked over to one of the tea stalls nearby. He desperately needed some tea to clear away some of the cobwebs from his tired brain.

“*Darshan ke liye aaye ho Saheb?*” the friendly tea-serving boy at the stall asked the man if he's come to visit one of the temples, handing him a glass of piping-hot milky tea. Sonepur was considered a holy city and thousands of people came to the town to visit its many temples. Over the years, the boy had become very good at reading people and identifying the true devotees - among the masses of curiosity-seekers. To his discerning eye, the thickset man with the overabundant moustache and serious, almost-expressionless face did not fit the mould of a typical *darshan* seeker. Most people who came to visit Sonepur's temples generally came with their families, while this man was alone. But then, he didn't seem to be a leisure traveller either; he looked too serious to be a happy, excited tourist. Whoever the man was or whatever his reason for visiting Sonepur, the boy was determined to make small talk with him. In his experience, some customers would respond to his friendly overtures – the best topics were of course the temples and the customers themselves. Some would even chat with him and ask him about his family. The most generous ones would tip him handsomely with ten or even twentyrupee notes.

“*Gokeneswar mandir ka raasta bata sakte ho?*” Abdul asked the boy the route to Gokeneswar temple, the place he was supposed to be at, before now.

Abdul was worried about missing his appointment, but more than that he was furious at himself for having agreed to this plan in the first place. To his mind, it made little sense; yet he was willing to do anything to collect his remaining payment of 30 lakh rupees. As instructed, he had boarded the 1:20 PM Mumbai-Tata Nagar Antyodaya Express from Lokmanya Tilak Terminus, Mumbai and had alighted at Nagpur junction late the same night. Nagpur, the normally busy Tier II city in the Western state of Maharashtra, looked deserted in the dead of the night, and he booked himself a room for

the day at a small, rundown place a fair distance from the railway station, mainly because this place didn't insist that he produce some ID proof and they were willing to accept cash. He did not venture out of the room throughout the day, save for once in the afternoon when he stepped out for a grub. He left in the wee hours of the next day to board the Samta Express to Balangir junction in Odisha. He reached Balangir only at 5 PM, the train having been delayed by over four hours. This journey was followed by an hour-long bus ride to Sonepur on a rickety, over-crowded Odisha State Transport bus. According to the instructions provided, he was supposed to meet a person called Biswal at the Gokeneswar temple in Sonepur at 6 PM, but he was running late.

The 12-year-old, delighted upon receiving a twenty-rupee tip from Abdul, helped him with the directions to the temple and even hailed the visitor a rickshaw to take him to his destination. The rickshaw driver took a shortcut via Sonepur College road and stopped at the edge of a well-maintained playing field.

"You'll have to walk from here Saheb. It's only a short distance – the Gokeneswar temple is right across this ground," the rickshaw driver informed Abdul while silently wondering why the man wanted to visit this small, unremarkable temple when there were many other larger and more popular temples in the nearby vicinity. Once Abdul paid him however, he shrugged silently to himself – *none of my business* – and drove away in search of another fare.

Abdul looked around him and then started walking across the field. On his left, the façade of Sonepur College loomed high over the open ground, which was likely the site for myriad of sports activities for the students. Exactly as the rickshaw driver said, he came upon the temple at the opposite end of the field. In appearance, the temple was a poorly-maintained, nondescript structure similar to the hundreds of small temples found all over India. He was over half an hour late and it was getting dark very rapidly. Even though the college, a bastion of frenzied young human activity, was less than 200 metres away, this area, at this time of the evening, looked as if it had not seen human presence in decades, if not centuries. The temple itself was surrounded by tall trees standing strong and silent in a world gone mad. The sound of water came to him on a soft breeze. A curious investigation revealed the presence of a large water body a few hundred feet away. *That must be the Mahanadi River.* The entrance itself consisted of a vibrant blue, red and

green-coloured archway, decorated with beautifully-detailed carvings of Shiva, his holy consort Parvati and his sons Ganesha (the elephant God) and Kartikeyan. An idol of Nandi, the sacred bull believed to be the ‘vehicle’ of the Hindu God Shiva, stood guard right outside the entrance of the small temple. Beautiful, but still creepy!

There was absolutely no one around. The structure seemed to be abandoned and forgotten. Tired of waiting, he decided to explore the inside of the temple. He opened the rusted, creaking metal gate and stepped inside. The dull, yellow walls and cracked ceilings covered with white distemper and cobwebs offered a stark contrast to the still-vibrant colours at the entrance. The sanctum sanctorum was straight ahead. He stood at the doorway and gazed at the Shiva statue, all his senses tuned to the slightest sound or movement. He was getting more and more edgy about this secret rendezvous in this too-remote a spot. Why was he asked to come to this Godforsaken place to collect his own money? *Why wasn't I paid in Mumbai itself? Or even in Nagpur? Something doesn't smell right here. But what?!*

With such thoughts churning through his disturbed mind, Abdul came outside and stood leaning against a tree near the main gate. For all he knew, Biswal could have come and gone already, but Abdul decided to wait. Maybe Biswal would come back tonight or tomorrow morning. It was well past sunset and the area would have been completely dark if it weren't for the small incandescent bulb hanging just inside the temple entrance, throwing off a weak, milky light outside. *I'll wait all night if need be and sleep inside the temple itself. But I'm not leaving until I get my damn money!*

The amber glow of what seemed to be a lit bidi appeared in the near distance. Abdul saw a dark shape walking towards him from the same direction he himself had taken a little while ago. The shape soon resolved itself into a dark face and a short, stocky body. The man, wearing an all-black ensemble that included a knitted monkey cap covering half his face, approached Abdul and in a gravelly voice enquired.

“Abdul bhai?”

“Yes.”

“You're late. I was here on time but you weren't.”

“Yes, sorry. The train was ...”

“Doesn't matter. I'm Biswal. Follow me.” Biswal cut off Abdul's explanation and started briskly walking towards the woods behind the temple. Abdul followed him, albeit hesitantly and with a rising suspicion that



something was about to happen.

“Where are we going?” Abdul enquired.

“To a cave.”

“What cave? Why?”

“That’s where I’ve kept the money. 30-lakhs is a big amount. I cannot possibly carry it around with me, risking theft or worse.”

On the face of it, Biswal’s explanation was completely valid but Abdul couldn’t shake off the ominous feeling that continued to build inside him. However, he wanted his money so he ignored the feeling as best he could and kept following Biswal’s dark shape. The trail led them through a dense cover of trees, getting damper and more rock-strewn as they walked. It was pitch dark but Biswal’s cell phone flashlight shed just enough illumination to light their way. After what seemed like hours but was probably no more than five minutes, they had reached an area where larger rocks were prevalent and water came up to their ankles. *We are on the banks of the river!* While he was looking around, Abdul suddenly realised that the sound of Biswal’s footsteps in front of him had ceased. The flashlight too went out with a disquieting suddenness. Abdul stopped, taken unawares by the abrupt silence and sudden darkness. *Something is wrong, something is wrong, something is...*

“Biswal? Are you there? Where are you? BISWAL!” He reached into his shirt pocket to remove his old-fashioned multi-key mobile phone. As he tried to access his mobile’s built-in flashlight, he peered into the dark-as-sin night, hoping that the errant man would somehow materialise.

“BISWAL!!!” he yelled, fear and panic gripping him by the throat even while a strange sense of inevitability descended on him.

Biswal seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

A soft sound behind made him turn halfway, the last action he would ever take in his mostly misbegotten life. He had no time to cry out – or do anything else – as the sharp object struck the back of his neck with an almost-clinical preciseness. His head rolled off his body in a spine-chilling parody of a gruesome guillotine-style execution and rolled a couple of feet into the water of the Mahanadi. With a grim sense of satisfaction, the attacker watched the headless body collapsing to the damp ground.

Still holding the axe – its blade now covered with blood and other body fluids – Biswal began part *deux* of his grisly project. He would chop Abdul’s body into smaller pieces and place them in small plastic bags along with the head. He would then place the bags in the canoe he had tied nearby and take

the canoe out on the water, rowing all night if necessary to make sure that the parts were scattered all over the mighty Mahanadi, and the head buried in one of the many swamps along the river.

*The fish would love a treat.*

## DAY 4

### 19

Razzak slowly opened his eyes. He thought he heard a noise; footsteps in the courtyard right outside the shut window of his room, in his maternal uncle and aunt's modest, mud-brick village home. He checked his glow-in-the-dark watch. 3 AM. *Could it be Ranjitsinh's men? Security agencies?* Since the time he returned from Mumbai, he had been on an alert. Another sound had his eyes popping open in alarm. Someone was trying to open the window! Without conscious thought, Razzak reached for the gun he had placed under his pillow, a Glock 17 with a threaded pistol barrel for noise-dampening that had been his constant companion everywhere, day or night since the last 2 days. As he lay still, the window opened partway, the dim yellow lamp burning in the courtyard throwing a faint light into the room. Without turning his head, Razzak realised that it was just his mama checking up on him as was his nightly habit.

Razzak's mama, reassured that all was well, shut the window of his nephew's room and walked back across the courtyard to the room he shared with his wife. For many years after he was brought from Ahmedabad to Bhirandiyara as a young, frightened orphan, Razzak had trouble sleeping. Often, he would wake up screaming in the middle of the night and sit on the floor of his room facing the opposite wall for hours on end. Sometimes he would talk to the wall as if it were a living being he was trying to reason with. At times, he would pierce his palm with the nearest sharp object and write *Jai Shri Ram* on the walls of his room in his blood. For Razzak's mama and mami, the sight was not only disturbing, but also heart-rending. The two of them would embrace him and try to get him to go back to sleep, checking in on him again and again through the night. On some mornings, when one of them entered Razzak's room to wake him up, they would find him lying on the floor in a foetal position, already awake but shuddering and sobbing like his world was coming to an end.

Razzak finally relaxed. There were no more sounds to be heard. No

footsteps. Not even the wind. He closed his eyes and just before sleep finally claimed him, a flash of memory lit his mind's eye with Fatima's thousand-watt smile.

He was 11 years' old and Fatima, his 15-year-old sister, was his mischief partner, mentor and best friend. He thought that *Abbu* and *Ammi* were the best parents a boy could ever wish for. They were a cheerful, happy little family staying in one of several Hindu-Muslim housing societies dotting Ahmedabad. However, in those days, it was simply known as a housing society. The description 'Hindu-Muslim' was added much later, in a way commemorating the most violent event the state of Gujarat had ever seen. Just two days after this horrific incident at *Godhra* had shaken Gujarat to the core with its egregious violence and bloodshed, the family had sat down to a quiet, tense lunch, when a large mob of men, wearing orange and brandishing lethal-looking swords, entered his society's courtyard shouting, "*Jai Shri Ram! Bharat Rajya, Ram Rajya!* (Long live Lord Ram! India belongs to Ram!)"

Hearing the noise, Razzak's father rushed to the front window. The blood draining from his face, he rang the nearest police station, hoping to summon protection from a situation that would probably turn volatile and very soon. Despite multiple frantic efforts, the phone just rang and rang at the other end with no human response whatsoever. *Was it deliberate?* The strident roars of "Jai Shri Ram!" rent the air, getting closer to their house with each passing minute. They could not even escape – there simply wasn't enough time to get away from the frenzied mob that sounded as though it was everywhere. Panic reaching a desperate crescendo, Razzak's father looked at his precious family, helpless to alleviate the terror that was clear in all their eyes. With shaking hands, he shut the window, hoping to at least drown out the hate-filled cries of religious zealots. Reading the resignation in her husband's eyes, Razzak's mother turned to her children and embraced them to offer what little comfort she could, even as she realised that they – a devout Muslim family – were at the mercy of the *Ram bhakts* (devotees). *Allah, save us! These men are out for blood! Keep my children safe! Take me if you want but protect my babies from harm, I beg you!*

Even as they huddled together in the middle of the room, stones were hurled at the front window of their house, breaking the glass with a splintering crash. One sliver hit Fatima on the arm and she cried out in surprise as much as pain. Razzak's father was petrified – more for the sake of

his family than for himself – but he tried keeping Razzak, Fatima and their *ammi* calm, to no avail. Less than five minutes later, a crowd of 20-30 people broke open the door of their house, shouting “*Jai Shri Ram!*” with their swords and *trishuls* (tridents) held aloft like weapons of war.

Razzak’s father cowered before them, hands folded in front of him in petrified humility. But before he could get any words out begging for mercy from this blood-thirsty crowd, he felt kicks raining down on him from every direction. He was hit in the stomach, the back and on the head, his family’s screams dimly piercing his consciousness. As he lay on the floor groaning in pain, swords ripped off both his arms, the life blood gushing out of his body like a red Ganges. Finally, a sword pierced his heart, ending his life on the one hand and putting out his misery on the other. The crowd still chanted, “*Jai Shri Ram, Jai Shri Ram!*” like a deranged marionette come to gruesome life.

A group of five men pinned Razzak’s mother to the floor, falling on her like rabid wolves out for blood. Another group carried his sister Fatima, kicking and screaming into the nearest bedroom. As the door banged shut, Razzak tried to follow Fatima to save her from the demons masquerading as *bhakts*, but he was pulled back, kicked and punched by men much stronger than his frail 11-year old body. Screams of “*Jai Shri Ram!*” reverberated around his little home, drowning out his mother’s and sister’s helpless cries for mercy. A *bhakt* held each of Razzak’s arms while another lashed out at him with his blood-stained sword. As Razzak put all his energy into twisting his little body aside and kicking each of his captors, the blade glanced off of his right arm. His howl of pain mixed with the screams of his captors, who suddenly let him go, giving him the opportunity to jump out of the front window.

Without looking back, he sprinted towards the line of parked cars in the courtyard and quickly hid behind their neighbour’s large SUV. Over the sound of his own sobs, he could still hear *ammi*’s and Fatima’s pain-wracked screams and the wild reverberations of “*Jai Shri Ram!*” Tears streaming down his face, right hand bleeding like a geyser, he stayed hidden behind the car, praying to his God for mercy that never arrived. Abruptly the screams stopped. The mob came out of his house, pumped up and triumphantly waving their swords and *trishuls* in the air. “*Jai Shri Ram!*” one screamed even louder than his comrades as he turned back to the house, lit the home-made Molotov cocktail (petrol bomb) in his hand and then lobbed it into the

now-silent dwelling.

As Razzak watched in horror, his house exploded in a ball of flames soaring towards the clear afternoon sky. The little building where he had lived all his life with Fatima, *ammi* and *abbu*, the site of all the love, laughter and joy he had ever known was being destroyed right in front of his eyes. *My home! My home is burning! Allah, save my home!* Even as his heart cried out in grief and pain, he could do nothing but helplessly watch the flaming spectacle swallowing his entire family in its merciless maw. He suddenly realised how alone he was. He wished that this was all a horrible nightmare and when he opened his eyes, his *ammi* and *abbu* would take him in their arms lovingly, hugging him and Fatima close. But this was no dream. Everyone he loved was gone, never to return.

Cradling his bleeding hand close to his body, he peeped out of his hiding place to find that the rabid mob had disappeared. As he stepped out, injured and traumatised, he saw a few policemen standing guard near the main gate of the housing society. Sobs and barely coherent words burst out of him like staccato gunfire as he hobbled towards them for possible succour. The last thing he remembered was a police *lathi* striking his head with what felt like the force of the hammer of Thor. He woke up in a makeshift refugee camp, one among a horde of dazed, disoriented, angry and newly-orphaned children. However, he was the only child to be struck mute by his experiences. The camp's workers – trying to do their best in the midst of the worst levels of human misery imaginable – were run ragged trying to keep up with even the basic needs of the inmates. No one had the time, expertise or sadly, the inclination to deal with the special needs of a young child so brutally exposed to the trauma of extreme violence and bloodshed. Luckily for Razzak, his mama traced him to the camp about a fortnight later. Although he was still traumatised and mute, his mama hoped that bringing the child to his home in Kutch would help him with the healing process.

It was still early when Razzak woke with a suddenness that no longer surprised him. The pain and anguish of the past would always remain with him; they were inseparable from his psyche. He closed his eyes and yearned to see his family again. *Ammi! Abbu! Fatima!* Making a visible effort to shake off the grief that was always quietly waiting to descend upon him in his weaker moments, he prayed that their souls were resting in peace in Allah's merciful heaven.

He reached for the glass of water on the *teapoy* standing next to his bed and took a small sip. Finally rising from the bed, he moved to the corner cupboard, removed his prayer mat from the top shelf and spread it in the middle of the floor. Then he placed his Muslim cap on his head, knelt on the mat in the direction facing Mecca and performed his morning *namaz*, tears once more streaming from eyes that were both anguished and enraged.

*Revenge! Revenge! REVENGE!*

He stepped out of his room into the courtyard of the house. The heat of the sun had warmed the cold, dry Kutch air to give a balmy, cosy feel to the morning. He went straight to the kitchen where he knew his mami would be at this early hour. She was making *theplas* and *masala chai* over the *chulha*, an old-fashioned stove usually fired by coal or wood. As her tall, handsome nephew with unusual hazel eyes entered her domain, she smiled at him, nodding towards the brewing tea. . She had never been blessed with children of her own and showered Razzak with all the maternal love and affection stored up inside her. Every time he left on his trucking job and stayed away for most part of the year, her heart would break a little and yearn to see him again. She had lost track of the number of times she had insisted that he settle down in the village and work in their mava shop, but as always, he seemed disinterested and distracted. *My darling boy has a whole other life I know nothing about.*

His mama, a frail man in his late 60s, was sitting on the veranda swing, reading the day's Gujarati newspaper and humming softly to himself. Shivering slightly in the morning's chill, mama picked up his green shawl lying beside him and placed it around his shoulders. His shawl exactly matched his green cap and contrasted beautifully with his ivory *kurta* and white *pajama*. As Razzak approached, mama smiled warmly and nodded at the empty seat next to him on the swing. Seating himself, Razzak picked up the paper's supplement and settled down for a leisurely read.

As he watched Razzak from the corner of his eye, mama once again realised with a pang how much he missed his nephew's presence in the months that he was away from Bhirandiyara. It was great to have someone from the family to help him with his mava shop and share the often-burdensome responsibility of being a business-owner. But even more than that, it was wonderful to simply have Razzak in the house, sharing their lives, joys and challenges like a real family. As they sat together on the swing in companionable silence, mami joined them on the porch, looking resplendent

in her colourful, embroidered *choli ghaghra* that was made even more vibrant by her jewellery – bangles that ran halfway up her arms, *jhanjhar* around her ankles tinkling softly with each step, and of course the *mang tikka* that touched her forehead like a lover’s gentle kiss. Seating herself on the clean porch floor, mami handed mama and Razzak plates piled with *theplas* and a handful of *papdi*. She also placed old, white porcelain cups of piping hot *chai* near their feet, warning them with a twinkle in her eye, “If you spill your *chai*, I’m not brewing you a fresh cup!”

Mami was an accomplished artist, well-known for her skill and creativity in the area. During the morning, she would help her husband manage their decades-old mava shop. And in the afternoon, she would get to her real passion – embroidery. She would embroider everything from women’s blouses to table covers to blankets and rugs, and sell them to tourists who came to the village for the *Rann of Kutch* Festival. The end of festival also marked the end of the tourist season. During this off-season, mami would continue her embroidery work and build up an inventory of sorts in preparation for the next season. Inspired by her dedication to her craft - and aware of the potential for good earnings - almost all the women of the village had taken up this craft as well. In the past, when there was no high-profile festival to attract tourists and their *moolah*, these simple, mostly-uneducated women were homemakers, tied to home and hearth with no independent income source of their own. Since its inception, the *Rann of Kutch* Festival had proved to be a boon not only for the women of this and many other surrounding villages, but also for their families.

Razzak thought about the day that lay ahead. He would leave in a few hours to keep his appointment with Ranjitsinh near Prag Mahal in Bhuj and collect the remaining money owed to him. Ranjitsinh didn’t know it – and probably wouldn’t care even if he did – but for Razzak, the attack was more than just a job. It was the most important mission he had ever undertaken in his life, probably the very reason he was drawn to the path of jihad in the first place. He was thankful to *Allah* for this chance.

*Ammi, abbu, Fatima, I have avenged!*

After collecting his remaining payment, he would finish off Ranjitsinh too. *No loose ends!* Then he would immediately head back to Pakistan and his family. It was already end of March. He was a month late.



Shamsher Singh was shaking in barely-controlled rage. He had been lied to and deceived. However, mixed in with his anger at the man who duped him was a healthy dose of self-disgust at his own naivety.

The tall, dark man had called him numerous times – *how did he get my mobile number?!* – and then approached him just outside the Indian army's cantonment area in Bhuj a month ago. He already knew that Shamsher was working in the ordnance unit, and asked his favour to procure an RPG-7 to be supplied to a wealthy industrialist in Rajsamand, Rajasthan for use in his marble mine. The request did not make sense. How would an RPG-7 help in a marble mine when specific explosives are available for the purpose of blasting hills? But the man gave him an advance payment of 5 lakh rupees in cash, an enormous sum to a lowly-paid man like Shamsher Singh, that too without blinking an eye. Dumbfounded by the huge pile of crisp notes – and already dreaming of ways to spend it – Singh had agreed to deliver the weapon as soon as possible. Only now was he realising that he had been taken for a royal fool. *What the hell have I done?!*

The man had specifically requested for an RPG. Luckily for him and for Shamsher, the brigade ordnance unit that Shamsher was a part of, had a few RPG-7 units left over in the warehouse from its last requisition of the weapon. The RPGs were no longer the weapon of choice for the Indian army since they had made the switch to Carl Gustaf recoilless rifles which had a utility similar to the RPG-7s but were far lighter to carry, stable and accurate. On a designated day, Shamsher secreted the weapon from the ordnance unit into an army jeep and delivered it near the Bhuj Railway Station. As the weapon was no longer being requisitioned by any of the artillery or infantry units, no one really noticed it missing from the ordnance warehouse. Until this morning, that is. Like a plague of locusts, the army top brass had suddenly descended upon the army camp in Bhuj. The RPG used in the attack on the Prime Minister had been identified and traced. To here.

For Shamsher Singh, this was a nightmare scenario of epic proportions. He was a patriot to the core, willing to sacrifice even the last drop of his blood for his country. He came from a family of soldiers – separated by generations but bound by a common passion to serve the nation selflessly and with a boundless sense of national pride. Like his father and grandfather before him, he too was a loyal son of the soil and the Punjab Regiment was

his second family. He respected the Prime Minister, not only the position, but the man himself. Despite his busy schedule, the PM made sure that he spent time on every Diwali and New Year's Day with some brigade or regiment of the country's armed forces. For all this and more, Shamsheer believed that the PM deserved to lead the country. More than that, he believed that both the armed forces and the country needed *this* PM.

He was supposed to collect his remaining payment of 10 lakh rupees last night from near the Kutch Museum in Bhuj but he didn't. Instead, he carried the 5 lakh rupees he had already received to a clearing a fair distance from his residential quarter and set it all on fire. Anybody watching would have assumed that he had lit a campfire to stay warm in the cool night. Looking back, he realised that had he known the ultimate purpose of the RPG-7 he helped steal, he would never have accepted the money. *This money is tainted! My Waheguru will never forgive me. I will never forgive myself!*

He tried calling the dark man's phone, but every time he got the same recorded message in response: 'Please check the number you have dialled.'

He threw the phone down on his bed in frustration and mounting panic.

He paced back and forth for a few minutes and picked up the instrument to try the dark man's number once again. Just as he did, a staccato knock sounded upon the door of his room. Turning to the sound, a sense of eerie calm descended upon him.

He knew what that knock portended.

Doom.

Squaring his broad shoulders in grim determination, he opened his cupboard and removed his INSAS service rifle from the top shelf.

*I am not a traitor. I made a stupid mistake but I AM NOT A TRAITOR!*

He turned to the stylised picture of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) pasted on the inside of the cupboard. Hands folded in front of him in a humble Namaste and eyes filling with tears, he murmured, "Forgive me, my Mother. I have let you down. Jai Hind!"

He placed the barrel of the gun under his chin, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

Hearing the roar of the rifle's report, the armed soldiers outside looked at each other in shock, and as one, broke open the door. As they tumbled into the room, they were greeted by the gruesome sight of Shamsheer Singh's body lying on the floor in a rapidly widening pool of blood.

Only one thought was reverberating through the brains of every person

standing over Shamsheer's broken body, '*Shamsheer paaji! What have you done?! WHY?!*'

Vijay was unusually nervous as he sat in the National Security Advisor's office with the NSA, the Director of IB and another senior official from the agency. The IB Director had called an urgent, impromptu meeting where many of the task force's members – including officials from the Home Ministry – were not invited on purpose. The IB Director reported directly to the Home Minister, so if the latter was in the dark about this particular meeting, then it must be something very important and very hush-hush, Vijay thought. Vijay was not meant to be part of the meeting either, but Prahlad Dev, the NSA had asked him to join given the depth of his involvement already as chief coordinator of the Joint Task Force.

The IB Director cleared his throat as he addressed the small audience watching him with rapt attention. "I have called this meeting because I believe we have found a useful lead. Admittedly, part of it is still a hunch – which we still need to follow up on – so I'm not comfortable sharing it with anyone outside this room yet. There are big names involved, so any leakage would be a disaster. And for reasons I don't need to explain, I definitely cannot involve the political leadership in this information chain, be it the Home Minister or anyone else. So I am limiting this particular piece of knowledge with the Intelligence and Administrative members that are part of this meeting," he said, gazing at the group assembled before him and finally settling on Vijay who was seated in the audience to the Director's left.

"Yes, Sir, I understand," Vijay said taking the cue. He was the only Administrative member in the meeting.

"Good. Anyway, you all probably also know that in the IB, one of our responsibilities is to keep a watchful eye on industrialists, actors, sportspersons, religious leaders... basically anyone who qualifies as 'influential' and or a 'firebrand' in this country."

Vijay was aware that the IB, CBI, RAW and other intelligence agencies in India used NETRA (Network Traffic Analysis), a software application indigenously developed by the scientists and engineers at the Centre of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CAIR) and Defence Research Development Organization (DRDO) for monitoring all internet traffic in the country. He also knew about the highly-advanced CMS (Central Monitoring System) that linked all telecommunication infrastructure set up by the different private and public providers in the country. Unbeknownst to the

good citizens of India, virtually each byte of data and voice traffic in the country is tracked through NETRA and CMS, mapped against a dynamic list of keywords and then further analysed by experts for any suspicious user activity upon a 'hit'.

"What you all don't know is that we have also been watching the senior BNP ministers and important members of all other political parties... without their knowledge of course..." the Director said, watching the reactions of his audience.

Pin-drop silence.

Vijay could almost hear his heartbeat as he anxiously waited for what the IB Director had to say next. *Why did the NSA even include me in the meeting?!*

He figured why political bigwigs were kept in the dark about this meeting. *This is explosive information!*

Outside the room, a familiar tune started playing, the jaunty ringtone in stark contrast to the sombre mood in the room. As if on cue, another phone rang immediately in one of the neighbouring rooms of the large PMO building. However, the silence in the meeting room remained unbroken.

Prahlad Dev reached for a cigarette in his pocket, lit it up and leaned back on the chair as he took a deep puff. He seemed to be studying the ceiling deeply.

The silence was deadening. Vijay was uncomfortable. It reminded him of an experience he once had when he visited an anechoic (no echo) sound chamber in Minneapolis, United States, supposedly one of the most silent places on earth. The experience was one he would never forget as long as he lived. He could hear his heartbeats loud and clear, and even hear the blood flowing through his veins and the air filling his lungs. In less than 15 minutes, he started having hallucinations about his first wife, Natasha. She appeared out of the blue and sat right next to him in the room, trying to speak to him, but she wasn't audible! She was running her hands over his face and coming close to him... At the time, a tiny, still-rational part of his brain realised that he had to get out of the chamber immediately! *Let me out!*

Hearing his panicked shouts, the chamber's attendants threw open the door and pulled him out. This wasn't the first time they had to rescue someone from the deadening silence. Vijay was gasping for air and waving his arms around like a mad man. It took a few minutes for the terror to abate

and for his breathing and mental faculties to return to normal. Thinking about the experience still gave him the creeps. Today's experience felt eerily similar, although it was in a different, less-controlled setting. Once again, he could feel his heart trying to beat itself out of his chest and his lifeblood gushing through his body. *Explosive! Are the intelligence agencies laying down their own rules?*

Vijay coughed in an attempt to break the silence. The NSA was still looking up at the ceiling as he gulped the smoke.

The Director continued trying to alleviate the impact of what he had just said. "We don't really 'listen in' to the phone conversations of VVIPs, of course which means that the content of these calls is unknown to us. We listen in only when we think it's imperative to do so. However, we do monitor the call logs real-time, so at any given moment, we always know who is speaking to whom, when and for how long."

Prahlad Dev closely watched the Director's face as he made these revelations, choosing not to interrupt this flow of information. He was already aware that the IB tracked calls secretly and without a warrant. He just wasn't sure about the pervasiveness of it all, which only seemed to be all too pervasive now. He also knew that the agency listened in on the conversations of some 'persons of interest', despite the Director's assertions that they didn't. What he was having trouble with at the moment was the fact that the IB Director was being so open with these facts, that too in this particular forum. While he felt that the meeting's attendees – especially Vijay – were thorough professionals and could be relied upon on matters of sensitivity and confidentiality, he also felt that they need not need to know the details of how the intelligence agencies operated or what they did. *Why is the Director being so free with this kind of information? Is he being deliberate or simply naive?*

"Asit made three calls over the last month to Keyur Shenoy, the owner of Moon Media and Entertainment, the company that owns the Kal Aaj Kal channel. As you may recall, Kal Aaj Kal aired the ambulance incident just before the attack. In the same period, both men also met in person twice. Keyur flew in to Delhi once and Asit Patel came to Mumbai the next time."

"So? Politicians and the media are bedfellows after all," Prahlad Dev prodded the Director for more information. It's fairly common for politicians to speak to or meet with powerful media owners from time to time, especially during the election period. The larger political parties spend hundreds of crores of rupees on media for canvassing activities in election years and the

leaders do meet up on media strategies and cost negotiations. Of course, some of this money also goes to keeping the media sweet.

“True. But we also checked the call logs of Shenoy. He had called his employee – Vinay Sharma, the producer of the show that broadcast live visuals of the rogue ambulance – multiple times over the past 15 days. To add to our suspicions, Shenoy had even called the producer on the morning the Prime Minister was attacked, and again when the Prime Minister landed in Mumbai and was en route to Andheri.”

“I’m still not convinced. This could all be a gigantic coincidence and nothing else. Couldn’t it?” Prahlad Dev retorted, playing the devil’s advocate as the others looked on. Keyur Shenoy was an important name in the world of business and media so any deductions or accusations they made had better be air-tight with no holes that some creepy high-paid lawyer might exploit to their benefit.

“No, it doesn’t appear to be so. And it’s highly unlikely that a high-profile industrialist like Keyur Shenoy – a man with his hands in many different pies, so to speak – would call a mid-level employee directly, that too multiple times over a period of a few days. Not unless he had either a specific work-related reason or a yen to pick up an old relationship or otherwise. We know that the latter is impossible because Shenoy and the producer did not know each other from before their common association with Kal Aaj Kal TV. The producer was only hired six months back. And we checked their call records going back over two years. They have never spoken with each other, *ever*.

We also checked their social media accounts and their emails. Again, all we found was that they were complete strangers, at least until a fortnight back when they suddenly became each other’s phone buddies. All this brings us to the only other possibility – Shenoy and the producer had a specific reason to connect. Now the question is – *what* was that reason?”

Watching this interesting by-play between the IB Director and the NSA, Vijay made careful notes in his diary in a coded language that only he could understand. Keyur Shenoy was the billionaire playboy owner of Moon Media and Entertainment, a conglomerate that spanned multiple industries including telecommunication, media and finance. He regularly made it to the list of the richest and most high-profile individuals in the country. Intuition told Vijay that the IB director was right. For a man like Shenoy to call a junior or middle management employee, that too out of the blue and so often in a short

period of time, was definitely an anomaly that warranted closer inspection. *The IB may be to be onto something here.*

“Sir, perhaps Mr. Shenoy wanted to directly oversee Kal Aaj Kal TV’s coverage of the Prime Minister’s trip to Mumbai? Since the BNP would have major spends and promotions running on the channel, he may have wanted to make sure that they were not showing or saying anything to upset the party?” Vijay suggested.

“Yes, that could be a possibility.”

“OK, but all said and then, how does Asit Patel fit into this mess?” Prahlad Dev enquired.

“Prior to last month, Asit Patel had never met Keyur Shenoy or talked to him on the phone. It was always the BNP communication cell that worked directly with Moon Media Group’s Chief Executive’s office. This is why the sudden calls between Patel and Shenoy raised our suspicions,” the Director replied.

“Alright, I agree that some of these developments are strange and worthy of further investigation, but I’m still not sure how all the dots connect,” Prahlad Dev prodded the Director further to help plug the gaps in his understanding.

“OK here’s some more interesting information I want you all to think about. Vinay Sharma, the producer, phoned Keyur Shenoy’s mobile twice in the space of a few minutes. As per the call logs, both these calls were placed soon after the attack on the Prime Minister, and per his body’s post-mortem report, just before he was killed. Vinay Sharma, as we know, was murdered in cold blood, poisoned, and dumped like trash in an old house in Mumbai’s Lower Parel area. A check on the producer’s finances revealed that his savings account, which is also his salary deposit account with Moon Media had received two deposits of 25 lakh rupees each, 10 and 3 days before the day of the attack. The deposits originated from Moon Media & Entertainment. We believe that the money was not a performance bonus or reward, or anything related to his work with the company. The bank statement simply indicates ‘Moon Media - Services’ next to the credited amount. Now the question is what kind of services did the producer render that Moon Media pay him such a huge amount of money? His monthly salary, to give a context, was rupees 35 lakhs.”

“Now it’s getting interesting!” Prahlad Dev commented, provoking titters and chuckles from the assembled audience.



The IB Director smiled and continued, “Indeed! We think the producer was rewarded for his cooperation, his job to ensure that the fake ambulance story got plenty of coverage and built up a lot of pressure - leading the authorities to open up the thoroughfare for ambulance movement, inspite of the PM’s movement. From what we also know from Deepti, the TV reporter who was covering the incident, Vinay Sharma was coordinating with the Director of an NGO – a fake NGO – to whom the ambulance purportedly belonged. Once Vinay finished his part in this gruesome play, he met his own gruesome end.”

“Though it would be naïve to believe that a meticulous plan as this would leave such a paper finance trail,” Prahlad Dev observed.

“Yes, that’s true, but that’s also what makes it seem very normal, isn’t it? It could very well be a strategy – a clear payment from Moon Media to the producer can’t be hidden and could guise as a normal payment. A cash discovery – say in the producer’s or his relative’s home, on the contrary, would raise everyone’s suspicion.”

“And what would Shenoy and Patel gain from this?”.

“From Keyur Shenoy’s point of view, Moon Media & Entertainment would be the lucky recipient of BNP’s massive advertising budget. And if BNP forms the new government, the spends on Moon Media channels could get even bigger over the years. They may even get some policy benefits. So, a bigger slice of the pie for Moon Media,” Vijay interjected.

“Correct. During the last election, the BNP officially spent almost 350 crore rupees advertising on Moon Media’s bouquet of channels. This time, the deal size is twice, a whopping 700 crores! Of course, the unofficial numbers are much higher.” the Director affirmed.

“So then, what is the next course of action?”

“Well, for now, we have both individuals under watch and are actively monitoring their movements, phone calls and digital footprints. We have already asked the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) to analyse the two payments of 25 lakh rupees each from Moon Media to the producer.”

“But how do you know that someone in FIU would not leak information to the Finance Minister and even tip off someone in Moon Media – perhaps Shenoy himself?” the NSA raised a very valid question. The Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) was a part of the Finance Ministry and reported directly to the Economic Intelligence Council headed by the Finance Minister. Moon Media and Entertainment probably had high level contacts in

the Finance Ministry so bringing the FIU into the loop was probably a bad idea.

“You’re right,” the Director of IB said, “and my answer is, we don’t. But we have tried to minimise the possibility of this happening by involving very few people in the FIU in this investigation. And these are people I have hand-picked myself so I know that they can be trusted not to leak anything.”

Vijay sat back in his chair. The channels belonging to Moon Media and Entertainment – some 25 of them – were among the first to suggest ‘the opposition-is-the-culprit’ angle when the attack shook the country and its people. Last night, even when the opposition politician had been released after questioning, Moon News and Kal Aaj Kal – the English and Hindi news channels of the company – had broadcast a prime-time debate on the opposition’s role in the attack on the PM and the rapidly deteriorating levels of political discourse and gamesmanship in India. In the last 2 days, they had also carried interviews of Asit Patel as well as the acting Prime Minister and the Home Minister and also played multiple documentaries on the ‘good work’ done by the BNP government over the last 5 years. A show on the ‘Life and Times of the Prime Minister’ was being played on Moon’s news channels every 12 hours, obviously to stir up the patriotic emotions of the Indian diaspora worldwide and create a wave of sympathy for the PM and the BNP. All in all, it was pretty clear where their political loyalties lay.

“As to the question of what Asit Patel stands to gain from this attack on the PM,” the Director of CBI said, breaking Vijay’s train of thought, “Since our current Prime Minister’s survival is a touch and go matter, Patel could very well become the next Prime Minister of India. Can anyone say *politically-motivated assassination?*”

The implications were shocking.

Once more, the room went deathly quiet.

Once more Vijay felt as if he was back in an anechoic chamber. *Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.*

Ranjitsinh had been shocked witless when he received the call on his home's landline number two evenings back. *How did he get my home number?* He cursed Mumbai police's ineptness once again. *Razzak should not have been alive!* Though he had hoped never to hear Razzak's voice again – or God forbid meet him in person – a strange voice inside him had kept insisting that he and Razzak would definitely meet, and soon.

"We meet on Tuesday at 3 PM sharp," Razzak stated baldly, with no pretensions to politeness or small talk.

"Er... okay," was all the response Ranjitsinh could manage while trying to keep the anxiety from his voice.

"You will bring my remaining 3 crores?" Razzak reminded him of the remaining payment he was to receive in Bhuj soon after the attack.

"I will bring it with me."

"Fine. You will get the address tomorrow."

*Click.*

The next evening, Ranjitsinh got a call once more, this time on his office landline at the Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau Office in Ahmedabad, and once more Ranjitsinh was shocked.

"3 PM at Bhuj. I will leave an envelope for you at the tea-stall outside Kutch Museum. Collect it at 1 PM. State your name as *Gadha Kumar*." With this curt message, Razzak disconnected. The joke wasn't lost on Ranjitsinh, even in the midst of such gloomy circumstances. *Gadha Kumar – a man as stupid as a donkey. Ha ha!* But despite his grim amusement, he acknowledged to himself in a rare moment of honest self-reflection that the name itself was not far from the way he saw himself right now.

He felt as though he had been royally out-manoeuvred by someone, that too for the first time in a very long time. *I hate the man but he's absolutely right. I am exactly like a donkey! He knows all my coordinates – where I work, where I live! How does he know my home and office phone numbers?*

Vinay, the TV producer and Abdul, the Ford Endeavour driver were dead. Shamsheer Singh, the army man, had taken his own life. *He was too naive for his own good. Poor fellow.* Despite these eliminations, Ranjitsinh was more conscious than ever that there were still some unfinished businesses that he needed to deal with, loose ends that needed to be tied up. And Razzak was the main loose end. Having him alive, especially at a time like this, was akin

to carrying a ticking time bomb in one's hand. The explosion could occur at any moment, destroying anything and everything in its orbit. He once again cursed the Mumbai police. *I have to contain this. The day I meet Razzak should be his last.*

The next morning, he made the 5-hour journey from Ahmedabad to Bhuj by road with the money stuffed into a non-descript, overnight bag under the passenger seat next to him. At exactly 1 PM, he stated his name as 'Gadha Kumar' at the tea-stall while doing his best to ignore the amused snickers of the stall owner and the people standing nearby. He collected his envelope and turning his back to the chortling group – *imbeciles!* – opened it to see what it contained.

The hand-written note inside was crisp and to the point.

'3 PM. Darbargadh Road. Near Prag Mahal.

A rickshaw with license plate 5666 will be parked outside Darbargadh complex. Place the money inside, walk towards the front of the vehicle and wait there. You will get another instruction.

COME ALONE.'

Ranjitsinh was accompanied by his trusted IB colleague from the Bhuj office, a man who had often been his partner in crime, both figuratively and literally. He had also arranged for three other men – 'like-minded' accomplices from the local Crime Branch to assist them with their plan. They reached the rendezvous point early and found the rickshaw with license plate 5666 already stationed there. There was no driver.

They carefully went over the plan. As the rickshaw drove off with the money, they would follow it and wait to ambush it at another location, one that was not as crowded as Darbargadh Road. Shoot Razzak dead and even take back the money bag. *Simple*. Or if there was an opportunity to be discreet enough, shoot Razzak wherever he was, though very cautiously, as shooting him dead in the middle of a crowded street could bring a lot of unwanted attention and that would be the last thing Ranjitsinh wanted.

It was 2 PM and Ranjitsinh still had an hour to kill before he was supposed to place the money and wait for Razzak. He could feel his anxiety rising with every minute that passed, so while his men surveyed the area and took positions, he decided to divert his attention and explore the Prag Mahal like a regular tourist. He couldn't remember a time earlier when he had been

as edgy, and he did his best to temper his anxiety as he walked around the large *darbar* (king's royal court) on the first floor of the *mahal*.

He studied the plaque in one corner of the *darbar*. It explained that the palace, a stunning sandstone and Italian marble structure, was designed in the Italian Gothic architectural style and that artisans from Italy, Kutch and Rajasthan were involved in its construction. He didn't really understand architectural styles, but he was awed by their intricacies. History affirmed that the *raj*as of yore lived in massive palaces in the absolute lap of luxury, a fact that he both appreciated and envied. Whichever old city he happened to visit – whether it was Jaipur or Varanasi, Gwalior or Thanjavur – he made it a point to visit the palaces there and note their layout and floor plans. Every time, he was wonderstruck by the magnificence of the structures – the huge *darbars*, the tall ceilings, rough sandstone and smooth marble façades, and the intricately-detailed sculptures and carvings that were hallmarks of almost every royal Indian property of the time.

The Prag Mahal was commissioned by *MahaRao* Pragmalji II, ruler of Kutch in the 1860s. Unfortunately for him, he didn't live long enough to see the results of his pet project, dying before construction was even completed, and for years, his son enjoyed the grand palace of his departed father's dreams.

*I don't want to end up like that, working like a dog, only to have someone else steal my bone! But then, who will steal my bone? It's not as though I have any greedy children of my own. Well, I do but it's almost as though I don't.*

His eyes fell on the stuffed bodies of a *saabar* (stag) and a tiger – hunted and killed for sport by the *raja* that lived in the palace at one time or another – mounted on the wall in the main *darbar*. In present times, hunting was banned, but if it wasn't he would have surely loved to hunt some game. Perhaps he would kill lions, tigers, stags or blackbucks found aplenty in the forests of Gujarat and stuff them – or at least parts of them – like a taxidermist and hang them up on the walls of his residence in Ahmedabad as trophies to commemorate his own 'manliness'.

He climbed the stairs to the second floor and crossed over to a narrow, dimly-lit spiral staircase tucked unobtrusively into one corner that led to the 45-foot-high clock tower. As he ascended these time-worn steps, he stayed on the left, leaving just enough space for the visitors who were climbing down. From the top, he could see most of Bhuj city spread before him in a

sparkling, sun-kissed panorama. He had been to Bhuj many times over the years, but every time he found the grandeur of the palace calling to him like an old friend, making it impossible to resist its lure. He always capped his palace visit with a stopover at the clock tower. And each time he stood inside the tower, looking out over the glorious vista that was Bhuj, he was mesmerised all over again by the city that seemed to be continuously expanding in every possible direction. The rate of expansion had accelerated over the last few years since the *Rann Utsav* was first inaugurated by the then-Chief Minister, now the Prime Minister of the country. If not for the efforts of the local communities and the government in rebuilding the region from scratch after the massive earthquake of 2001, Kutch might have been wiped off the map and eventually even from people's memories. But now, every winter, people flocked to the *Rann* from all over India and abroad, keeping the region not only alive, but also prosperous. However, there was an unfortunate side effect of this expansion and prosperity. The water levels of the Harmirsar Lake – still visible from the tower, despite the unstoppable onward march of rapid urbanisation – were dropping at an alarming rate every year.

Ranjitsinh's attention now turned to the imposing structure that stood a short distance away. Unlike the Prag Mahal, the *Aina Mahal* (Glass Palace) was in complete shambles, a once-grand edifice constructed in the 1760s, now reduced to a pile of rubble that most people acknowledged with a sad shake of the head. During the 2001 earthquake, most of the Glass Mahal collapsed – ironically enough like a heap of glass – and official and public apathy ensured that it stayed in ruins, unlike its grand neighbour.

Ranjitsinh's home in Ahmedabad was a large, 2200 square-foot apartment on the top floor of a newly constructed building in Satellite, a posh locality of the city. He had five other large properties in Ahmedabad, all of them *benami* (under proxy, false names). He also owned two big properties in Mumbai, a huge achievement in and of itself, considering that the country's financial and entertainment capital was also its most expensive city and boasted real estate prices that were continuously rising and among the highest in the world. Still, his financial status was not enough to satisfy Ranjitsinh. *One day I'll sell them all and build my own palace in Ahmedabad!* He wanted to live the life of a present-day *raja* but he knew that he couldn't do that just yet. *One more side hustle like the current one and I'll have the moolah to make this dream come true.*

He made his way slowly down the spiral steps of the clock tower, leaving just enough space for some tourists who were climbing up. He had brought his ex-wife to Prag Mahal many years ago, when they had still been together and trying to make a go of their marriage. While climbing down from the tower, she had missed one of the steps but he had caught her in time and saved her from tripping. They had shared a rare moment of laughter at the time but overall, his life with her had been anything but fun and games. He felt continuously deprived of his freedom, both of time and space. They had constant squabbles over his aspirations and methods, turning their family home into a performance hall for acrimonious dramas. Finally, one day, after years of tense silences, churlish dinners and petty arguments, she walked out of his house with their two children and he hadn't seen her – or them – since. Occasionally he thought of bequeathing some of his properties to his children in the hope that they would eventually realise the value he had created for them, even though they were currently estranged and probably would remain so until the day he died.

Ranjitsinh stepped out of the Darbarghad palace complex into the bright sunshine and walked over to his two favourite food stalls that served *undhiya pav*, bun bread filled with *undhiyu* – a traditional Gujarati vegetarian dish made from yams, sweet potatoes, brinjals, peas and beans. One stall served a medium-hot *undhiya pav* and the other a very spicy version filled with red-hot chillies. Today, he ordered the medium-hot version and followed it up with a large glass of chilled sugarcane juice at the stall just across the road. *Sugar would help me relax.*

He looked at his watch. It was about time. Ranjitsinh was not particularly happy with Razzak's choice of this rendezvous spot. As a crowded marketplace, it clearly worked in Razzak's favour. Rather than a public location like Prag Mahal, he would have preferred to meet Razzak at a remote location where killing him would have been easier with a much lower potential for disaster. *Anyway, what's done is done.* Ranjitsinh was determined to get rid of Razzak – crowded area or not – as discreetly as possible.

He knew that the operation, under any circumstances, couldn't go wrong for the simple reason that he had no Plan B. If the operation went out of control, while he could still say that he had been running a top-secret, undercover IB operation to shadow a suspected extremist, an operation that

somehow went badly wrong, his case would be undermined by the fact that he had filed no First Information Report nor taken any permission from his superiors. Neither, to cover up for the local Crime Branch men helping him on the operation, had he raised any official engagement request with the agency. This could put him in a bad spot. The only silver lining being that once the intelligence agencies realised that the suspected '*jihadi*' who found himself at the wrong end of Ranjitsinh's gun was none other than the man who had attacked the Prime Minister, Ranjitsinh would become an overnight celebrity. He would make news headlines all over the country, be felicitated by the intelligence and political community, receive cash awards and his long-awaited promotion along with a fat pay raise. *And soon my palace in Ahmedabad will become reality!*

Neither could he directly say that he was following a lead that took him to the Prime Minister's attacker because then he would also have to explain the source of this particular piece of information. And wouldn't that open a whole new can of worms! He would have to be careful and only subtly nudge the intelligence agencies in that direction.

It was 3 PM. Ranjitsinh extracted the overnight bag filled with 2000-rupee notes from his parked car and walked over to the parked rickshaw. There was still no driver. *Expected*. He placed the bag in the narrow luggage space of the rickshaw behind the passenger seat. He then stood by the rickshaw waiting for Razzak to arrive, sure that he was nearby and watching Ranjitsinh's every move. His colleague from the IB was lounging on the porch of a shop right across the road, looking like just another tired tourist waiting for other members of his group to emerge from the Darbargadh complex, which housed both Prag Mahal and Aina Mahal. The other undercover men, officials from the local Crime Branch were also nearby. Two of them pretended to be friends enjoying a cup of tea at a stall just down the road. The third man, playing the role of a customer at the sugarcane juice stall was probably on his tenth glass by now, hopped up on sugar while waiting for some much-awaited action.

The reward promised to all four was handsome.

The brief was simple: KILL.



An old, turbaned and bearded Sikh man nonchalantly walked past the Darbargadh complex and continued down the Darbargadh road, keenly observing the place without really seeming to. A dirty brown satchel hanging on his left shoulder, he passed by a rickshaw parked near the *undhiya* stalls and approached Saraf bazaar in the crowded old town. The bazaar had several shops selling everything from antique furnishings and ornaments to Kutchi sweets and clothes adorned with exquisite Kutchi embroidery. He stopped for a few minutes at a shop selling collectible old coins dating back to the Mughal and pre-independent British eras as well as some of the first coins and notes ever minted in the newly independent India era. The Sikh man declined to buy anything despite the shopkeeper's wheedling and moved on, crossing a narrow, crowded crossroad until he reached the centuries-old vegetable market. Housed in a former British Garrison, the market is a large indoor space where vegetable vendors and farmers from Bhuj came to sell fresh produce of the day. He entered the market and made his way purposefully to the other end and exited. He then crossed another narrow road and entered a small, rundown shop selling perfumes just a short distance away from the old vegetable market.

The Sikh man gave the young boy manning the shop a hundred-rupee note and watched him take off on his bicycle towards the Darbargadh complex. *He has a simple task.* Noticing a mirror hanging on the wall just opposite the entrance, he adjusted his turban and admired his changed appearance, a new look that he had almost perfected. His father had been a handsome man whose masculine appearance was accentuated by his luxuriant moustache and beard. His pedigree may have been the reason Razzak had always been fascinated playing with facial hair to radically change his appearance. He already had a large collection of fake moustaches, beards and wigs and continued adding to it every few weeks. His little hobby was a huge help with his chosen profession, although his hazel eyes, an inheritance from his beautiful mother, would give him away to anyone who knew him well. Cognizant of this fact, he had also started collecting coloured contact lenses to add to his repertoire of disguises. When he attacked the PM in Mumbai 3 days ago, he had worn a set of brown contact lenses to make himself look less memorable so he could easily blend in with the rest of the Indian population.

Moving his satchel to his other shoulder, he left the shop and retraced his steps. After walking through the old vegetable market again, he stood once more near its front entrance. An operation in a crowded tourist spot like Prag Mahal would be much easier to execute. He could discreetly shoot at his target and merge with the throng, becoming one of them and eventually disappearing into the undulating sea of humanity.

The young boy on the cycle reached the Darbargadh complex and, as he had been instructed, handed a small mobile phone to the tall, bulky man standing by the rickshaw. As Ranjitsinh placed the phone to his ear, a cold voice barked "Get into the rickshaw, take a U-turn towards the vegetable market and keep driving."

"How far should I drive?!" *Bloody Razzak!*

"You don't need to know that right now. Just drive!"

The boy pointed towards the old vegetable market, snatched his phone back and cycled back in the direction he had come from. Ranjitsinh got into the driver's seat of the rickshaw and signalled his men to follow. He started the rickshaw and took a U-turn along the narrow Darbargadh road, driving through Saraf bazaar and towards the vegetable market. It was crowded at this time of the day and the going was slow.

Just as the rickshaw went past the vegetable market at a snail's pace, a lanky old Sikh man hopped onto the passenger seat. Ranjitsinh had barely turned his head to look at the man when he felt the cold barrel of a gun pushing against his back.

"Don't look back! Keep driving!" Razzak barked, as with his other hand he felt for the handle of the bag in the luggage space behind him.

"How much is in the bag?"

"3 crore rupees as agreed."

"Sure, it's all there?"

"Yes! If you don't believe me, I can park the rickshaw here. Feel free to count it. I won't stop you!"

*Bloody Amdavadi!*

"If the money's not okay, we can't really do anything now. If the money's okay, then we have no further business. I will shoot you in either case," Razzak chuckled.

Razzak lifted the heavy bag to the empty space next to him and unzipped it. He ran his hand over the stacks of high-denomination rupee notes inside

and randomly picked out three different bundles inspecting the notes.

In the rickshaw's rear-view mirror, he could see at least four motorbikes following, struggling to make their way through the thick crowd. "Keep honking and drive!" he ordered Ranjitsinh.

One of the motorbikes suddenly drew parallel on the right side of the rickshaw and the rider discreetly drew his gun through his leather jacket on Razzak, while continuing to manoeuvre the vehicle with his other hand.

Without lowering his gun hand, Razzak quickly lifted his satchel and swung it quickly, hard across the biker's helmet-less face. The biker, struck hard on the face, lost control of both the gun and the bike, skidded and then crashed horizontally into the panicked sea of people. Screams of horror and disbelief rent the air, striking a discordant note in the otherwise pleasant afternoon. The distraction provided Ranjitsinh just the opportunity to steer the front wheel a hard left and crash against a shop along the road. And just as he jumped out of the driver's compartment into a sari shop, he felt a bullet swoosh past his ear. The jarring sound of the rickshaw's wheels screeching and then the vehicle itself crashing into the façade of the shop covered the sound of the gunshot.

Razzak rued missing his chance and immediately stretched towards the driver's side managing to catch hold of the rickshaw's steering, righting the vehicle, and absently noting that its front windshield was cracked right down its middle. And as he jumped into the driver's seat and gained control of the vehicle, he berated himself again for missing his chance to get rid of Ranjitsinh once and for all. Looking back, he saw that three bikes were pursuing him and getting closer. A short distance away, he could see a group of Muslim men, probably devotees returning from their afternoon prayers at the *Manbaiwali Masjid* ahead. If he drove further down the Darbargadh Road, he would plough into them, a possibility he wanted to avoid probably out of respect for their common Islamic faith, or more out of the knowledge that a rickshaw wasn't the best vehicle to plough into people, and escape. Making a split-second decision, he took a sharp right onto a narrow lane leading to the main Chathi Bari Ring Road. A bike suddenly appeared on his front right and slowed down, making him swerve uncontrollably to the left for a few seconds. The rider looked back, openly drew a gun and fired at Razzak, all in one quick motion. Razzak applied the three wheeler's brakes bringing the rickshaw to a sudden halt and ducked, and as the biker felt the misery of having lost a shot, he failed to notice an oncoming rickshaw and

ploughed right into it and into the screaming crowd. Somehow Razzak managed to find a way out – unmolested – through the swarm of horrified people. As he drove away, he looked back and saw that dozens of furious people had descended on the biker like a wake of vultures and were pounding on him with their fists, legs and anything else they could find.

In a few seconds, Razzak reached the wider Chathi Bari Ring Road and again turned right. This road was wider than the roads he had just left behind and had more vehicles and fewer pedestrians. Just as he stepped on the accelerator pedal, a gunshot cracked the rickshaw's right side-view mirror. *The third rider!* Another, near simultaneous, shot pierced the rear plastic cover and travelled through the 3-wheeler, whizzing just past Razzak's head and finally hitting the front windshield before making its way out. *The fourth!* The already-cracked glass splintered into a thousand tiny pieces that littered the road like a shower of diamonds. Razzak was continuously honking and driving in a zigzag manner, weaving past other vehicles like a drunk man weaving his way past people, unsure where he is or where he is going.

Razzak quickly glanced behind to his left and right, and noticed the fourth biker. The third biker was nowhere to be seen. *Right behind!* He suddenly applied brakes. The third biker, who by now had managed to get right behind the rickshaw, crashed full-tilt into it. The force of the impact threw him off his bike and he sailed above the rickshaw in an elliptical path, finally landing in front of it with a sickening crunch. Razzak quickly shot him in the forehead before the man could attempt to draw his own weapon out. *Lucky for me, these bastards don't believe in wearing helmets.* Razzak swerved the rickshaw around the man's body and drove off.

Another bullet suddenly whisked past, grazing Razzak's left arm like a lick of fire. *Ya Allah, how many of them are there?!* The biker, who was now on Razzak's left, took another shot, again missing his target by a whisker. Razzak shifted to a lower gear and revved the rickshaw to take a quick lead over the biker. He then turned the rickshaw a sharp left and braked to provide him with a good angle to aim his gun at his attacker. Strangely, this particular biker was wearing a helmet. Razzak's bullet shattered the helmet's glass and found a permanent home in the exact centre of the biker's forehead. He fell off the bike, dead before he hit the road. The bike, now rider-less, skidded hard and moved forward several metres before it smashed against the central divider and finally came to rest, as mangled as its rider's face and body.

Razzak turned the rickshaw around and accelerated once again. He

looked in the rear-view mirror and sighed in relief. *No one*. As he drove off, he tried his best to ignore his bleeding arm and focus on undoing the fiasco his life had suddenly become over the last few hours. He was perturbed. His normal practice was to live a low-profile life in India and avoid getting involved in anything that could unmask him as a *jihadi*. He restricted his incendiary activities only to Afghanistan and Pakistan. For him, India offered a respite from the violence across the border and also gave him the opportunity to spend some quality time with his beloved mama and mami.

Noticing that he was now in a less noisy part of the city, Razzak looked for a place to get rid of the rickshaw. Finding a quiet side road, he parked the vehicle, reached into the back seat for the bag of money and nonchalantly walked away. Other than his bleeding left arm, he was unharmed and looked remarkably put together for someone who had just been through a wringer of an experience. Even his turban and beard were undisturbed. While pondering what now lay in store for him, Razzak hired another rickshaw and alighted a short distance away from *Sarpat* gate. He walked towards his mama's car that he had parked near the remains of the Jubilee Hospital that had been completely destroyed in the 2001 earthquake. The 5 crore rupees he had made on this mission was a healthy sum and he was pleased that the money was finally in his hands. *I've worked too bloody hard for this!* One thought clouded his happiness though. He realised that today's incident had been unnervingly big, and it wouldn't be long before the cops in India traced him and came after him with a vengeance. Today's shootings could even unmask him and connect him to the attack on the Prime Minister. But now that he had the money, he would go to Pakistan and spend some time with his wife and child. *I should lie low for a few months, maybe return to India only after two or three years...*

In addition to his worry, another part of Razzak was also furious with himself for having lost the opportunity to get rid of Ranjitsinh. He was sure that Ranjitsinh would be baying for his blood and would come after him again. Razzak reached for his phone and dialled his mama's number. When he answered, Razzak ordered him and his mami – politely but an order just the same – to get the hell away from Bhirandiyara and stay away for a few weeks. “I can't explain right now mama. For Allah's sake, just do as I say! Go stay with mami's cousin in Surat. I don't know; just say that you need to attend an untimely death, or a sudden wedding or something! I don't care what excuse you make! JUST GO! NOW. IMMEDIATELY.”

Danger was closing in. He could feel it.

Ranjitsinh's anxiety was sky-high. Razzak had killed two of his men from the Crime Branch. It was a big mess. He knew he would have to face an official enquiry into his off-the-radar conduct. As he dived into the sari shop trying to get away from Razzak, a bullet had grazed his right ear, licking a trail of fire down his neck. A police surgeon had patched it up, stopped the bleeding and assured him – to his never-ending relief – that his hearing would not be affected in any way.

Absently touching the bandage on his injured ear, Ranjitsinh realised with a start how lucky he was to still be alive. If he had stayed in the rickshaw for even a second more and not jumped out when he did, Razzak's bullet would have found its inevitable way into his skull. *I would've been lying dead on Darbargadh Road right now!*

Thanks to the death and destruction he had left behind, the cops would be hot upon Razzak's trail now. *But the witnesses saw a bearded Sikh man. How will the cops reconcile him with the man he was chasing – Razzak?* This would give Ranjitsinh some more lead time before the cops connected the two and closed in on Razzak. Ranjitsinh would have to find Razzak before the cops did and take his nemesis down without leaving a trail that could be traced back to himself. Unfortunately, he had a very little time to accomplish this task – only until tomorrow morning when his debriefing was scheduled.

The tiny GPS tracker he had placed in one of the bundles of rupee notes at the bottom of the bag of money was clearly transmitting its location to Ranjitsinh's mobile.

It seemed Razzak was still nearby. *I'll catch you, you bastard!*

The motorcade stopped outside the main gate of the AIIMS main building. The police personnel guarding the entrance had already been alerted to the VVIPs' impending arrival. This was only the second time that someone was visiting – or rather allowed to visit – the Prime Minister. And despite the sombre occasion, for the uniformed men, it was still a welcome change and the only piece of action they would witness in an otherwise long and mundane vigil.

With their continuing silence regarding the health status of the injured Prime Minister, AIIMS had managed to create a news blackout of sorts in the country. The citizens were concerned and fearing the worst for their leader. Across the country and even overseas, people were carrying out silent protests for information, keeping candlelight vigils and organising prayer meetings. The news media wanted an update just so they could keep their TRPs up. And as expected, the opposition parties were demanding to know what was happening just so they could add their 2 cents' worth of hypotheses to the unfolding crisis and stay relevant in the political game. But the instructions given to AIIMS by the BNP government were unequivocal: no statements were to be issued until further notice.

Rajendra Singh alighted from the car after Asit Patel, surrounded by highly-trained officers from the Special Protection Group (SPG). The SPG officers, ashamed and dispirited at their spectacular failure to protect the Prime Minister, had now been charged by the cabinet to provide protection to Rajendra Singh too, who was now the acting Prime Minister. Ignoring the sea of reporters shooting questions at them like high-speed bullets, the group walked quickly to the steps leading into the AIIMS building and entered. The two men passed through the mandatory security checks and were then escorted to the highly secure VVIP ICU floor where they were once again frisked.

Rajendra Singh looked through the thick, bulletproof glass of the VVIP ICU that separated them from the unconscious Prime Minister. The PM lay there, covered by snow-white sheets and as motionless as a corpse. Multiple monitors placed around the room flashed his vital stats every few seconds. Watching the heart-rate monitor, Singh was reminded of a seismograph, an instrument that detected and recorded earthquakes. At the moment, the graph

on its screen looked stable with no indication of an impending ‘earthquake’ or ‘volcanic eruption’. Despite his worry, Singh smiled to himself at the analogy. The Director of AIIMS and the doctor heading the Prime Minister’s medical team provided a brief update to both men, explaining everything that had been done so far. They also shared their plan of action and assured them that they would do everything in their power to keep the PM safe and alive.

Once again, Asit Patel’s eyes filled with tears as he listened to the doctors’ update. It looked like the PM had escaped a horrible fate. He was a strong man and had survived the worst. Maybe it was his daily Yoga practice that gave him the strength and resolve to stay rooted to this earthly realm. He recited a short *mantra* in his mind thanking God for keeping his friend safe from harm. Rajendra Singh was experiencing strong emotions as well. He was the current leader of the country and that was a powerful feeling. At the same time, the Prime Minister had been his mentor and guide and he acknowledged that he would have been nowhere if not for his support. Shaking off his mixed feelings, Singh too prayed for the quick recovery of his friend.

“48 hours before Election Day, before the protocol prohibiting election campaigning kicks in, the Prime Minister will address the nation,” Asit Patel said softly.

“Hmm?”

“I said, the Prime Minister will address the nation before the elections. He will even contest the elections as planned.” Asit Patel repeated.

Rajendra Singh was taken aback at Asit Patel’s confident statement. *As if he had the power to directly affect the Prime Minister’s recovery!* However, he thought it best not to argue with him. Patel was currently the most powerful man in the party so it was in everybody’s interest to keep him sweet. And he had the ear of the Prime Minister, who was no ordinary person himself. After all, going from a poor *dhobi*’s (washerman’s) son in a small village in Gujarat to leader of the world’s largest democracy was no mean feat. So if all this meant that Singh had to agree with Patel’s outlandish statements once in a while, Singh was more than ready to do so. *For the good of the nation, of course!*

“I surely hope so,” Singh agreed, albeit with a lack of enthusiasm that Patel barely noticed (or so Singh thought).

Asit looked at his watch. “Alright then, let’s get going. The Defence Minister must be on his way to the party office for our meeting.”



As the men, two of the most powerful politicians in the country, started moving towards the exit, Asit Patel once more reiterated, “I know you don’t believe me, but he will! I also know that we will win with an overwhelming majority with over 400 seats in the Loksabha elections.” The resolve and belief in Asit Patel’s voice were unequivocal and more than a match for Rajendra Singh’s scepticism.

The annual Moon Media Film Awards event was larger and much more extravagant than many of the awards shows that dotted the Bollywood film fraternity's collective calendar. In many ways, it was grander even than the Oscars but it lacked its global appeal, being patronised only by South Asians and the Indian diaspora worldwide. Most Indian superstars clamoured to perform on this platform. Their goal was less about showcasing their skills and enthralling adoring audiences and more about staying on the 'right' side of Keyur Shenoy, the multi-billionaire tycoon who headed some of India's largest telecom, media and finance companies and regularly made it to the list of Top 10 richest businessmen in India. Moon Media owned some of the most-watched Hindi, English and regional General Entertainment Channels (GECs) and news channels in India, making it the country's largest TV channel network. Its programmes reached millions of households in India and across the globe. Apart from the massive exposure an entertainer would get from performing at the Moon Media Film Awards, they could also expect to have Mr. Shenoy's executive team pick up the broadcast rights of their films for Moon's movie and GEC channels. And now, with Moon's newly-launched video streaming platform, the company could even pick up the digital streaming rights of their films at good prices. All in all, it was a win-win situation for everyone.

Keyur Shenoy was a worried man even as he mingled with the Founders, Managing Directors and CEOs of some of the largest Indian companies during the after-event party. The efficacy of TV as an advertising platform was declining, losing its former premier status to digital media and the multiple video streaming platforms proliferating the entertainment ecosystem. This was an industry-wide issue, but one that was crippling Moon Media and Entertainment and threatening the very core of its existence. The costs of content production and acquisition had risen manifold thanks to the sudden increase in demand for quality content. And the recent launch of Moon's video streaming platform, Moonbeam – dropped straight into a competition-ridden industry – had been a super-expensive, over-the-top affair. Then the company revenues were falling year on year, primarily due to the impact from digital media. Given the level of debt, Moon had almost defaulted on its interest payments last year, its Earnings Per Share forecast had taken a

beating on Dalal Street and the stock price had been on a downward-falling spiral ever since. Shenoy had been in the business for almost 40 years but the winds of change were blowing strongly now and he was feeling the pressure. More and more of late, he had started to feel as if he was back at square one, struggling to take his first business off the ground.

*There is one reason to cheer though.* Moon's awards night was an outright success and would definitely garner – just as it did the previous years – the most television rating points amongst all film-related programming in India for the whole year. Many of the show's sponsors had already reached out to him to tell him how much they loved the show. *That should really help our ad sales pipeline!* It was also an election season and the revenue projections across all his channels were at an all-time high. He had already made deals with three different political parties but the deal with BNP was by far the largest of them all, promising continuous rewards once BNP won. *What a coup for us!* He was unhappy about what happened to his TV producer but not so unhappy that he forgot his purpose – to run his business and make money. Anyway, he was sure that the 50 lakh rupees paid to the producer would be enough to take care of his family. And if it didn't... *it's not my problem*, he thought with a mental shrug, putting the unfortunate man out of his mind.

The 700 crore rupees deal with BNP was huge and two of the three scheduled payments had already been received by Moon. The third tranche amounting to 40% of the deal size would be received towards the end of the election campaigning period. BNP's promotions had been in full swing across Moon's many channels. Their editorial teams were being guided by the BNP's communication cell to ensure that the stories they aired were aligned with the party's manifesto and messaging. The party was a hard taskmaster, driving almost everyone in Moon Network to distraction with their constant demands. It was like BNP had taken a temporary lease of Moon. *Well, they're paying for it, so I'm willing to put up with their crap.*

"Cheers," he said, raising his half-full glass of fine Scotch whiskey to Khan, country's biggest superstar as he passed by his table. The star's latest movie, produced under his own banner, had not worked at the Box Office. "Moviemaking is a tough business. Sometimes I think I'm in the wrong place. And at times, I feel I'm over the *moon*, haha! A year or two worth of planning, filming, post-production, editing, promotion... all of this to come down to one single day, a Friday that determines a film's fate... it's just so

unfair. Hit or flop, who can tell, eh Keyur?” “True true, Khan *bhai*,” Keyur replied. But don’t you think every business is a gamble? Every businessman takes a risk when he launches a new venture. No?”

His words were not empty rhetoric; he truly believed them. Keyur Shenoy admired people who took risks for something they believed in. He himself had been a risk-taker all his life. If he hadn’t, he was sure that he would not have been able to build the empire that he had.

And yet, for the first time in 40 years, Keyur was uncomfortable about the risks he had taken. He just hoped that he had not swallowed more than he could chew.

Vijay had barely slept over the last four nights and was absolutely exhausted. Apart from the sleeplessness, his recent busy schedule kept him chained to his desk at the PMO. In fact, he had not been able to venture out of the PMO at all, not even to see his pregnant wife. Most of his time was spent coordinating with the different teams on the Joint Task Force, reviewing status reports, getting onto conference calls with myriad agencies and analysing the latest leads to enable the JTF to pursue a firm investigative direction.

Knowing Geetika, his wife, as he did, the fact that she had now stopped calling him altogether did not surprise him in the least. Still, her apparent angst and fury over his 'disappearance' also engendered a huge dose of guilt in his gut. To his relief however, his mother and two children would be arriving in Delhi the next morning so she would soon have family with her.

With each day that passed, the intelligence agencies and the JTF were under increasing pressure to deliver a breakthrough in the investigation. The situation along the India/Pakistan border was getting more and more precarious by the day. Shelling by both Indian and Pakistani armies at the border had intensified and showed no signs of abating. The hapless inhabitants of more villages near the Indian border had been asked to vacate their homes and move to government-designated safe zones and shelters. Artillery movements had been building in scale on the Pakistani side, probably preparing for a large-scale attack on its giant neighbour, according to the latest reports from Indian intelligence agencies. Indian Navy ships had begun patrolling the contentious waters of the Arabian Sea between India and Pakistan, with more being diverted from their patrolling duties in the Indian Ocean. INS *Vikramaditya*, India's only aircraft carrier with its floating fleet of MIG 29K and Chetak aircrafts had already been pulled out of a scheduled weaponry systems upgradation at INS Kadamba Naval Base at Karwar, Karnataka, and was on its way to the Arabian Sea, its new deployment zone for the foreseeable future.

Rajendra Singh, Prahlad Dev, and the Directors of most agencies were expected to attend the JTF meeting today. It was not yet 7 PM but the room was already buzzing with excitement as there were a few developments in the case worth sharing with the executive group. The investigations were moving in multiple parallel directions simultaneously and sooner or later a few of

them would converge to provide a breakthrough.

The requisite quorum was already in the room so the meeting could start. Earlier, in a separate meeting, Prahlad Dev had unequivocally ordered Vijay to stay well away from any mention of a possibly strong association – iffy or otherwise – between the BNP Party Secretary Asit Patel and the Big Daddy of Indian media, Keyur Shenoy. Dev was insistent that knowledge and details about this particular link were to remain limited to a very select group of people who were a part of the meeting in his office earlier and whose discretion could be absolutely trusted. Phone conversations between Asit Patel and Keyur Shenoy on their office landlines and mobile phones were discreetly being monitored by the Intelligence Bureau.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us. We have some more developments to report on and we believe we are moving inexorably closer towards finding the culprit or culprits behind the attack on our Prime Minister. Mr. Jha, the Director of the Defence Intelligence Agency will present the DIA report. Sir? All yours,” Vijay said motioning to the DIA big-shot standing quietly to one side.

The large wall-mounted monitor in the room displayed the photograph of a broad-shouldered Sikh soldier in full uniform. “This is Sardar Shamsher Singh Bassi. He was a soldier in the ordnance unit at the Bhuj Army Camp. Our investigations have revealed that he supplied the RPG-7 grenade launcher that was identified as the weapon used to launch the attack on our Prime Minister.” The Director paused in his monologue while the photograph on-screen switched to now show a campfire. He continued. “Unfortunately, Shamsher fatally shot himself before our soldiers could arrest him. A search of his room yielded no useful information that could qualify as a lead. However, we did find a pile of partially-burned 2000-rupee notes in a campfire near his quarters and a few bundles of notes in his room. As of now we don’t yet know the source of this money, or if it belonged to Shamsher Singh, but we are investigating this for further clues. We are also reviewing CCTV footages in the camp tracking Shamsher’s movements, if he had been meeting any specific person or persons of interest. What we do know for now is that Shamsher made a number of calls to a particular number in the last two days. His mobile call logs also indicate that he had received calls from this number upto a week before the attack on the PM. Obviously this number is not in existence and we haven’t been able to track this number at our end. NTRO is evaluating it further. Shamsher Singh might have given us useful

information leading us to the attackers so it's unfortunate that he killed himself before we could talk to him. Very unfortunate... We will continue to update you as soon as we have anything more. Thank you."

"Thank you, Sir," Vijay replied and then signalled to the Home Ministry official in the JTF to continue with his update. The man presented photographs and videos on the monitor and pointed to them as he spoke in a heavy, baritone voice that took the audience – and Vijay – aback for a few moments. *For such a small man, he sure has a big voice!*

"It has already been established by the Mumbai Police that immediately after launching the attack on the Prime Minister in Mumbai, the attacker followed a route that took him through a non-descript building society called 'White Heaven Housing Society' in the upscale western suburb of Juhu. We have also found that he wore the uniform of a food delivery company's delivery-boy and walked out of the society wearing a helmet which made it impossible for nearby CCTV cameras to capture useful shots of his facial features. He entered the building society through a large hole in its 8-ft perimeter wall. Very few outsiders know about the hole in the wall as it was covered by a larger dumpster can placed abutting the wall on the outside, so it is more than likely that this path was deliberately taken, i.e. *it was pre-planned*. After exiting the society, the attacker then got on a bike without a license plate that was parked right outside. The bike has now been identified from its Vehicle Identification Number stamped on its body. Unsurprisingly, the bike was stolen, that too just the previous day from the nearby suburb of Khar Road. The bike's owner had already registered a complaint at Khar Police Station and questioning him revealed no further information or solid clues.

We checked a number of possible routes leading away from the Juhu building society and checked the footage of all public CCTV cameras along those routes. A camera one kilometre away picked up the bike moving towards the suburb of Andheri West. Eventually, the bike was found abandoned near Nadco Shopping Centre, a shopping-cum-residential complex, bang outside the super-busy Andheri suburban railway station. And here we've lost the trace of our man.

We have considered the possibility that he may have boarded a local train, northwards in the direction of Virar, eastwards to Panvel, or southwards towards Churchgate. However, a *prima facie* investigation of the CCTV footage from Andheri station has not yielded any useful information about

our guy. So far we have not found anyone boarding any of the local trains wearing the food delivery company's distinctive black and yellow uniform. It is entirely possible of course that our teams haven't been able to identify the man among the crowds yet, given the constant rush of people at the Andheri station. The teams are reviewing the footages again and again for any strike there.

Another possibility is that the attacker could have simply changed his clothes and ditched the delivery uniform somewhere within the premises of Nadco Shopping Centre itself, or in the many buildings nearby. Delivery boys are a common sight in the area, walking in and out of Nadco and the neighbouring buildings. This means that no one even remembers our particular guy, forget about identifying him. And nothing out of the ordinary has been reported from Nadco itself – unattended bags, shady-looking characters, etc. We have searched the premise and few properties on either side including the Andheri Station bus depot, but this too has yielded no useful clues. To sum up, what is really hampering our search for the man is that we have no clear visual of his face. We have his physical features – he's a tall, thin person with white facial hair that may or may not be false. But none of this information helps us identify him or run him down."

The man paused. Both he and Vijay watched the nonplussed audience – the JTF members as well as the acting Prime Minister, the NSA and other senior officials – and waited for them to digest this troubling information.

Vijay said, "Thank you Sir for that update. Any questions from the team?"

Silence.

After almost a minute, the uncomfortable stillness was finally broken by Rajendra Singh, who cleared his throat and asked in a gruff voice, "Any news or information on Abdul Khan, the Endeavour driver?" Although he was completely in the know with regards to the investigation, like every other person in the room, he was also frustrated at the slow pace of progress and the lack of solid conclusions. He was worried that the investigation into Abdul Khan would end up going the same way as that of the attacker, i.e. nowhere.

"Yes Sir, we do have some information." Vijay switched the photograph on the TV to reveal a thickset man with a thick moustache, dressed in a white *kurta pajama* and wearing the traditional *topi*, Muslim cap. "In fact, there have been some rather interesting developments on Abdul Khan. We know



that he boarded a train from Mumbai's Lokmanya Tilak Terminus to Tata Nagar in Jharkhand. Footage from the CCTVs of all stations between Mumbai and Tata Nagar has been reviewed. Since all information about Khan and others is being continuously fed on NATGRID, we are able to ensure that all investigative agencies are on the same page. This has helped us to quickly trace Abdul's movements," Vijay was referring to the National Intelligence Grid, a highly-secure, centralised intelligence-sharing platform accessible to the Indian intelligence agencies.

Vijay once more turned to the Home Ministry official and said "Sir, would you like to update on the CCTV hit?"

"Yes, Vijay. Thanks. We got a positive hit from one of the CCTVs at Nagpur Junction railway station, which is almost 1000 kilometres from the train's final destination of Tata Nagar. At Nagpur, Khan had disembarked from the train at around one in the morning of the next day of the attack, or we may even put it as late night on the day of the attack. We were able to trace him for about two kilometres into Nagpur city but then we lost the trace as many road-side CCTVs are not working. So we do not know where exactly he went in Nagpur. To muddy the waters further, Khan was sighted again on a CCTV at Balangir Railway Station in the state of Odisha, just a day after he was sighted at Nagpur. Given the time of the day, we believe he took the Samta Express from Nagpur to reach Balangir. From the station, he got onto a state transport bus towards Sonapur, an hour's ride away. This has been confirmed by the owner of a food stall right outside the Balangir station who recalls seeing the thickset man wearing the *topi*, boarding a bus towards Sonapur. We are investigating this further and also the possibility that he might have disembarked at an intermediate town or even somewhere along the highway. The driver and conductor of the specific Odisha State Road Transport Corporation bus at the time have already been questioned. Neither of them recalls him in particular. This is a crowded route so the passengers' faces tend to blur in their minds.

What we are working upon is if Balangir was always Abdul Khan's destination, he could have directly boarded an Odisha-bound train from Mumbai itself instead of getting on a train bound for Tata Nagar in the neighbouring, yet distant state of Jharkhand. Why the multiple legs on what should have been a fairly straightforward journey? And why Nagpur? Unless he had some unfinished business in the city that he had to complete before going to Odisha? The Nagpur police are investigating and trying to trace his

movements in the city. The Odisha Police are also investigating Abdul Khan's possible movements in the state."

The man now looked at Rajendra Singh for his reaction to the news, but he remained silent, seemingly lost in thought.

"What about the phone calls? Have they been traced yet?" Prahlad Dev, wanted to know.

Vijay motioned to the team of two from the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO), silently requesting them to respond. They were leading the effort to trace the phone calls and numbers of all persons of interest in this case. However, for reasons that Vijay had not been able to unravel yet, right from day one, these two men had been exceedingly tight-lipped and even blatantly unwilling to share their findings with the JTF team. At this point, Vijay was pleased that they were being put on the spot by none other than their boss, the NSA. He did know that they were reviewing the mobile phone call logs of the TV producer as well as those of Shamsher Singh. So far they had found that both men had received multiple calls from different anonymous numbers in the same three-week period before their deaths, and that both men had even tried calling these numbers in the moments before they died.

One of the members from the NTRO team now stood up from where he was sitting near the front.

"Sir, we have not been able to trace the numbers yet. It is a complex task. These calls have been generated by a VOIP-based application, either from a desktop, or from an IOS or Android mobile phone. With VOIP, i.e. Voice Over Internet Protocol, as you know, the voice calls are carried as digital packets over the Internet rather than over the regular analogue voice network.

Some VOIP applications allow you to choose your own dialling number. For example, I might choose my number as 999 999 9999 and the recipient will receive a phone call from the 999 number on their mobile or even land phone. There are many VOIP applications out there, many of which are legitimate, so the numbers and the calls originating from them can be traced back accurately. But of course, for as many legit applications, there are also a number of illicit applications which enable callers to make highly secure, untraceable calls. All the firms making these applications are based outside India. So even if we could identify the exact application used by the culprit – for which we need to access his device – we will need to officially reach out to the firm for the data we seek, or crack into the firm's database for the

records. As you'd appreciate sir, this is extremely difficult to do. On top of that, it is entirely possible that the user we are trying to trace may have signed up with the VOIP service via the TOR dark network, or used TOR based VOIP applications – just a simple Google search and you'll find many of these. Such applications, most of them operating illegally, neither log nor store the IP addresses and identities of their callers, ostensibly to 'protect' their identities. It's like a regular Swiss bank system out there, only that the Swiss banks you can still crack...

To sum up, it is our humble opinion that unravelling this case, at least through this particular route is convoluted, and would take massive international cooperation to trace the path of the calls to the origin, or at least a very long time. While we are actively working on tracing these numbers, we do think we should continue looking at other avenues."

He was just about to sit down, seemingly unaware – or more likely uncaring – of the shock his last words had engendered in the audience, when Prahlad Dev sitting on the other side of the room jumped to his feet and exploded in anger, "If this was a simple, open-and-shut case, we would not have created a goddamned NTRO in the first place! You and your controversial group of tech geeks have caused us nothing but trouble so far! Are these the results you guys are supposed to deliver? Of what use is your high-tech apparatus if all you can say is 'we should continue looking at other avenues'? What the hell!" The NSA's rage was palpable. and most people in the room were nodding their heads in agreement. After all, the NTRO reported to the NSA so he naturally expected them to deliver useful results. Moreover, ongoing controversies and scandals related to the agency were affecting his hitherto squeaky-clean reputation and causing him untold problems. Over the last year, a number of high-value purchase orders placed by officials within the NTRO had been flagged as fraudulent by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), the authority responsible for auditing all government receipts and expenses. Another issue was the ongoing turf wars and constant altercations between the country's nodal agencies with NTRO, a direct result of the inefficient ways in which the NTRO teams were handling operational and investigative overlaps and coordinating with other agencies. And to top off these issues, there were also rumours of serious kickbacks received by NTRO officials, placing an additional burden of culpability on the NSA's ageing back. Those who knew him and the problems he was currently grappling with were unsurprised at his

outburst.

“Sir, I assure you we have not given up on this investigative avenue. Although we have not been able to trace these calls so far, we are *still trying*.

We are also working with the CBI cyber security teams, the Central Monitoring System team and other monitoring cells in the country. But...”

“But...?”

“But Sir, the general consensus is that most of these illicit applications do not log IP records and client details, and even if they do, registrations via TOR network...”

“What the heck is a TOR network?” the acting Prime Minister wanted to know interrupting the conversation.

“Well Sir, TOR is The Onion Router.”

The acting PM’s confusion was obvious.

Hiding a supercilious smile, the man from the NTRO continued, “Sir, the Onion Router is an Internet application that keeps you anonymous on the internet; you can browse without revealing your true identity and location for instance, at least in most circumstances.”

“Oh, you’re talking about the browser incognito mode...!” Rajendra Singh was silently congratulating himself on his tech knowhow as the entire room fell silent for a few long seconds. The NTRO man thought of adding more to Rajendra Singh’s comprehension, to convey to the acting Prime Minister that the browser incognito mode was actually quite different to browsing on a TOR network, but stopped himself and sat back down.

Finally, Vijay broke the silence.

“Okay ladies and gentlemen, if no one has anything more to add to this meeting, thank you for your time.”

It was 10 PM. The small village of Bhirandiyara was peaceful and its inhabitants were preparing to turn in for the night. Lights were off in most of the humble homes that dotted the village but the darkness, although moonless, was not absolute. It was broken here and there by the dim glow emanating from some of the huts, either from colourful, low-watt night lamps hanging on verandas like lone rangers or from flickering TV screens playing late-night soaps that were full of melodrama but almost completely devoid of real substance. Out of doors, the glowing embers of burned-out firewood in the village square were giving off some feeble light and trying to keep the encroaching dark at bay. Until around 8 PM, the night was brightened by the lively humanity more than the light, village elders gathered around the campfire, trying to warm themselves while chatting, laughing and exchanging the latest news and gossip. But now, quiet reigned and the night had taken over.

The soft grunt of a reposing camel softly pierced the silence, but only for a moment, as it tried to stand up from its reclining position in the cumbersome way typical to the creatures: lean forward full-tilt, bring the hind legs up and then push on the front legs. It took a few moments for Badal to finally reach a full standing position.

Razzak had already checked the large leather satchel on Badal's back. Although it was bulging a bit with the 2 crore rupees hidden inside, it was tied securely and had no chance of falling off. And Razzak was careful to completely cover it with a couple of embroidered shawls. The shawls were pretty but they had a bigger purpose in providing fairly effective camouflage. Razzak was sure that no one would notice the leather satchel underneath the shawls that was filled with more money than many Indians would see in a lifetime. Tooh, the small village in Pakistan where his wife and daughter lived, was approximately a 90-kilometre journey from Bhirandiyara. Having made this journey with Razzak many times before, Badal was familiar with the way to Tooh – a route that took him across the mud fields towards Khavda and Dhrobana and then across the wide *rann* until he reached the India/Pakistan border. From there, he would gallop on his own towards Odhano in Pakistan and then on to Tooh.

Border Security Forces with thermal cameras patrolled through the night, but even they could not possibly protect the entire *rann*, a salt marsh that

covered an area of almost 7500 square kilometres. With the marshy land providing a natural border and a difficult terrain to fence, fencing along the border with Pakistan was patchy, broken and even absent at places and it was easier to cross the border especially during the nights when visibility was low. A camel or two straying across the border would hardly alert the forces.

Every time he visited India, Razzak would strap a satchel full of Indian currency to Badal's back and send the animal across the border alone to Tooh where his wife would receive the satchel and store it in a safe place in the house. Once in Pakistan himself, Razzak would exchange the more valuable Indian rupees for cheaper Pakistani rupees and hand them to his wife. It pleased him to know that his little family was comfortable and well-cared for, at least financially. He would set aside some of the Indian money for his handler at Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency. The ISI would hand him US dollars and Afghani, the currency of Afghanistan, that he would need for his operations in Afghanistan. He knew that most of the Indian currency he provided to the ISI would be diverted to his militant 'blood brothers' fighting for freedom and fomenting separatist unrest in the Indian part of Kashmir.

After Razzak's first two trips with Badal, the camel could remember the directions and find his way on his own to Tooh. The moment the leather saddle was placed on the animal's back, Razzak could sense the beast's excitement at getting the chance to run like the wind under the cold, night sky. Badal's impatient movements, tossing head and soft grunts made Razzak laugh out loud. *Yes, my friend, I know how excited you are to see my little darling Ayshah, and my love Saida.*

Razzak kept the animal walking at a sedate pace until they had covered a fair distance of the mud fields. After that he slapped the camel's rump and yelled '*arraa... arraa...*' and the camel took off all alone, briskly into the dark, new-moon night. Badal would take around four hours to reach Tooh and would return by mid-morning the very next day.

Razzak looked on with a longing as Badal gradually disappeared into the night... he longed to see his Saida and Ayshah. He felt for the gun in his jacket as he walked back to Bhirandiyara and fell into a thoughtful contemplation of the events earlier in the day. He was sure that the morning papers would cover the incidents near Darbargadh complex in some detail. The Bhuj cops were probably already looking for him, or at least the man they thought he was, a *sardarji* who went amok with an auto-rickshaw.

He knew that it would be in Ranjitsinh's best interest to get rid of him before the cops found him and brought him in for questioning. Ranjitsinh was smart enough to realise that he could easily spill the beans about the attack on the Prime Minister and consequently implicate Ranjitsinh in the crime. *He knows that I'm a thorn in his side. And I know that he knows that I'm a thorn in his side. Huh!*

The morbidly funny thought made him smile inwardly. However, the smile left his face in a hurry when he remembered yet again that he had lost a golden opportunity at Darbargadh to eliminate Ranjitsinh, that too by just a whisker. He and Ranjitsinh were playing a dangerous cat-and-mouse game, each trying to outdo the other while trying to stay alive for the next salvo. *But what was Ranjitsinh's interest in executing the PM?* Razzak was fairly sure that for all his seniority in the Intelligence Bureau, Ranjitsinh was still small-fry, at least in this particular game. There was probably someone way above Ranjitsinh who was the mastermind behind the attack. *Was Ranjitsinh actually a pawn of the ISI or certain forces in Pakistan or some other country who wanted the PM dead? Was ISI the mastermind?*

Razzak too was fully aware that he would not have any peace until he killed his nemesis, if the cops and other agencies managed to ever arrest him and draw out any details from him. *I must not be identified!* Even if he stayed in Pakistan for the foreseeable future, he would always be in danger of being identified as the perpetrator of the attack on the Indian Prime Minister – as long as Ranjitsinh was alive. And he had to think about the repercussions for his family too; not only his mama and mami in India but also his wife and child in Pakistan.

At these disquieting thoughts, he once more felt for the Glock 17 in his jacket, as always its weight lending him a measure of comfort and reassurance. After traversing the mud fields, he reached Bhirandiyara Branch Post Office at the corner of the cross-roads intersecting with State Highway 45. Walking quietly to the back of the unpretentious one-floored structure, he stealthily climbed onto the terrace. A cold breeze was blowing so he pulled on his black woollen monkey cap that covered both his head and most of his face. For several hours now, his left shoulder had been throbbing in reaction to the bullet that had scratched him earlier in the day. He rubbed it to relieve some of the pain but a thought made him pause. *Ranjitsinh is not the only lucky bastard. I've been lucky too!*

It was now nearly 11 PM. An occasional car or truck still passed by on

the highway, disturbing the otherwise quiet stillness of the night. At this time of night, the state highway was a long, almost deserted double-lane road that stretched from Bhuj all the way to the India/Pakistan border. It was also fairly isolated because except for a few small villages like Bhirandiyara that it cut through, there were nothing but vast, arid mud plains keeping it company on either side.

From the terrace of the post office, he had a good view of the state highway for some distance until the road took a bend and disappeared behind the small mud dunes and arid shrubbery.

He felt his breast pocket for the GPS tracker he had located earlier in the bundle of notes. Ranjitsinh would be coming from the direction of Bhuj.

*I'll wait for as long as it's required.*



## DAY 5

### 28

Brigadier Sharon Willing sat at her desk and for the umpteenth time checked her desktop monitor for incoming updates. Still nothing! It was already 2 AM and the US embassy in New Delhi where she worked was quiet and mostly abandoned but for the few men and women who worked the graveyard shift liaising with their counterparts in the US. As soon as she finished reviewing the intelligence from SIGINT Afghanistan, she had submitted a request to her superiors asking them for approval to share relevant evidence with her Indian counterparts. This was two hours ago but she had not yet received a clearance from Fort Meade to share the information on CRUSHED ICE.

Lost in thought, she now sipped her fourth cup of coffee for the night. And she would consume more cups of strong caffeine for as long as it took. *I need to stay awake for this!* She couldn't afford to leave work right now, much less sleep, with all the new information swirling about in her mind and causing a maelstrom of emotions she was struggling to deal with at the moment. To her way of thinking, it was all India's fault anyway that she had to wait for official approval from her bosses before sharing any intelligence with the country.

The US National Security Agency (NSA) had invited India to be a part of its SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) Seniors Pacific Group back in 2008. Prompted by the heinous November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India joined the Group in 2009 as a partner in the top-secret multi-national intelligence sharing network along with six other Asia Pacific countries. It also got access to SIGINT Seniors Europe network, the older SIGINT group originally formed by the NSA in 1982 with the sole purpose of spying on and intercepting Russian military communications during the Cold War period. Since joining the group though, Indian agencies routinely made the mistake of using the sensitive intelligence data shared with them loosely. Even after multiple warnings, information that should have been top-secret often found its way to the Indian media and thereon to the general public. So over the past few years, data sharing between other SIGINT members and Indian agencies

had been limited. Moreover, any information, no matter how small or big, could only be shared with India after approval had been received from NSA Headquarters at Fort Meade, Maryland.

Two days ago, India had asked SIGINT Seniors Europe and Pacific Groups for help with the identification of some DNA samples and fingerprints. The Afghanistan-based Canada SIGINT team, a part of the Canadian operations in the country, had positively identified the samples and shared the results with the larger group including USA. Consequently, the information now lying on Brigadier Willing's desk was not only sensitive and disturbing but potentially explosive. With the attack on the Prime Minister and a General Election looming, a release of this intelligence could even lead to a war with Pakistan. *But the Indians need to know this!*

After hours of waiting and several more cups of coffee, Willing finally got the approval to share the information on CRUSHED ICE, the intelligence sharing platform accessed only by members of the SIGINT Seniors Pacific group. The information had already been reviewed at the highest levels at Langley (headquarters of the USA's Central Intelligence Agency) and Fort Meade. Fifteen minutes later, a video conference call was arranged. Among those in attendance were the CIA Station Directors in New Delhi and Islamabad, the US SIGINT teams in Afghanistan and Pakistan, senior members of the South-Asian desk in the NSA and CIA, as well as the Directors of the NSA and CIA who were joining in from their offices at Fort Meade and Langley respectively. The US Secretary of State was also scheduled to join in from Washington.

The situation was serious and verging on catastrophic. So far, no one knew if Pakistan had masterminded the attack on the Indian Prime Minister, but the apparent involvement of an ISI-trained terrorist was proof enough for India to point accusing fingers at its traditional nemesis.

The CIA analysts were predicting an Indo-Pak war in the very near future. US would have to exert all its pressure to prevent it from going nuclear.

Ranjitsinh drove along the state highway towards Bhirandiyara, flooring the accelerator as much as he dared. At this hour, traffic along the two-lane road was almost non-existent but for his lone vehicle moving away from Bhuj. The car's headlights lit up the road for a few metres ahead, trying their best to keep the darkness at bay.

Ranjitsinh had started from Bhuj thirty minutes back and he expected to be at Bhirandiyara in a few minutes, the 50-kilometre, normally over an hour's drive to the village to take lesser time in the wee hours of the day. His partner-in-crime from the Intelligence Bureau was seated beside him on the passenger seat. Like Ranjitsinh, he too was injured and walked with a limp, a memento of his experience with the incognito Razzak. When Razzak had struck the man across the face with his heavy handbag, his bike had ploughed into the crowd in the bazaar. The minds of both men were pre-occupied with thoughts of the tomorrow's impending debriefing; the silence in the car was absolute and remained unbroken for miles.

Ranjitsinh's right ear was still throbbing from its close shave with Razzak's gun earlier in the day. Although the surgeon had done a bang-up job of patching it up, he absent-mindedly kept feeling the bandage for blood. His mind ventured off to the question that had been nagging him since he had been tasked with the attack: Why kill the Prime Minister at all? He seemed to be doing well for the country. He was sure that the anonymous caller would have an agenda of his own even if he didn't see fit to share the details with him. But Ranjitsinh could observe some strategies clearly playing out. Stealing the car of the popular Muslim opposition politician – and only his car – was part of the caller's instructions. And soon after the attack, the media went crazy expostulating on a number of conspiracy theories and debating which particular theory held more 'merit'. One theory held that the opposition party had a hand in the attack. Another theory involved a religious angle – a conjecture that the attack was a result of Indian Muslims' hatred for the Hindu nationalist ruling party, and its leader in particular. All this Machiavellian led to advantage, BNP.

But why was there no news regarding the Prime Minister's condition? Since the attack, there had been no medical bulletins issued and no information shared by the government with the people of India. No one knew about the Prime Minister's condition. What did this mean? Was the attack

fatal? Was he lying dead in the AIIMS morgue? Or was he grievously injured and hanging on to life by a thread? Rumours were rife on WhatsApp and other social media channels that although he was not dead, he was in a coma and unlikely to ever wake up. It was not clear. There was no grapevine either among his intelligence circuit, no gossips, no 'inside' information. There was absolute silence on the topic of PM's health as if it had been mandated and even monitored from the very top.

The man dozing beside him coughed in his sleep and Ranjitsinh turned to look at him. They were both exhausted after the Darbargadh incident but they had to take care of the Razzak problem, and it had to be done tonight. The cops were already on the look-out for Razzak. The chaos he left in his wake near Darbargadh had brought forth many eyewitnesses who had provided a good sketch of the man they now dubbed '*sardarji rickshawallah*'. The sketch was already in circulation but luckily for him, the cops were looking for a bearded Sikh man. *This gives me more time to track Razzak down.*

Disguising himself so completely was a good move and Ranjitsinh had to give Razzak credit for that. Razzak seemed to have lady luck favouring him from the beginning. *The bastard!* He had escaped certain death at least twice, first in Mumbai after mounting the attack— *Mumbai police be damned* — and again today at Darbargadh. *Enough! This ends now!* Ranjitsinh checked the GPS tracker app on his phone which was continuously beaming Razzak's position in real time. He was getting closer!

He heard the sound of shelling on the distant border and as he continued to drive towards Bhirandiyara, a convoy of empty army trucks went past him, driving in the opposite direction towards Bhuj. Since the attack, military convoys carrying tanks, artillery and soldiers were a common sight on the state highway during the day time, the vehicles moving towards the border, beefing up the Indian military capabilities in the region. Both armies were getting increasingly aggressive and 'get ready: war is imminent' was an unequivocal message given to the rank and file in the Intelligence Bureau. Ranjitsinh suddenly had a startling thought: *Was the attack on the PM the prequel to an attack on India? Or was it a pretext to start a war with Pakistan? What the hell have I got myself involved in?!*

The 'caller' had not called him since the attack although Ranjitsinh was not completely surprised by his radio silence. In his experience, the caller would get in touch with him only after the entire 'project' was over. The caller seemed to be omniscient and omnipresent, always aware of what was

happening, where, when and how. He always knew how much progress had been made on the ground and which ‘problem’ had been solved. Ranjitsinh was sure that once Razzak was dead and out of their way, the caller would somehow know this too. And he was hoping that he would call Ranjitsinh to congratulate him for a job well done and let him know that his remaining payment was on its way.

Ranjitsinh slowed his car as he saw a temporary army check post in the near distance. Military movements were ongoing during this tense time, so he was not surprised that the army had put up check posts on the roads leading to the border. As he slowly approached the check post, he nudged his companion to wake up and ensure that none of their guns were visible. They would both be caught in another huge mess if they were caught with guns so close to the border, that too when tensions with Pakistan were in such a heightened state. Stopping before the check post, he rolled down the windows and pasted a bland smile on his face to reassure the sombre soldiers that he and his companion were completely harmless. Ranjitsinh and his companion blinked in surprise at the bright flashlights that suddenly lit the insides of the car and turned it as bright as day.

Peering into the vehicle from the driver’s side, one of the three heavily-armed soldiers stared at Ranjitsinh and asked in a voice heavy with suspicion, “*Jai Hind, Sahab*. Where are you going?”

“Sir, I am from the Intelligence Bureau...” Ranjitsinh responded with confidence and moved slightly to remove his ID card from the wallet he always placed in the pocket of his trousers.

“Don’t move! I said, DON’T MOVE! Hands up! HANDS UP where we can see them!”

Ranjitsinh and his companion quickly complied, bemused by the soldiers’ obvious hostility and wary of their barely-leashed potential for violence.

“Now, where are you coming from, where are you going and for what purpose?!” the soldiers had their guns trained on the two men in the non-descript car.

“Sir, I work for the Intelligence Bureau and I’m on a mission for the Bureau. This here is my colleague and we are following an important lead that may lead us to a suspected extremist.”

“And your name?”

“Ranjitsi...”

Ranjitsinh never even finished giving the soldier his name. Multiple shots

rang out from the soldiers' automatic rifles, splattering the men's brain matter all over the vehicle and covering its insides with rivers of dark-red blood.

One of the soldiers got into the driver's side and pushed Ranjitsinh's body off the driver's seat like a bag of trash. He paid no attention to the bullet-riddled body of the other man. He put the car into gear and drove it off the road a fair distance, quickly jumping off, and letting the car drive itself into the dark night to wherever it would go over the vast, barren mud plains.

Razzak watched the army jeep with a growing sense of bemusement as it slowly pulled into the open space right in front of Bhirandiyara Mava Centre, his mama's shop. *Something's odd.*

Razzak thought he heard the sound of gunshots a few minutes back. He was quite sure that the shots were fired from AK 47 assault rifles, a sound that he could identify anywhere in the world, originating as it did from the type of rifle he used in Afghanistan. The night was quiet enough that the sound would travel a fair distance, but given its intensity and sheer 'loudness', he was quite sure that the weapons had been fired not far away from his location. His hair stood on edge as soon as he heard the quick, short bursts; automatic rifles firing in unison on some hapless victim or victims.

The harsh, yellow light bulb hanging from a branch of the large tree near his mava shop clearly illuminated the *Avtomat Kalashnikovas* hanging from the shoulders of the three uniformed men who got out of the jeep. The soldiers spoke quietly for a few minutes and then moved stealthily, their guns drawn and at the ready.

Suddenly Razzak realised that the shots he had heard earlier could be from these very AK 47 rifles. And something told him that these men were not soldiers from the Indian Army but someone else. Indian soldiers traditionally used rifles from the INSAS family, or AK 103s, Ghataks or the new SIG Sauer 716s that were recently acquired by the army. AK 47s were not the common weapon of choice. And the way these men were moving – stealthy and more reminiscent of criminals with something to hide than confident soldiers or commandos on an official mission – was extremely suspicious in the peaceful, sleeping village.

Razzak stayed low in his hiding spot on the terrace of the Bhirandiyara Post Office and watched the men as they stopped near his home. *My home!* The man in the lead of the small unit of rogues skilfully opened the main door lock as the other two kept watch on either side. The leader quietly entered the house, followed by his accomplices who immediately shut the door behind them. *Mercenaries.*

As he settled down for a long wait, Razzak congratulated himself for his foresight in asking his mama and mami to get out of Bhirandiyara and stay with relatives in Surat for a few days. From the payments he had received, he

had concealed a large amount of money in a secret hidey-hole in the kitchen where he knew his mami kept all her jewellery (in her own words, “away from the prying eyes of greedy maids and nosey neighbours”). He could imagine the expressions of surprise and pleasure on the faces of his mama and mami when they found the money sharing space with mami’s jewellery. The money would be a comfort in their old age, even if he was not around to ease it for them. And of course, no amount of money would ever be able to compensate for the love and affection they had showered on him; neither would it make up for his absence from their lives. He would love to continue to stay with them and take care of them until they passed, even bring Saida and Ayshah to stay along, but then he had already selected a different, more contentious life path that made the other alternative impossible. *Ya Allah!* The direction of his thoughts, poignant and bitter-sweet, made him sad for what was, and mourn what could never be.

Razzak kept close watch on the house for at least thirty minutes before he realised that the mercenaries probably wouldn’t come out until he himself entered the house. By now it was obvious to him that this trio of murderers was here to permanently ‘neutralise’ him. But who had sent them? Ranjitsinh? That seemed improbable because given the importance of this mission, Ranjitsinh himself would have been here, and if not holed-up in his home with the mercenaries, then at least out somewhere close from where he could supervise the operation.

*So if not Ranjitsinh, then who had sent them? The ISI? The mastermind behind the attack? Were these men the ‘clean-up’ tools in a high stakes game? Eliminate Razzak, get rid of all evidence, tie off all loose threads? The last thought provoked a barrage of other thoughts – if the mastermind has sent these men to kill me, what about Ranjitsinh? Isn’t he a loose thread too? Why isn’t he here yet? Have they killed him already?*

*Were the gunshots...*

He crushed the square, wafer-thin GPS tracker under his feet and continued to watch his mama mami’s home, aiming his Glock 17 at the front door. It was still dark where he hid on the terrace but the light bulb hanging on his house’s porch threw enough light around it to enable him to take a shot. However, the distance between the house and his location was too far to ensure an accurate shot with his Glock pistol. *I’m still going to try.* By force of habit, he checked the threaded barrel of his gun for tightness to ensure that the shots would be muted. He was carrying a paltry 12 ammunition rounds



versus the hundreds that the mercenaries probably possessed. However, he was determined to make each round count. *I only need three rounds to get rid of them, after all*, he thought to himself with a grim smile.

After a very long day, Vijay finally managed to leave the PMO and drove through the streets of New Delhi at 4 AM. He was looking forward to seeing his family after what felt like years, but was in truth only a few days. *I know they'll be sleeping but I want to see them dammit!*

He was only a few kilometres away from his house when the shrill sound of an incoming text startled him out of his anticipatory mood. Slowing down, he glanced at his phone lying on the car's dashboard: "URGENT! Come back to office RIGHT AWAY!" Frustrated and disappointed, he turned the wheel to go back to the PMO. *So near, yet so far!*

He rolled down the driver's side window as he drove back. It was an unusually cold night in the city for this time of the year. A freak cold had enveloped the city tonight. Just a few months ago, the effects of a polar vortex gripping the Northern Hemisphere and the resultant deep freeze moving in from the Arctic had almost frozen Delhi to its marrow.. So-called weather experts were sombrely announcing to anyone who would listen that global warming was sinking its tentacles deep into the city. For the common man though, life went on as usual, the changing weather just another challenge to be met through perseverance and doggedness. He thought about his own two and a 'half' children and wondered how their lives would pan out. Weather was one thing; the pace of technology advances was so high that life suddenly felt unpeaceful and even scary. Artificial Intelligence could really take on the world. *Humans: you are terminated!*

Hearing a car honking in the next lane, he snapped out of his reverie and realised in the same instant that his car's air conditioning was on. He didn't need it and quickly switched it off, and once again fell into a deep contemplation of his past and possible future.

He recalled the days of stress and terror he had spent at Vaishno Devi during *Operation Jai Mata Di* five years ago. It was Diwali and the nights were biting cold. He was then occupied by the nitty-gritties of the critical operation, and these distractions had somehow managed to keep thoughts of a cold reality away from his mind. Now again he was in the midst of an important operation. The differences between the two operations however were stark. In this project, he was mostly tied to his desk while project-managing the different agencies, coordinating their efforts and trying to set a common forward-looking direction to benefit all of them.

Prahlad Dev, the National Security Advisor and currently Vijay's reporting manager, was highly experienced in the fields of security and intelligence given his long stints with both domestic and external intelligence agencies. He had also held a number of important positions in the ministries of defence and external affairs under different governments. In some ways, Vijay was picking up crumbs from Dev that would one day enable him to bake his own loaf of bread one day.

*Ha! What a thought! One day I will advise my three fledglings: "Pick up the crumbs children, so that in future you can bake your own bread!" I'm being ridiculous! I must be more tired than I realise.* These last thoughts made him laugh out loud.

He jolted back to reality when he heard another ding and glanced at the new text message: "GET YOUR BUTT BACK HERE NOW!" The terse message scattered all other thoughts and he rolled up the window and stepped on the accelerator. He was now only a few minutes away from the Prime Minister's office at South Block, Raisina Hill. *Wow, two texts in 10 minutes?!* Vijay knew that the brusque summons must be issued for a grave reason. Once again he entered the PMO building complex, parked his car close to the main entrance and quickly sent a text in response, "I'm here," just before he dashed inside.

Razzak could not wait anymore. He had now been on the terrace for over an hour and by now he was convinced that the men were determined to outwait him. Unless they were drawn out somehow...

He climbed down from the terrace, looked around him furtively to ensure that he was still alone and then took an alternate, roundabout route towards his house. The path would take him straight to the window-less room at the back of the house and the stone stairs set into the adjacent wall. Climbing the steps quietly, he tiptoed onto the terrace and sat in a corner for a few minutes. Intently, he listened for any sounds emanating from the house. Nothing.

As was typical for the homes in the Kutch region, the terrace had a large, square opening that allowed the sun to bathe the central courtyard in bright, luminous light. Razzak realised that he had to draw the men to the courtyard and then shoot at them as soon as they appeared. *I don't have too many chances.* But almost immediately he realised the flaw in this plan. If the three mercenaries had even an iota of common sense in their money-hungry noggins, they would realise that they might be walking into a trap. So they would probably not be drawn out into the courtyard and just wait for him to enter the house himself. If they were experienced enough, they would know better than to be impulsive and give their nemesis an advantage. *No, this plan won't work unless the men are amateurs, which seems highly unlikely.* In Afghanistan he would have had grenades and his trusted AK 47 rifle with him that would have enabled him to work something out to his advantage without second-guessing himself. But not here. He couldn't afford to take such risks, and certainly not with his sole Glock when the men themselves had AK 47s, that too three of them. *I'll have to come up with a Plan B.*

As quietly as he had climbed the stairs, he now tiptoed down them, again took the roundabout way back to the post office and once more climbed its terrace. By his estimation, there was just about an hour left for sunrise. He felt the mobile phone in his jacket pocket. When he was in India, he used it sparingly and only for emergencies. *This counts as an emergency, doesn't it?* He dug the device out and placed it on the ground next to him. Fishing out a new SiM from his wallet, he placed it into the phone. Then he called a pre-programmed number and waited for someone to answer at the other end. *I should've done this well before now.*

"Hello, this is Razzak bhai calling from Bhirandiyara, ID number

INBI246. I want to report three suspicious-looking gunmen wearing army uniforms who entered my house a little while ago. They are carrying large guns and are hidden in the house. My house is just behind the Bhirandiyara post office. I suspect that the men are Pakistani terrorists.”

Razzak was confident that this approach was fool-proof and would result in the men’s execution or at least apprehension. However, he was worried that by calling in the incident, he had brought unnecessary attention on his mama mami’s house. He didn’t want anyone to search his home, and especially not the kitchen. His poor mama might be in trouble with the law if the money Razzak had hidden was discovered. *I hope I’ve hidden it well enough.* After waiting in vain for the mercenaries to come out of the house, Razzak had realised that there was no other option to flush the bastards out into the open.

Reflexively, he felt for the thick wad of cash in his jacket pocket, making sure that it was still there. As soon as the mercenaries were dealt with, he would get out of the village and cross the border tonight itself. It was too dangerous to continue staying around. The cash would be enough to see him through. A few minutes after placing the call, he saw a jeep – an army vehicle judging by its appearance – and a truck rapidly approaching the village from the direction of Khavda, 20 kilometres north of Bhirandiyara.

The Indian army had hired informants in every village near the border to report on any suspicious goings-on in the region. All the informants were identified by a number that they had to quote to identify themselves to the dispatcher at the other end. Once the dispatcher confirmed their identity, they could call in their report about ‘unusual’ movements, suspicious activities or life-threatening emergencies. The ID number he had provided belonged to his mama who was one of the informants in Bhirandiyara village.

His mama’s name was also Razzak.  
And everyone called him Razzak *bhai*.

Vijay felt a wave of shock run through this body as he stared in disbelief, first at the image on the large monitor and then at the brief report on the table in front of him. The NTRO had just received irrefutable intelligence from the Signals Intelligence Seniors Pacific team. The DNA and the fingerprints of the Prime Minister's attacker had been identified as belonging to Ahmed Salaam, a high-profile member of Afghanistan's Taliban terrorist network. According to information provided by the Afghanistan National Police, Salaam had played a significant role in at least four major attacks on US and Afghan soldiers over the past two years. He had also made it to the list of 'Most Wanted' criminals in Afghanistan, after his role in the August '18 attack on Afghan Police headquarters in the provincial capital of Ghazni, some 150 kilometres southwest of the capital, Kabul. The heinous attack had killed over a dozen policemen and left many more wounded. Soon after the incident, Salaam and other Taliban fighters were believed to have quietly slipped into neighbouring Pakistan's territory. Salaam was known to frequently shift base between Pakistan and Afghanistan and come to Afghanistan periodically to run specific 'errands' for his Taliban brotherhood. International intelligence agencies also knew that he had been trained by Pakistan's ISI and in all probability, functioned as the ISI's representative within the Taliban.

Still bewildered, Vijay once again looked at the still photograph staring out at him from the TV monitor. A tall, fair-complexioned man with deep hazel eyes, a luxuriant light brown beard and the typical Afghan turban. *How did this man from the Taliban end up in India? What was he doing here? Who sent him?* Salaam did not look like any of the other men they had studied so far on any CCTV footage from over the past one week. His looks were so unique and un-Indian that if he *had* been caught on a CCTV camera, his image would have stood out from the sea of tanned faces like a sore thumb. But the DNA and fingerprints told a different story and they never lied. This meant that Ahmed Salaam had been in India recently, and probably still was. But how did he escape the notice of hundreds of policemen, security analysts and cameras?

*Oh, of course! He changed his look!*

"Upload this and make sure all men get their arses on the job pronto!" Prahlad Dev's furious voice echoed around the large chamber and had

everyone, especially the CBI team, jumping to do his bidding. The analysts would share the available photographs on NATGRID so multiple intelligence agencies could have access to the information. The Joint Task Force had declared an intelligence ‘emergency’ in the country and all intelligence and law enforcement agencies – both central and state – had been placed on a state of high alert. All agencies and departments across India had a job cut out: track the past movements of Ahmed Salaam and trace his present whereabouts.

“Start that operation you do with the face detection thingie...” Prahlad Dev now roared at the NTRO officer standing in the corner of the room.

“But Sir, it’s not ready to be deployed yet,” the man protested, looking at his colleague to back him up but receiving just a ‘what can I do?’ shrug in response. Prahlad Dev was referring to NTRO’s centralised mass surveillance programme that would run Artificial Intelligence-based facial detection algorithms to trace movements of known criminals and other persons of interest pan India, across different CCTV feeds from different regions of the country. This system, when fully developed, would help the Government scale up its law enforcement and crime clean-up efforts. A recent stand-alone pilot of this system in Delhi had helped trace over 3000 missing children in just four days’ time, an achievement that had received only a mild, passing coverage in the national media. What was not announced however was that the programme also involved the analysis of millions of faces caught on CCTVs all over Delhi, a fact that could blow up in the government’s face if privacy exponents ever got wind of it. The official line also did not mention that besides tracing the 3000 missing children, the programme had also traced over 600 known missing criminals, most of who were in captivity now and awaiting trial.

A number of state police departments, railways police forces and other law enforcement agencies operated their own customised face recognition software applications to analyse their CCTV feeds. The work to centralise these disparate applications and bring them under the umbrella of a common face-detection programme was at an advanced stage. Some amount of centralisation had already taken place but given the havoc that such a mass surveillance system could potentially unleash on the privacy front, it was all being done under the radar. The code name for the project was Mass Watch aka MAWA.

Prahlad Dev’s patience was at an end. “I don’t bloody care whether it’s

ready to be deployed or not! I have been hearing the same excuse for the past year and I HAVE HAD ENOUGH! Just get the damn thing running NOW! I want you to map every airport, railway station and border town. I want to know where this bastard came from, where he's been and where he's going. JUST GET ON WITH IT!"

"Yes Sir," the NTRO man responded to placate the National Security Advisor even though he had no idea how to accomplish what the NSA demanded. MAWA was still in an alpha stage and the code was crashing frequently so the programme was far from ready for actual deployment.

"I'll ask the team to focus on a few railway CCTV feeds to start with, and slowly map it all out across more railway and airport feeds. That might work."

Vijay re-read the report he held in his hands, blinking his eyes in utter disbelief. Something was not right. *Something smells wrong here. An ISI-trained Taliban fighter comes to India, attacks the Indian Prime Minister and then... what? Where did he go? How did he end up in India in the first place? Did the Taliban send him?* Vijay admitted to himself that a Taliban hand in the attack was within the realm of possibility; frequently in the past they had made their anger against India known. Still, all things considered, Taliban involvement didn't seem particularly probable. *So if not the Taliban, then who? Pakistan? But why would they mount such a high-profile attack, an action that is sure to get them brickbats from the international community? Surely they know that doing something like would portend an ill-advised war with its giant, more powerful neighbour!*

Shaking himself out of his thoughts – meanderings that were currently leading him nowhere productive – he noticed Prahlad Dev stepping out of the JTF room and moving towards the cafeteria. Quickly following the National Security Advisor, Vijay caught up with him and together they walked over to the coffee machine in the corner. Without wasting any words on unnecessary small talk, Vijay quickly laid out his concerns to the senior man. With an economy of movement and words that Vijay couldn't help but admire, Dev nodded tersely and said, "We now know that our man is a Taliban extremist with clear links to the ISI. This itself is *sufficient proof* for us to conclude that Pakistan is behind the attack on our Prime Minister. The Americans are saying that there's no proof yet that ISI has *actually directed* or masterminded this attack, or if the Pakistani government was in anyway



involved, but we don't care. For us, it's clearly Pakistan. So while your concerns may be valid, you know that I cannot just talk about what we feel in our 'gut' without anything concrete to back up these so-called feelings! Especially in such a high-stakes case. If we have an alternate motive or explanation to the attack in mind, we'll have to find and show proof." Vijay stayed quiet, sensing that there was more to come. Prahlad Dev turned to the coffee machine and waited for his cup to fill with the strong, dark brew. He then stepped aside as Vijay filled his own cup, seemingly lost in thought.

"You know how high the emotions are currently running among the ruling establishment and the people of the country. I have a Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meeting later today. In my mind, the new information leads us to only one end result: *war*." With this ominous warning, the NSA turned and walked away, leaving Vijay staring after him in mounting agitation and helplessness.

Vijay entered the operations room where most of his team members had gathered.

"Good morning everyone. I hope you are all wide awake now with the information we have and raring to go because today is going to be a long day."

"Sir, don't you mean *another* long day?" someone in his team good-naturedly heckled. Everyone in the room burst out laughing.

"Yes, yes, *another* long day. So grab your cups of coffee or tea and let's get started. We are reviewing everything that has happened over the last few days. We will also review the SIGINT report that we received just a while back. Our man is Ahmed Salaam."

As he spoke, he displayed various photos of Salaam on the monitor along with aerial shots of his attack sites in Afghanistan, the most recent in the provincial capital of Ghazni. "After his attack on Ghazni, he seemingly disappeared, probably into Pakistan. And he would have then slipped into India."

"IB team: review all NATGRID reports and keep an eye out for anything that may lead us to the whereabouts of Ahmed Salaam. There could be reports about the ISI, the Taliban or even words like terrorist, extremist, separatist and others that pop up. Am I making sense? MI team: review NATGRID reports filed from the border regions and run it against the border intelligence reports. Past four months to start with, and then we go back if we

find no hit. Any relevant word, place, person, fact or report, on any platform, media and from any place. Got it?”

His team members nodded.

“CBI: Get the folks in the Cyber Cell to run Salaam’s image through AASMA. If there’s a hit there, I should know about it.” AASMA or Advanced Application for Social Media Analytics was an advanced tool used by agencies in the country to track and monitor social media accounts of individuals using facial recognition technology.

“And while NTRO tries to trace Salaam through MAWA, let’s get the railway and state police departments to manually run the image through their CCTV footage again, going back to the day of the attack on the Prime Minister. Almost every state has access to some kind of AI or face recognition tool, so they may hopefully get a hit quickly. Who knows, we may be able to trace Salaam faster than this MAWA thingamajig!”

Before they received the information from SIGINT, they had no promising leads to investigate so progress had been completely stalled no matter which direction they looked in. Now thanks to SIGINT’s solid lead, they were suddenly moving forward at the rate of knots. Vijay sat at his desk and penned his thoughts down in his old-school paper notepad – a childhood habit that still helped him to make sense of his thoughts and identify the patterns hidden in the information.

The Muslim politician from Mumbai whose Ford Endeavour was stolen and then used in a crime did not seem a likely candidate. The TV reporter who covered the incident was clueless. The Moon Media producer might have provided some useful information but he was dead. His murder had closed that line of enquiry for them. Then there was the Endeavour’s driver, Abdul Khan. He had left Mumbai on a train to Tata Nagar, Jharkhand but for some inexplicable reason, he had left the train part-way in Nagpur. No one had any clue what he had actually done in Nagpur or why he was even there. Nagpur police was still showing his photograph around the city’s hotels and guest-houses, hoping to glean some useful information about his movements and at the same time, take away some of the focus off of their incompetence. Abdul reappeared in the town of Balangir, Odhisa and police in Odisha had reported that they had traced Abdul to the temple town of Sonepur. A tea-stall boy had even helped him with a rickshaw to a temple in Sonepur but the trail ended there. No one had seen nor heard of him since then, so for now,

Vijay and his team were assuming that he too was dead. Dumped in the Mahanadi river probably. And with that, another line of enquiry lost. Shamsheer Singh, the army man who was found to have supplied the RPG had fatally shot himself. The ambulance attendant Ram Charan had been shot in the head by Ahmed Salaam during the attack itself so he was obviously one of the first players or loose ends to be eliminated. And no one could find the original ambulance driver whose ambulance was used by Ahmed Salaam for the attack. But again they were assuming that he too was dead – most probably murdered and dumped somewhere like a bag of week-old trash.

One of the most glaring gaps in their investigation was also one of the most serious. They had lost track of Ahmed Salaam almost immediately after the attack on the Prime Minister, that is, right in Mumbai itself. This was a serious loss of face for the security forces of the country, especially for Mumbai Police. *How can a terrorist, after pulling off such an audacious attack, slip from the watchful eyes of thousands of security men in the city?* Mumbai is a huge chaotic city, so this early loss had just complicated matters and that too in a way that they were struggling to unravel. Mumbai Police had finally located the food service deliveryman's uniform dumped in the attic of a room in Nadco shopping centre in Andheri. The attacker would probably know that his footprints in the otherwise dusty room on the terrace would be a clear giveaway, but he didn't really care. Every little atypical step just helped him buy more time. The trail went cold after that. What did Ahmed Salaam do after he dumped the uniform at the shopping centre? Where did he go? Did he don a new disguise? Did he go somewhere else? By local train? By BEST bus? Or did he hop into a three-wheeler rickshaw? He hoped that once Ahmed Salaam was mapped among millions of faces in the CCTV feeds, the task force's job in tracing the onward path of the man would become easier.

The words were flowing from Vijay's pen onto his notepad like a river breaking banks. Suddenly, he stopped at the initials KP and AS he had just written. KP was of course Keyur Shenoy and AS was Asit Patel, with the last initials of both interchanged. He might be old-school but he was not unaware of the security risk of his notepad falling into the wrong hands. *One can never be too careful, can they?* After his lengthy analysis of the facts of the case, Shenoy and Patel were the only actors he had remained to conclude upon. During his investigations into these two men in particular, he would have to tread very softly.

For the first time in five days, Vijay felt as if he was in the driver's seat.  
*Are we getting close to solving the case once and for all?*

Razzak kept as low a profile as possible on the terrace as he saw army vehicles entering the village from the direction of Khavda. The army jeep and truck stopped a good distance away from his mama's mava shop where the mercenaries' jeep had been parked. Two heavily armed soldiers – real ones from the look of them - alighted from the truck and cautiously approached the parked jeep for an inspection. They combed the vehicle with their hand-held Improvised Explosive Device (IED) detectors, and after a physical check inside the vehicle and underneath, they signalled an all-clear to the officers and the soldiers who were still inside their vehicles. All of them alighted. The ranks formed two files in the dark, and the senior-most officer wasted no time in leading the troops towards Razzak's house. Only the two heavily-armed soldiers remained near the jeep, sharp-eyed even at this early hour and weapons at the ready.

A group of soldiers stepped onto the porch of his mama's house as silently as ghosts. One of the men knocked on the door while the others stood silently by on either side of the door. To no one's surprise, there was no response to the soldier's knock. In fact, there was absolutely no sound coming from inside the house. If they didn't know better, they would have thought that the house was devoid of life, human or otherwise. Once again, the soldier peremptorily knocked on the door and once again, he got no response. At a signal from his superior officer, he then pushed on the door slightly, but as expected it was locked from the inside.

The officer accepted the megaphone from one of his men and lifted it to his mouth. In a voice loud enough to wake up the sleeping and even the dead, he barked into the megaphone, "This is the Indian army. We know you're inside the house so there's no hiding from us. Whoever you are, come out with your hands above your heads and your lives will be spared. But you have to come out RIGHT NOW!"

The army men waited silently, weapons raised and hearts pumping with adrenaline, but the door remained closed. Once more the officer shouted into the megaphone, "This is your last chance. Come out with your hands held above your heads. You have five minutes before we come in and force you to come out," he said as another group of soldiers climbed up the terrace and crouched against the balustrade, guns pointing towards the central courtyard of the house.

Five minutes passed but once again, there was no response from the people inside.

The officer nodded at his men and they forced the door open with a battering ram. As soon as the door flew open, they jumped to the side and not a moment too soon, because almost immediately shots were fired in their direction from inside the house. The platoon of soldiers on either side of the now-destroyed door waited right where they were, prepared to out-wait the criminals hiding inside. At a signal from the officer, two soldiers on the ground quickly pulled on their face masks, lifted their teargas launchers and in quick succession, fired four teargas grenades into the house.

The men holed up inside had not expected a teargas attack and in a blind panic they rushed into the courtyard, firing indiscriminately in all directions with their AK47 rifles. The soldiers on the terrace fired back at them in unison. In less a minute, the entire operation was over. The soldiers on the porch put on their masks, and rifles drawn, rushed inside to confirm that the criminals were indeed dead.

From his vantage point, Razzak saw soldiers dragging three bodies out of his house and dumping them into the back of the army truck like bags of stinking refuse. The senior officer alternately studied the faces of the mercenaries and then the phone he held in his right hand. It took Razzak a few seconds to realise that the man was probably looking at some photos on his phone and trying to see if the dead men's faces matched the equally-inanimate digital images. The officer looked at his second-in-command and with a slight nod of his head which indicated that the men lying dead in the truck weren't the same men in the photos.

The sun was out by this time and almost the entire village had gathered some distance away from Razzak's house, bewildered but still fully aware that the strident sounds that woke them up so suddenly were caused by real guns. Silence reigned as they saw the soldiers throwing three dead bodies into a truck that stood nearby. Two soldiers remained outside Razzak's house, guns held across their chests and staring the villagers down with their gimlet, dead-eyed stares. If nothing else, the stares kept the villagers away from approaching the house and satisfying their curiosity about this turn of events. The remaining soldiers along with the senior officer got into their vehicles and as quickly as they had arrived, went back to the army barracks at Khavda.

Once the crowd had dispersed, Razzak came down from the post office

terrace. Making sure that no one saw him or worse recognised him, he started walking away from Bhirandiyara and towards the state highway. He would take the next bus to take him close to *Kalo Dungar* (Black Mountain), the highest point in the Kutch region, and kill time in the nearby village before crossing the border later tonight. He would call to inform Ummah, his handlers in India, soon of his plans and hopefully they would make some arrangements to get him across the border safely and in one piece! He was pragmatic enough to know that at such short notice, they may not be able to help with a border escort at all like earlier times – in that case he would cross the border on his own – but he knew that Ummah would at least make arrangements and plant appropriate information, so in case the army or Border Security Force border patrols caught him crossing the border, he would already have a cover.

He wished he could see his mama and mami once more but that ship had already sailed. A sudden thought made him pause. The army officer had inspected the faces of the dead men with deliberate intent. He was obviously confirming if one of them matched a person he was looking for. *Ya Allah, he was looking for me!* A sickening feeling in his stomach overwhelmed him. If indeed his cover were blown, he had led the soldiers straight to his home!

*Allah, let no crisis fall upon my mama and mami because of me.*

*I have to get out! I have to get to Tooh!*

“...we haven’t yet considered their Nasrs.”

The noisy room suddenly fell silent as its occupants stared at Prahlad Dev, the National Security Advisor, in stunned disbelief. The Defence Minister snapped his mouth shut with an audible click and turned to look at the acting Prime Minister who shrugged and then focused his full attention to what Dev was saying. “We need to take their Nasr missiles into account,” Prahlad Dev repeated to the assembled members of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS).

Vijay took notes, attending the meeting as a part of the NSA team, as were a few other staff representing cabinet ministers and defence chiefs.

Dev was referring to Pakistan’s short-range tactical nuclear missile that they had developed to counteract India’s Cold Start Doctrine. After the terrorist attack on its Parliament in December 2001, a crime for which India held Pakistan solely responsible, India had mobilised its military in huge numbers in preparation for storming across the border with Pakistan. This was to be its largest ever planned deployment after the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. However, the Indian Strike Corps took over three weeks to fully prepare for the counter-attack, enough time for Pakistan to also mobilise its armed forces in preparation for a war against India. This three-week window also gave the world powers, especially the United States, a good window of time to intervene and prepare a case dissuading India from declaring outright war. The Pakistani President, General Pervez Musharraf once again gave lip service to the anti-war rhetoric by denouncing terrorism. He also promised a crackdown on terrorists and anti-India forces based in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). Ultimately, India was unable to justify its reasons for going to war with its enemy across the border. In all, *Operation Parakram* was a costly fiasco.

The Cold Start Doctrine was specifically developed to avoid the repeat of this exact scenario, and to attack swiftly before the enemy could react or global intermediaries could interfere. The 2016 strike in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir that destroyed specific terrorist launch pads was a targeted operation carried out by commandos of the Indian Army in retaliation to the attack of heavily-armed militants at its Brigade Headquarters in Uri. Similarly, the February 2019 airstrike at Balakot was a targeted counter-attack against a large terrorist training camp deep inside Pakistan in retaliation to the



terrorists' attack on the BSF convoy in Pulwama. Although these two actions were carried out swiftly enough, and could be called as 'surgical strikes', the Cold Start Doctrine itself is a much broader concept that involves tactical air support from the Air Force as well as fire support from the forward spearheads – artillery and tanks deployed at the border – as the infantry units marched across the border. India's idea was to use every resource at its disposal to respond swiftly and with a strong element of surprise in order to inflict significant damage on Pakistan while keeping its own damages down to a minimum. The goal was to ensure a limited incursion into Pakistani territory that was effective enough to get great results for India but not major enough for Pakistan to justify its use of nuclear warheads against India.

Back in the present, the evidence pointing to Ahmed Salaam's role in the attack on the PM was mounting. And knowing that Salaam's murderous intent had been honed to a fine point by none other than Pakistan's ISI, more than one person in the room was of the opinion that India had enough justification to initiate a Cold Start against Pakistan. Hopefully *this* time, a Cold Start could eliminate each and every ISI-funded terrorist camp in Pakistan occupied Kashmir, and possibly even a few deep inside Pakistan, and solve India's terrorist problem once and for all. This would also be an opportunity for Indian forces to venture deep into Pakistani territory and do everything possible to wrest back control of Kashmir. And if the situation escalated to a full-out war – which it very well could, given the state of readiness of both nations' armies – it was about time that the mighty hammer of Thor came down on Pakistan and silenced it forever.

Pakistan's National Development Complex (NDC), the agency tasked with missile research and development efforts in the country, had developed the Nasr or Hatf IX (Vengeance IX) tactical missile with the goal of neutralising India's Cold Start Doctrine. With a short range of 70 kilometres, the low-yield nuclear missile could be launched on the advancing Indian infantry and mechanised divisions if they happened to venture deep into Pakistani territory. Of course Pakistan was aware that the nuclear weapon would go off on its own soil and cause untold damage, but this was a risk it was ready to take. In Pakistan's view, if a nuclear weapon prevented the Indians from capturing Karachi, Lahore or other Pakistani cities, then the loss of some of its own citizens was simply collateral damage – an inevitable outcome of war. India too had its own version of a short range tactical missile in its arsenal. The *Prahaar*, with a range of 150 kilometres, was meant to be

used for a similar purpose although India had no thought of sacrificing its own citizens in the quest to destroy Pakistan. Unlike Pakistan, India was unwilling to cut off its nose to spite its face. Prahaar would be used for a limited, tactical deployment only inside the territory Pakistan. And given the perpetual arms race in the subcontinent, it was perhaps no coincidence that both the missiles were tested in 2011 within months of each other – Nasr's test was Pakistan's response to India's test of Prahaar.

"They will not dare to launch a Nasr at this point," Rajendra Singh said. "If they do, they know what will happen to them. If they attack us first, our 'no first use' nuclear policy will be null and void and we will be free to retaliate."

The bleakness in the room deepened further. India maintained a 'no first use' nuclear policy. According to this policy, India pledged not to use a nuclear weapon as a means of warfare unless first attacked by an adversary using a nuclear, chemical, biological or any other type of weapon of mass destruction. In such a situation, India would retaliate with its own nuclear weapons disproportionately and punitively.

"They would know this, certainly. And hence there is no guarantee that Pakistan would limit its line of attack against advancing Indian troops to only the Nasr missiles. They might simultaneously launch strategic nuclear strikes over Delhi, Mumbai and several Indian cities – an eventuality that could have horrific and long-term consequences for India" Prahlad Dev said.

Silence.

"Are you suggesting that as we initiate the Cold Start, our Strategic Forces Command should be ready to simultaneously launch a nuclear warhead against Pakistan?!" the External Affairs Minister wanted to know as she looked at Rajendra Singh, the Defence Minister and then at Prahlad Dev.

At the look of amazement on the External Affairs Minister's face – mirrored on the faces of everyone else in the room – the National Security Advisor shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Despite his apparently nonchalant attitude, he knew that millions would die if a full-scale nuclear war erupted between the two countries. India had air, ground and sea nuclear strike capability as well as a second-strike capability from its nuclear submarines to respond to eventuality of a Pakistani first strike, but there would be no joy of taking Pakistan off the world map if most of India was under a mushroom cloud itself.

At Prahlad Dev's continued silence, the acting PM fired another salvo.

“And what about China? Have we considered what that Red Giant might do if we attack Pakistan?” Rajendra Singh had received intelligence that China was maintaining a ‘non-interference’ policy, especially in the case of India and Pakistan, but he was unwilling to take this information at face value.

To his mind, going forward, India’s strategy to deal with the Pakistan problem would have to assume that China would play a significant supporting role in the India-Pakistan deadlock. In his opinion, India should have done more to prevent Pakistan from developing into a full-blown nuclear power in the first place, but the earlier governments were too soft and limited in their approaches enabling Pakistan to develop a credible deterrence against India. *It’s too late to avoid the problem. All we can do now is deal with it as best as we can. There are no easy answers anyway.*

“...after all, we can never tell with the Chinese, can we?! The concept of ‘No Guarantee’ is just not limited to their products!” he chuckled as the room burst into laughter.

Prahlad Dev finally replied. “Well Sir, we can consider one of the two approaches. Given the fact that Pakistan’s armed forces are already on high alert, one approach could be that we refrain from implementing the Cold Start, at least for now. At the same time, we should avoid alerting Pakistan to the fact that we know that they are responsible for the attack on the Prime Minister. We should also pull our soldiers back from the border and keep the firing down to a minimum. This deliberate strategy of retreat on our part could encourage the enemy to relax and lower its guard. This would take a few weeks of course. *Then* we can initiate a Cold Start with the nuclear weapons in a ready-to-launch state. Following this, if we detect even the slightest trace of Pakistan readying its Nasr or any nuclear weaponry, then we will blow the country right off the planet. We can easily justify abandoning our No-First-Use Doctrine as a response to an imminent and critical threat. Even if we breach a hundred different international norms and agreements, so be it. We cannot put a billion Indian lives at risk in order to claim a moral high ground. It’s not worth it!”

Vijay shifted in his chair. *Gosh!*

“I agree with that. Okay, what else?”

“I will call an Executive Council meeting today, discuss this issue in detail and based on the outcome of that meeting, I will give my recommendations to the Political Council by tomorrow. Till then I think – and we are already on with it – we should make a lot of ‘noise’ with our

artillery, continue with intense and targeted shelling and keep the armed forces in a high state of alert.”

Rajendra Singh felt anxiety creeping up on him. For the first time since he had taken over as Prime Minister of the country, he wished that he hadn't, and that he had a choice. He was nervous and understandably so. While strategies and policies regarding war were relatively easier to make, a decision on an actual war, especially one between two nuclear neighbours, wasn't easy; even when as part of the Atal Behari Vajpayee Government in 2001, he had witnessed the attack on India's Parliament closely.

He had been one of the members involved in drafting and setting up India's Nuclear Command Authority (NCA) in 2003, a sophisticated Command and Control mechanism which ensures that operational decisions about India's nuclear weapons programme remain firmly in civilian control. The Executive Council of the NCA gives its opinion to the Political Council on the potential use of nuclear force against an enemy state. The Political Council considers this advice and then directs the Strategic Forces Command – responsible for management and administrative control over the country's stockpile of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons – to take necessary action. The Cabinet Committee on Security is comprised of both the Political and Executive Council members, and while the Political Council is chaired by the Prime Minister (who also heads the Nuclear Command Authority), the Executive Council is chaired by the National Security Advisor. Prahlad Dev, in his role as the NSA, would have to objectively analyse the pros and cons of every possible strategy to deal with Pakistan, with the other members of the Executive Council, i.e. the three defence chiefs.

“Fine, that's a good plan. Keep me updated,” he said, as he prepared to leave the meeting and get on to other important matters on his to-do list.

“No Sir, not yet. There's another approach we can consider too. I think that what we have now is a wonderful opportunity, an opportunity that might never come again, to deal with the Pakistan problem, once and for all. While the recent attacks on the CRPF convoy at Pulwama and the Brigade Headquarters at Uri are regrettable incidents, and we have given a strong response to both, I don't think it's enough to permanently deter Pakistan from its dastardly intentions. Sir, *they have attacked our Prime Minister, the leader of our country, the leader of the executive of the Government of India.* Whether we call it that or not, this *is indeed* a pre-cursor to war and the sooner we accept it, the better for us all around. The international community

stands unequivocally behind us today, and people in the country are crying out for revenge: we could go all out this time in our response and strike while the iron's still hot. It's a golden opportunity. So we can initiate Cold Start right away, and from here on, there is no turning back. NONE!" Prahlad Dev's voice rose with every word, until he was almost shouting at the end.

There was absolute silence in the room as everyone tried to grapple with what Prahlad Dev was suggesting.

Rajendra Singh waited for a few moments as he took few deep breaths and then spoke up, "You make some very good points, but I am not completely comfortable with this approach. We need to consider all the possible repercussions of ..."

He was suddenly interrupted by his buzzing mobile phone. Glancing at the number on display, he excused himself hurriedly and stepped out of the room to answer the call. A murmur rose in the room as the meeting's attendees waited for Rajendra Singh to return. In less than five minutes, he was back. The meeting had already clocked over three hours with a lot of reports being presented but without a consensus on what the next steps should be.

Rajendra Singh cleared his throat and in a move that surprised everyone in the room, Prahlad Dev most of all, he said, "Prepare for a Cold Start in the next two days."

In a stunned voice, Dev sputtered, "But Rajendra ji, you just said..."

"I know what I said. But that was then and this is now. Now I'm saying that we can no longer remain helpless victims of Pakistan's clever political manoeuvring. I want everyone to be clear here - if there is a nuclear war, we will wipe Pakistan off of the face of the earth! I expect the Executive Council to give its recommendation by early tomorrow morning and initiate the Cold Start immediately."

Ignoring the stunned looks on the faces of every person in the room, he addressed the Defence Minister and the Chiefs of the Army, Navy and Air Force. "We should be able to initiate a Cold Start in the next 48 hours; am I correct?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Good! Plan for a Cold Start in the wee hours of Saturday, exactly 7 days to the day they attacked the Prime Minister. We will call a press conference today to officially denounce Pakistan's actions. I want them to know that they will not be spared this time for their 'act of war'. I will also visit the Prime

Minister at AIIMS. I don't yet know if he's conscious but if he is, I want him to know what's happening. He is still the country's Prime Minister, after all."

Prahlad Dev was lost in thought as he entered his office. He had a critical task ahead of him. Pakistan was well aware of India's Cold Start Doctrine. The moment it was openly held responsible for a supposed 'act of war' against India, it would quickly mobilise its defence and counter-strike capabilities and prepare for a real war with India. He had to make sure that they were prepared for such an eventuality.

Another thought occurred to him. Why did Rajendra Singh suddenly change his tune about the Cold Start after his initial vehement reluctance against it? While the acting Prime Minister had every authority to declare a Cold Start, why the quick turn-about? Did the call in the last 5 minutes of the meeting have anything to do with it? Who called him and why?

*I have a hunch.*

The NSA dialled the private line of the Director of Intelligence Bureau and made a request. He received the information he requested in less than 10 minutes. He switched on the TV in his office and flicked the remote to channel # 645 - *Kal Aaj Kal*. The news channel was already showing a breaking news report with its sub-title screaming Pakistan responsible for the attack on the Indian Prime Minister!

The sombre female news anchor quoted unnamed sources in the government and said: "when will the Government of India respond to Pakistan's act of war?!!!"

The rhetoric on war was already being pumped up.

A corner of the JTF room was a flurry of energy and euphoria, the vibe quickly spreading to the rest of the room. Vijay stood in front of the wall-mounted monitor and shouted to get everyone's attention.

"Team. Attention please. We have a match!" he announced.

"We found 750 hits on NATGRID for relevant keyword mentions over the last few months. Most of the reports on the platform were published by the Intelligence Bureau and Directorate of Military Intelligence and a majority of them were connected to border towns in the Indian states of Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab, and upon review, none too relevant to our man. Incidentally the Cyber Cell had scanned a report by the Press Trust of India filed just as of last night and carried by the local newspapers today; that of a *shooting incident* in the border town of Bhuj in Gujarat. Given the nature of the incident, the press was involved and PTI had covered the incident in detail. We reached out to Bhuj Police for further information and received details from them along with eyewitness records, sketches and some CCTV images. Of course, police departments don't have access to NATGRID so we couldn't find this information on the platform. The report is being uploaded on the platform by IB as we speak."

He paused to take a sip of water, aware that the entire room was holding its collective breath. Milking the moment for all it was worth, he shouted, no longer able to keep his excitement at bay. "Guys, say *Namaste* to Ahmed Salaam!" The 20-odd people in the operations room cheered and clapped as a photograph of Salaam dressed as a bearded Sikh man filled the large monitor.

Vijay displayed a number of different photographs on the screen, all of them provided by the Bhuj Police department. "From what we've gathered from the Bhuj Police and also the Intelligence Bureau, we now know that what happened at Bhuj was the result of an operation gone wrong. We also know that this was not an officially-sanctioned operation but a rogue campaign planned and led by a single officer, Ranjitsinh Rathod of the Ahmedabad Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau. Rathod oversaw IB's intelligence gathering operations in the Kutch border region. A shootout took place yesterday afternoon near the Darbargadh area of Bhuj in which two people from the local Crime Branch were shot and killed, and two other men – one from the IB and the other from the Crime Branch – were injured, one grievously. Ranjitsinh himself lost part of his right ear in the incident. When

questioned by the police as they filed a First Information Report (FIR), the explanation he gave was that he was tracking an informant as part of an IB operation. The man turned rogue and started shooting at him and his colleagues. He also said that they had to contain the situation somehow and they made some difficult judgement calls.

Further enquiries by Bhuj Police revealed that neither of these agencies had any knowhow of this so-called operation. No official case papers or reports had been filed and superiors of the officers involved were completely clueless. We have now corroborated this as true: Ranjitsinh and his men had led a trap and were involved in a shooting incident with none other than Ahmed Salaam. IB and Crime Branch had no clue whatsoever of this operation!”

The room exploded in exclamations of shock and dismay, each person trying to make himself heard over another. Vijay yelled for silence and when he finally got it, continued, “An official IB enquiry has been constituted. Ranjitsinh and his colleague were scheduled to be questioned today, this morning actually, but both have been reported missing. A Look Out Circular (LOC) has been issued. Senior Police officials of the Bhuj Police department are facing an inquiry for ‘losing’ Ranjitsinh and the other man. Of course, Ranjitsinh and his partner had a good influence among the police and knew the senior officials well. But two people dead and the officers let Ranjitsinh go on bail after initial questioning – as per their rationale – pending further inputs from IB. They did not even place them under arrest! By the time they knew better, the men had already disappeared!”

“Sir, do we know where they were last seen? Ranjitsinh and his partner, I mean?” a confident young woman at the back of the room wanted to know.

“Yes. We tracked their mobile phones. The last known location of Ranjitsinh and his partner was somewhere on the State Highway 45. They were driving away from Bhuj in wee hours of the day when the signals of both men’s phones dropped off suddenly. Either the phones are powered off or destroyed. The bottom line is that now we have no idea where Ranjitsinh or the other IB chap is and there is no way to trace them, at least not electronically.”

“Sir, what about GPS on their car? Can’t we...?”

“That’s good thinking and we did try that as well. Unfortunately, the car they drove off in was an older model Maruti with no GPS installed.”

“There was another incident of interest in the same region in the same



time period; that is in the early hours of today,” one of the officials from the Home Ministry desk spoke as all eyes turned towards him. “This incident may or may not be connected to Ranjitsinh’s disappearance. Three men dressed in Indian army uniforms were killed in a shootout at the small Kutchi village of Bhirandiyara. The Army carried out this operation based on a tip called in by someone from the village.

Anyway, what we have are these two disparate incidents – unusual by themselves, but when seen together, downright suspicious. Especially when you also know that the distance from Bhirandiyara to the location where we lost the IB men’s phone signals is barely half a kilometre, and that Ranjitsinh had been driving in the direction of Bhirandiyara from Bhuj” the Home Ministry official said.

“I want you guys...” – Vijay said looking at the Home Ministry and IB teams – “to figure out if these incidents are connected in any way. I don’t care how tenuous or improbable the connection is. If there’s a connection, I want to know about it. Dig up everything you can find on Ranjitsinh Rathod.”

“Yes Sir.”

“Good, then get to work and get me some results!”

With these words, Vijay walked out of the room. He looked at this watch and realised that once again, he had missed lunch. He couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten anything more substantial than a quick sandwich or *idli sambhar*. He was quite sure his team was food-deprived as well, although no one was complaining (not to his face, at least). He had asked them all to grab a quick bite and return to their desks quickly.

He walked over to Prahlad Dev office only to find that the National Security Advisor was in a meeting with the Chiefs of Army Staff, Naval Staff and Air Staff.

*Maybe I should eat something while I have the chance.* He knew that for each status report he gave, Prahlad Dev would only have more questions.

*But at least we’re a step closer to solving the riddle. I can feel it in my bones.*

Two men entered the VVIP suite and quietly requested the small group of doctors and nurses to step out for a few minutes. A few hours ago, the Prime Minister had been moved out of the highly-secure VVIP intensive care unit to a regular suite, albeit one that was also highly secure and reserved for VVIPs. Some members of the PMO staff had temporarily moved into the two rooms on either side of the Prime Minister's suite and set up makeshift offices. The PM's room was also set up with a video and telephone conferencing system.

The two men walked in and sat in uncomfortable chairs placed next to the Prime Minister's bed on his right.

"They charge an arm and a leg for this room and they can't furnish it with more comfortable visitors' chairs?!" one of the visitors grumbled to the other, eliciting a smile and a soft shake of the head.

"How are you feeling now?" Asit Patel enquired, laying a gentle hand on the PM's shoulder. The Prime Minister was out of danger now.

The Prime Minister opened his eyes and turned his head to face his visitors. Squinting against the fading but bright sunshine pouring into the room, he realised that he could barely move. Even opening his eyes fully took effort and his entire body was hurting like the very devil. His lips were drier than the Thar Desert and he desperately wished that someone would get him some water. He didn't even have the energy to push himself up to reach the glass of water on the bedside table. As his eyes gradually adjusted to the light, he struggled to a sitting position.

"Like I've been in an explosion," the Prime Minister dryly responded. Both Asit and his companion chuckled, relieved that the PM's legendary wit was still very much in evidence, despite his broken and battered body.

"Say, can you help me up please?"

"*Pradhan Mantriji*, being this country's Prime Minister is no walk in the park as I'm sure you already know. I want you to come back and resume your duties. *You* are the true leader of this country Sir, not me. I'm just the replacement and in all honesty, I'm having a devil of a hard time keeping this country going in your absence," Rajendra Singh said and smiled.

"No, Singh *saheb*, please don't ask me to come back, at least not yet. Don't I deserve some rest after five years and a million speeches?"

Oh this is good, thank you Asit my brother! I was getting tired of remaining horizontal all the time!" the Prime Minister smiled at Asit Patel

and Rajendra Singh as they adjusted the electric bed into a sitting position. Both men laughed in response.

“So how are things going in my absence? Should I be worried?”

Asit studied his friend from under his lashes. The Prime Minister’s face was drawn and pale, there were dark patches under his eyes and his normally trim white beard was anything but that. His once all-powerful, seemingly-invincible aura had been pierced and his strong charisma weakened. But he would recover soon. *He’ll be back to being himself in no time.*

The Prime Minister’s right wrist lay on the bed like an inanimate piece of rope, the left slung across his belly in an unconscious gesture of self-protection. Clasp ing the PM’s right arm just below the elbow, Asit assured him with confidence, “We’re doing fine, although we do miss our fearless leader. Don’t worry about us; we’re getting there. You just concentrate on getting better, okay?”

The Prime Minister smiled and nodded in acknowledgement as the two men began their report.

A nurse walked into the room, but on seeing the looks on the three men’s faces – intense, focused and completely serious – quietly walked out and shut the door behind herself.

The day swung by as quickly as all the other previous days since the JTF had been put together. Finally, some pieces of the puzzle were coming together in Vijay's mind as he listened to the officers providing a comprehensive late-night status overview to the JTF, and scribbled in his notepad trying to find even more logical connections that would solve the mystery once and for all.

"...we have not been able to trace Ranjitsinh yet but his phone logs have been thoroughly analysed. The team manning the voice traffic using the Central Monitoring System have reported nothing out of the ordinary, just regular calls to his IB colleagues, mostly. The phone recovered from one of the fake army men shot at Bhirandiyara by the army has been found to receive calls from anonymous phone numbers with strange numerical sequences like 343434343 and 787878789. These calls came over a period of two days before Ranjitsinh went missing. The men had travelled from Ahmedabad to Bhuj, the same morning as the Darbargadh incident. All three men have been identified as career criminals and frequent arsonists. At various times, they had all been arrested for violence, murders, fomenting unrest and instigating religious violence at multiple locations in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Almost every time they were arrested, they were bailed out by influential politicians of BNP or the main opposition party, and businessmen which indicates that they were most probably working as mercenaries and killers for hire.

The wounded Crime Branch officer who assisted Ranjitsinh in his unofficial operation at Darbargadh has been interrogated. Each person in Ranjitsinh's team had been paid 5 Lakh rupees to ensure that the so-called 'informant' was tracked throughout the city and then killed in an 'encounter' somewhere outside the main limits. The officer didn't have any other details including the name of the informant..."

As the briefing continued, Vijay paused taking notes for a minute. If no one in the Intelligence Bureau or Crime Branch knew of this operation, it stood to reason that Ranjitsinh had his own motivations to run such a rogue operation. Which meant that Ranjitsinh knew of Salaam, considered him a threat and therefore wanted to get rid of him. But why?

The answer came to him in a sudden burst of late-night insight. *Salaam was the man who attacked the Prime Minister. That's why he wanted to kill*

him!

This knowledge raised even more questions in his mind. Why did Ranjitsinh not inform his superiors about his suspicions regarding Salaam's role in the attack on the PM? Why the unofficial operation? Was he looking for singular glory or was there a more sinister reason?

Vijay's hair stood on end in a frenzy of excitement as he stood up and dashed outside the room to the coffee machine. *Did Ranjitsinh know about the planned attack on the PM?! Was he the one who executed it? Was he the mastermind? Was he a puppet?*

As he returned with his cup of coffee, Vijay could think of no grand reason for Ranjitsinh's involvement in the attack on his own country's PM, but for only a prosaic one – money. Checks on Ranjitsinh had already confirmed his possession of properties and wealth well beyond his means of income. *So, if Ranjitsinh was in it for the money, who was actually paying him? The ISI? A terrorist organisation across the border?*

"Sir!" At the loud interruption, Vijay turned to see the young lady from the Home Ministry running up to him, her tone and body language shouting her excitement and enthusiasm even more than her voice. "Sir, we have new information! Two dead bodies have been recovered from a car near a small hamlet in the Rann of Kutch."

"Let me guess – Ranjitsinh and his colleague from the IB?"

"Correct, Sir! Both men were shot from very close range and from the same assault rifles – AK 47s – that the fake army men were found to have in their possession. It's possible that the three men shot them on the state highway just outside Bhirandiyara and then pushed their car onto the rann. Bhuj Police found shards of broken glass and some traces of blood on the highway as well as and tyre tread marks from where Ranjitsinh's car was pushed off-road."

Vijay was pleased with this report. "Anything else?" he wanted to know.

"Yes Sir, Ranjitsinh's and the other IB man's official phones –the ones we were tracing – were completely destroyed during the shooting. No wonder we lost the signals at about the same time. The forensic team would have a tough time putting them back together. But we found another phone on Ranjitsinh's person which is intact. This device has a private, unlisted number that Ranjitsinh had been using. The call logs for the last one month are being analysed by the NTRO and the Central Monitoring System team. This phone is a treasure trove and we have some initial information already!

It seems that over the last one month, Ranjitsinh had received several calls from different anonymous numbers with strange numerical sequences like 121212121, 232323232, 5656565656 and so on, the last anonymous call just a few minutes before the attack on the Prime Minister. Guess where Ranjitsinh's phone has been traced to during that day and time of the attack: Lower Parel, Mumbai! The same area where the Kal Aaj Kal producer's body was found."

This was too much information and Vijay needed to assimilate it better. He motioned to the lady from the Home Ministry to pause for a moment as he sat down on the chair. He opened his notebook and requested to the lady to continue as he started scribbling with the pen.

By now the entire room was listening in to the lady as she continued with her excited spiel. "If you notice, the number patterns of the anonymous calls received by the fake army men – 343434343 – and Ranjitsinh – 232323232 – are similar. Different numbers though. As per the NTRO team such phone numbers do not really exist and these appear to be VOIP numbers, just as we've been concluding over the past few days...But given the similarity of the number patterns, it is highly likely these calls made to Ranjitsinh's and the fake army man's mobiles is by the *same anonymous someone* – or *someones* – using a secure VOIP application to mask their origins."

She paused for a moment to catch up with her breath.

"... and this gets even more exciting – Ranjitsinh's private phone was also found to have an illegal VOIP application installed on it. Calls from this app were made to the mobile phones of Vinay Sharma, the TV producer and Shamsheer Singh, the soldier who took his own life. We already know that both men tried outgoing calls to VOIP numbers prior to their moments of death; it stands to reason that neither of them were able to get through to Ranjitsinh. We also found the number for Abdul Khan, the man who drove the stolen Endeavour. All other numbers in the address book have been identified and are being traced – and we have some useful leads that we'll follow up on."

Vijay's mind was racing as it tried to absorb and re-arrange all these new pieces of the puzzle. More and more it looked as though the anonymous caller – the one they had still not managed to trace – was the mastermind. He probably called Ranjitsinh via a VOIP application and Ranjitsinh did the same with his henchmen. Ranjitsinh's job was most likely to execute the operation to attack the Prime Minister – even if he was not directly involved

– and ensure that there were no threads left hanging, a thread that also included Ahmed Salaam.

The fake army men's job was to kill Ranjitsinh.

*The person or persons behind the anonymous calls, Ranjitsinh and the fake army men - how are they connected? Are they connected at all?*

The mounting unanswered questions were beginning to give Vijay a headache but he didn't have the luxury to stop for a break. He rose from his desk, note book and pen in hand as he walked over to the NTRO team. "I need to know the source of the anonymous calls. And none of that VOIP crap – I want to know WHO! You do realize that these anonymous numbers are the only bottleneck we have!"

"We're trying our best Sir, but honestly we're not expecting much. We've even reached out to the CIA and a team is working with us on this. Just that given the combination of anonymous VOIP and TOR, there would be no way to know the true IP address of the end device even if we succeeded in figuring out which VOIP application or applications were being used and even if we cracked the VOIP firms' databases.

Like in Ranjitsinh's case, only since we have the device now, we could look up the application and conclude that Ranjitsinh actually made those anonymous calls. Now about the anonymous calls received by Ranjitsinh and the fake army men, since we do not know the application, we are proceeding with the assumption that it may be the same application... But, Sir, the team *does* require time, though we understand that it's something we don't have."

"So you're saying it's impossible?"

"Never say never, Sir. As I said, it's difficult but we're still giving it our best shot."

Vijay sighed. The NTRO team was the most difficult to work with of them all. Though with all the technological aura around the organisation, he hoped that they knew it better than everyone else. And then Vijay had himself exploited the capability offered by the TOR network once earlier, so he did know that the NTRO team's assessment was not misplaced.

His line of thought was suddenly interrupted as someone switched channels on the monitor to a news report. As he increased the volume, the room fell silent. Rajendra Singh was addressing a press conference along with the Defence Minister and the three Defence Chiefs.

"We have clear and unequivocal evidence that Pakistan is behind this cowardly attack on our Prime Minister. We will share this proof with our

intelligence partners across the world. If Pakistan wants to avoid the possibility of an all-out war with India, they must own up to their criminal actions through an official statement in the international media. They must hand over everyone involved in this attack to India, and the Indian law. They must also hand over all men involved in previous attacks on India – we have given already them a list of wanted terrorists, numerous times in the past. We give them two days to comply to these demands.”

Vijay, along with the rest of the room, was shocked down to his core. This investigation was already reaching epic proportions but by no means was it at an end. Despite SIGINT’s inputs that pointed the finger at Salaam – particularly since he was an ISI agent and a Taliban fighter – Vijay’s instincts told him that blaming Pakistan for the attack was the easy way out.

*I’m not yet sure that Pakistan had a hand in this. But then, who is the anonymous caller? Did the acting Prime Minister know for a fact that the anonymous calls originated from somewhere within Pakistan – someone within the ISI or one of the many terrorist organisations out there? But how?! The NTRO team with all its high-tech wizardry has not been able to figure it out yet, then how did the acting Prime Minister?!*

And why would the ISI send a known Taliban fighter – one who was on the Afghanistan National Police Wanted List – to India, that too for such a high-profile task? They must have known that he would be recognised and caught and would then eventually be traced back to the ISI. *Why did the ISI take such a huge risk?*

The answer slammed into him with the force of a ten-ton sledgehammer. *Salaam was hired so that the attack on the PM could clearly and unequivocally be linked back to Pakistan. Salaam may have carried out the actual attack but at the end of the day, he was just a patsy! But to whom? Who is pulling the damn strings here?!*

The answer seemed to be hovering just outside his consciousness, taunting him with its tenuous yet distinct presence.

Vijay’s mobile phone rang, startling him out of his thoughts like a splash of cold water to the face. Prahlad Dev was back from his meeting with the defence chiefs. As soon as Vijay answered, the NSA said, “Meet urgently,” and disconnected. Vijay immediately rushed towards Prahlad Dev’s office, his increased heartbeat and hammering pulse unconsciously mirroring the barely-banked anxiety in the NSA’s voice.

*What now?*



## DAY 6

### 39

Three paths diverge from the *Dattatray* temple at the peak of *Kalo Dungar*. A flight of steps takes the tourists towards the Sunset Point overlooking the village of *Dhrobana*, the rann, the International Border and the skies of Kutch merging with those of Pakistan. Another short flight of steps takes them to picturesque spots on Kalo Dungar, ideal for photographing the stunning vista of the mountains and the flat *rann* and capturing the scenes forever. Some tourists would change into Kutchi traditional dress and have their photographs taken by the vendors. The third path is unmaintained, a series of run-down, broken steps leading to a creaking cast-iron gate and then onto a rough, rocky mountain trail. Razzak was already on the trail when the temple bells stopped ringing and its gates shut to both locals and tourists as dusk fell. In the ensuing silence from the temple's vicinity, the faint sounds of intermittent shelling at the border could be heard.

Razzak reached the underside of India Bridge, the last man-made bridge on the Indian side of the border. A few feet above his head, he could see a lone Border Security Force (BSF) post patrolling – guarding the entry and the exit off the bridge. Civilians were not usually allowed beyond this point unless they carried a permission from the BSF headquarters in Bhuj. On previous occasions, Razzak would quietly meet up with his contact from Ummah here. The contact would confirm his identity and then drive him some 25 kilometres across the *rann* until they reached a fairly safe spot on the India-Pakistan border for him to cross into Pakistan. But Ali bhai, his contact and mentor at Ummah, was unable to support his request for help to cross the border tonight. The situation at the border was precarious and at such short notice, they could not arrange an escort for him. But he said Ummah would plant information about his movement, so if a patrol were to apprehend him, Razzak would have a cover – that of a RAW agent, and his movement could be verified.

No matter, Ummah or not, he would continue on his own. He would continue on foot, covering a distance of around 60 kilometres all the way to Tooh. He could have taken a camel but he would rather not take the chance,

as the long-range thermal cameras at the border could easily pick up the larger animal. He dimmed the display of his mobile phone, opened the compass application to confirm that he was still moving in a North-North-Easterly direction and started trudging across the wide, white rann that seemed to glisten in the darkness of a near-new-moon night.

He estimated that he would reach Tooh in about 7 or 8 hours. Under normal circumstances, if he had Ummah's help and access to a vehicle, he would have reached Tooh much earlier and rested at home. His wife Saida would have made him hot *rotis* and fragrant *chai*, welcoming home with her warmth and love. But this occasion was different. The situation was spiralling out of control and he was now playing by the seat of his pants. The shelling across the border was more intense than usual, which told him that something important had happened. *It cannot be a co-incidence.* A little over two hours ago, he was passing one of the shops near the Dattatray temple when a news report playing on the shop's TV arrested his movement. On screen, he could see the acting Prime Minister Rajendra Singh wildly gesticulating and shouting something about Pakistan. He was too far away to hear what exactly Singh was saying, but eavesdropping on a nearby conversation between two men filled in his knowledge gaps. It seemed that India was accusing Pakistan of attacking the Indian Prime Minister. India had given Pakistan two days to handover the 'culprits' responsible for the heinous act. *The Indians probably know who I am by now. Have they asked Pakistan to find me and hand me over? Is the ISI on a frantic lookout for me?*

Fortunately for him, the ISI did not know about his home in Tooh. And even if they did, he hoped that Saida would have carefully gone through the letter he had sent along with the money on Badal's back and that she would have the jeep ready at their secret hideout on the outskirts of Tooh when he reached in the morning. Iran was a long way away but he had sent enough money to fund their escape. In the letter he had specifically noted that if he didn't reach Tooh by noon, she was to proceed on her own with their daughter Ayshah to a safe house in Sistan near the Iran-Pakistan border on the Iranian side. Given the perilous nature of his profession and the constant danger he found himself in, he had already provided her the address a few months back. He had also sent her emergency contact of an ex-Taliban fighter whom he had fought alongside with in Afghanistan. He would help her cross the Pakistan-Iran border. Without him by their side, he would be concerned about his beautiful girls' safety, but it was a risk they had to take.

If he did not make it to Tooh in time, they would be left with no choice.

As he continued walking across the wide marshy terrain, senses tuned to any unusual sights or sounds, he thought he saw the rarely seen *chir batti* following him in the dark. He looked in awe at the bright lights that danced and changed colour from blue to red to yellow as they followed him at a distance. The *chir batti* were also known as ghost lights – the result of some kind of chemical phenomenon once explained to him by his mama.

This was the first time he had ever seen the *chir batti*. The lights came close and instantly moved away as if teasing him, dancing in the air in a colourful rhythm that left him mesmerised.

*Is this supposed to be a lucky omen?*

Something else caught his attention and he turned around to see what it was. In the distance, he could see two more lights moving in his direction – steadier and quite unlike the ghost lights. *The thermal cameras at the border must have spotted my movements.* He kept watching the oncoming headlights of an army patrol jeep without flinching or moving. He refused to run. There was no point. There was absolutely nowhere to hide on the flat salt plains.

Then he was sure that Ummah had done its job.

Vijay knocked on the door to Prahlad Dev's office and entered the room when bid to '*Andar aao!*'.

He found the man leaning back in his chair, head thrown back and eyes glued to the ceiling, fingers of both hands making alternate movements in the air as if playing an air board-game of strategy and counter-strategy. He acknowledged Vijay's presence with a nod and motioned for him to take a seat opposite his desk. Vijay was prepared for a serious conversation, but to his surprise, Dev just lit another cigarette and continued with his distracted actions, which now also included white smoke rings that he blew into the already hazy air over his head. Vijay yearned to open the window and let in some much-needed fresh air but the expression on Dev's face stopped him. *Why does he have that weird expression on his face?!* To Vijay's eye, the NSA was displaying a strangely compelling mixture of anxiety and excitement as he moved his hands about in a series of gestures that to an onlooker looked random and even 'palsy-like' but probably made complete sense to him. Three half-emptied white ceramic cups of strong black coffee were strewn across his desk, fighting for space with loose papers, stationery knick-knacks and a few slim folders marked 'Top Secret' across the front.

"Vijay, prepare yourself for a war!" Prahlad Dev suddenly exclaimed as he righted his chair and stood up with a speed that made Vijay dizzy simply by looking at him. "It's decided – we are going for a Cold Start," Dev continued as he started pacing the room, the lit cigarette in his mouth seeming to light his way, even though the room was already brightly lit. "Yet there's something that continues to bother me."

"What's that Sir?" Vijay wanted to know. However he wasn't sure if the NSA was actually speaking to him, or just thinking aloud.

"The Asit Patel connection! Where does he fit into all this? Do you remember what happened at yesterday's CCS meeting? No, how could you; you're not a part of the CCS. Towards the end of the meeting, Rajendra Singh got a call which changed the course for this country. I have since learned that the call was from Asit Patel. Don't ask me how I know this, okay?"

"I wouldn't dare Sir," Vijay replied, sharing a smile with Prahlad Dev, and still trying to get a hold on the context. *May be, he's still talking to himself.*

“Anyway, Patel’s call to Singh seemed to influence the latter’s about-face regarding our earlier discussion on the Cold Start. When I suggested the Cold Start, Singh was against it, but immediately after he got that call, he changed his tune and suddenly agreed with me! Why? I also know that Asit Patel called Keyur Shenoy shortly after speaking with Rajendra Singh. I’m sure it’s no coincidence that *Kal Aaj Kal* and Moon News both started playing the ‘Pakistan is behind the attack on the PM’ story almost immediately. Since the incident, Asit Patel’s name has popped up a number of times and in many different scenarios, and something about that doesn’t sit right with me. To be honest – and only between us – I’m more and more convinced that Asit has a role in the attack on the PM.”

Vijay nodded in agreement even as he tried to ignore the strong stench of cigarette smoke in the room. *I wish he would open the damn window!* He made a mental note to do some more research about Cold Start and its short and long-term implications. He knew that it meant a tactical Indian incursion into Pakistani territory but was unsure of details.

“I understand your doubt about Pakistan’s culpability Sir, but it doesn’t take away from the fact that Ahmed Salaam attacked our Prime Minister and he *is* an ISI agent,” Vijay said playing Devil’s Advocate. “This alone might justify a Cold Start response, right? Of course, I’m no expert on the subject but I would think that if not a Cold Start, then at least holding Pakistan openly responsible for the attack might be the next best thing? Then you are surely not suggesting that Asit Patel looped ISI into the game... er, I mean...”

The NSA stopped mid-stride and stared at Vijay, both disbelief and respect writ large on his florid face. Vijay, embarrassed at his *faux pas*, waited for a response but when none was forthcoming, he subsided in his seat and continued to wait for the NSA to finish pacing. Dev shook his head a couple of times and continued traversing the room from one end to another, hands clasped behind his back, head down in deep thought. Once again he stopped, looked at Vijay and then walked over to his desk where he picked up one of the files marked ‘Top Secret’. For a couple of minutes, he stared at the file as if searching for answers to the mysteries of the universe. Finally, he shook his head and finally tossed the file to Vijay.

“Vijay, this file contains some – not all – of the information you *don’t* know yet. Go through it and I’m sure you will understand what’s been bothering me.”

Vijay neatly caught the soft-cover file embossed with the State Emblem of India – the three lions of the Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath. Below the emblem, the words *Research and Analysis Wing, Government of India* were written in bold. And right at the top, the words *Level Red – Top Secret* were stamped in bold red. With a rising sense of trepidation mixed with curiosity, Vijay opened the file. It contained several pages, all of which were water-marked with the RAW seal as well as the red, prominent stamp stating *Top Secret – Authorised Personnel Only*. Vijay quickly perused the pages. The NSA was watching him quietly, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Sir, it says R2405, Razzak is an asset and he was trained...,” he started to say.

“Yes, R2405 is an asset. *Our* asset. Or maybe I should say he *was* our asset, because we don’t actually know where he is or whether he’s still alive.” As he spoke, Dev kept glancing at the clock on the far wall as if he knew that something was about to happen and soon.

Vijay was still lost. “So, I’m sorry Sir, how does Razzak fit into the picture...”

Prahlad sighed. “So the man we know as Ahmed Salaam is Razzak Munaf Sheikh, an Indian national. Helps?”

There was absolute silence in the room as Vijay tried to come to terms with the new found information. “... er... I always thought... have been assuming all this while... that he would be a Pashtun... either a Pakistani or an Afghan national. He looks like one too! But now you’re telling me that he’s Indian?!” Vijay was shocked to his core. *If he’s an Indian, then the whole case against Pakistan falls flat!*

“Yes that’s exactly what I’m telling you. You read the dossier. Razzak is originally from Ahmedabad and one among many of the unfortunate children who were orphaned during the *Godhra* riots. For over a decade, the Intelligence Bureau ran a clandestine programme to watch over some of these children as they grew up, especially those who had experienced serious trauma during the riots. The idea was audacious but not too far-fetched: while those children who felt extreme resentment and hatred against the perpetrators of their trauma were a *hazard* to the nation – you can imagine why – the IB also felt that this negative energy, if channelled properly, could be exploited in *service* to the nation. Razzak was one such textbook example. After the deaths of his parents and sister during the riots, his maternal uncle and aunt took him in and raised him to adulthood. He was known to harbour

extreme resentment and a need for vengeance, and even had psychological issues. When he was about 21 years old, he was contacted by a man called Ali bhai from Ummah, an underground *jihadi* cell in Srinagar. As with most new terror recruits, for months the Ummah brainwashed Razzak and groomed him into a perfect jihadi. Ali bhai became his mentor, his guide and counsellor; his confidant. Once Razzak completed his basic training in Srinagar, he was sent to Pakistan to train with the ISI. For four years he stayed in touch with Ali bhai and passed on useful information to him – of course unknowingly – about the ISI’s infiltration points and plans within Indian administered Kashmir, the locations of terrorist camps, their movements in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and so on.

Ummah still exists. And any guesses on who runs this Ummah underground cell”

Vijay’s blank stare indicated to him to move on.

“It is run by the Research and Analysis Wing – aka RAW – and the Directorate of Military Intelligence. Ali bhai, Razzak’s mentor, is a RAW officer.”

Vijay let out a whistle. He was on an information-receiving roller-coaster ride today.

Prahlad Dev continued. “Razzak had no clue he was working for the Indian intelligence; that unknowingly he was helping us. Over the years, he unknowingly helped us thwart many attacks on our soil and even arrest many Pak-based terrorists as they infiltrated across the border. Once the ISI moved Razzak to Afghanistan to work with the Taliban, the inputs coming in from him slowed but didn’t completely stop. The intelligence agencies continued to keep an eye on him. Ummah had provided him with a unique identity number and a phone number to call if he was ever in distress, anywhere, or if he wanted to cross the border into either India or Pakistan. That’s how they even tracked his current whereabouts. Ali bhai was his mentor and Razzak kept in touch with him.”

Vijay was still struggling to connect all the dots. So many things that didn’t completely add up. “But if he was now with the Taliban, why did he attack the Indian Prime Minister?!”

“Now that’s an answer we don’t yet have. We also don’t know if he’s working at the behest of the ISI. But first we need to know who the anonymous caller is. Hopefully unravelling that particular thread will unravel the rest.”

“I agree with you there, Sir.”

“Moving on – do you want to guess who sponsored the IB’s programme to monitor traumatised kids after Godhra? This person even wrote to RAW – on his personal stationery, might I add – in 2012 to enrol Razzak with Ummah.”

“I wouldn’t dare guess, Sir.?”

“None other than the then Home Minister of Gujarat and the current President of the BNP, Asit Patel. When he was state home minister, Patel regularly reviewed the IB’s reports regarding these orphaned children. The entire program was his brainchild. And giving credit where credit is due, he ensured that some of the children – at least those that displayed no negative behavioural effects of their traumatic experiences – were given government jobs when they grew up. Some were led to agencies to be trained as double agents and spies masquerading as terrorists, and a few cases like Razzak were trained *to be* terrorists.”

Vijay’s heart skipped several beats. Asit Patel’s strategy was almost unbelievable – using traumatised children as spies and terrorists to serve India’s interests – this was a long con that probably no one else could have even thought of, much less executed. Some people might call Patel a visionary leader. And some might call him devious and even evil. *Which one is he really?*

“...it’s obvious that the ISI has much to gain with the attack on the Prime Minister,” Prahlad Dev continued speaking his thoughts aloud, “Our PM is a strong and decisive leader; someone who has taken Pakistan by the horns. We have even invaded Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to shoot the terrorists down. ISI knows that his assassination would bring advantage back to Pakistan and could even destabilise our country, given that we have no other veritable leader. It’s no wonder that the ISI would try to get rid of such a strong-willed premier in its neighbourhood.

Anyway, that’s only probability number one, and at this point I hope that that is indeed what really happened,” Prahlad Dev said, pausing to take a sip from the glass of water on his desk.

“I’d rather that then...” Dev stopped what he was going to say to stare out the window.

“Yes Sir, you were saying...?” Vijay was mesmerised by what he was hearing and was keen to hear more. When there was no response from Dev, he tried to prod an answer out of him once again, “Probability number one



Sir? Is there a number two?” He was at the edge of his seat by now and was pleased when Dev shook himself out of whatever trance he had fallen into.

“Ah yes, yes there is. Probability number two is – how should I put it – *inward-looking*. See, the truth is that even the BNP and Asit Patel stand to gain by the attack and the resultant war trumpeting. An attack on the PM would garner a lot of sympathy for the party and it could end up winning a majority in the coming elections. And if the PM were to die, Asit would be the obvious Prime Ministerial candidate. We discussed this the other day, remember?”

“Yes Sir, I do”

“Yes, so anyway, whether we go the Cold Start route or not is another matter but we need to quickly unravel the Asit Patel - Keyur Shenoy connection and resolve this issue pronto. I want you to fly to Mumbai tomorrow. Shenoy is in Dubai right now but he’s expected to reach Mumbai by late night tomorrow. A special IB team has already been assembled and they will be reaching Mumbai before you. I want you to review the interrogation efforts – the guys from IB will take their cues from you. See what Shenoy says. If he reveals something useful, we might be able to figure out whether the PM’s attack was an internal operation or if it was ISI-led. I’ll loop you in with the IB Director so expectations are in place. Alright?”

“Yes, Sir.” Sensing that the conversation was at an end, Vijay got up from his chair and made his way to the door, his brain still trying to entangle the slew of shocks, discoveries and possibilities it had been dealt today.

“Bhirandiyara...” Prahlad Dev was visibly uncomfortable as he said this “is the village of Razzak Munaf Sheikh aka Ahmed Salaam. After crossing the borders and becoming a terrorist, Razzak continued to visit India. He would stay with his mama and mami at Bhirandiyara for a few weeks every year. I’m telling you this because I don’t want you to ask the Task Force to dig up details of people who stayed in the house where the fake army men were killed. Or any more digging on Ahmad Salaam. I believe they are already enquiring... divert that line of enquiry. There’s no point.”

“Er... yes, Sir...”

“And Vijay...” the NSA’s quiet words stopped him just as he was about to open the door. “Only a few people in the country are aware of whatever I have just told you. Apart from you and I, that is. I can count on your complete discretion, right?”

“Of course, Sir. You know me.”

“Yes. Just remember that no one else in the political, intelligence or other administrative cadres must learn any of this. If any of these facts leak, I will hold you personally responsible, understand?”

“Yes Sir, I completely understand.”

“For the world, Ahmed Salaam is an ISI agent. Nothing more, nothing less. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. Now Keyur Shenoy is of particular interest so we are not to do anything to arouse *his* suspicion either. Like I said, he is scheduled to be back in Mumbai tomorrow night, but if he extends his stay in Dubai, you will fly to Dubai as well. I need you to keep digging and find the truth even as we go to war with Pakistan.”

“Yes, Sir, you can count on me,” Vijay saluted Dev with new-found respect and turned to open the door.

“I know Vijay. Just remember that the country depends on you as well.”

Vijay nodded and stepped out of the room, a sense of urgency driving him along with a feeling of anticipation. *Something is about to happen. I can feel it!*

Prahlad Dev stood in the parking lot of the PMO building taking in the cold, crisp air that the night had to offer, a cup of strong espresso coffee in his left hand, a lit cigarette in his right. As he brought the cup to his lips, he realised that his hand was shaking. *I know it's not the cold.* Like the Prime Minister, Dev too had a reputation for being an assertive leader, someone who took decisive actions and made good judgements even in the absence of concrete data or definite proof. *If it wasn't for the actions and decisions taken by the Prime Minister and me, India's strong response to Pakistan for the incidents at Uri and Pulwama would never have materialised. The previous PM – and almost all the PMs in India's history – would have dithered and faltered so much over a decision, that Pakistan would have destroyed India and ended up with the last laugh!* Even as these thoughts occurred to him – pragmatic yet without a feeling of self-aggrandisement – for the first time in many years, he felt unsure about the recommendations he had made and the decisions he had taken today. He hated second-guessing himself but still, he couldn't help wondering if a Cold Start was the right strategy. *Is the risk of a Cold Start worth the potential for catastrophe?*

Earlier in the evening, the Executive Council had deliberated for two

hours and had taken the decision to recommend a Cold Start against Pakistan. The Political Council would surely accept the recommendation and put a plan in motion. The Cold Start would commence in about 48 hours and once it did, there would be no turning back. The Executive Council had also recommended that as soon as the Cold Start commenced, tactical air strikes be launched deep in the heart of Pakistani territory to destroy its Nuclear Command and launch capabilities from land, air and sea. The problem for India was that its action plan would have to involve some amount of guesswork. This is because despite the Indian intelligence agencies working with American, Afghan and Israeli intelligence agencies as well as moles within Pakistan – a complex and costly exercise overall – India did not have precise intelligence about the locations of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal or its strategic and tactical delivery systems. These locations were constantly changing and all in all, Pakistan was doing a fine job of guarding its secrets.

Today, Prahlad Dev felt a sense of kinship with his name-sake *Bhakta Prahlad*, a character from Hindu mythology. The mythological Prahlad, an ardent devotee of Lord *Vishnu*, was constantly tormented by his own father, the *asura* (demon) King *Hiranyakashyapu* who wanted Prahlad to worship him instead. The king was arrogant and blinded by his own power, particularly his near-invincibility, a blessing he had received from Lord *Brahma*. One day *Hiranyakashyapu* was about to kill Prahlad when the latter prayed to Lord *Vishnu* for protection. In response to his prayer, almost immediately *Vishnu* appeared out of a stone pillar as *Narsimha* – an avatar that was neither man nor beast – and killed *Hiranyakashyapu*.

Prahlad smirked at his own analogy. Like *Hiranyakashyapu*, Pakistan too had an over-abundance of arrogance, believing that its nuclear arsenal made it invincible and near-untouchable. It assumed that its nuclear capabilities gave it the blanket authority to carry on with its cowardly terror activities without fear of retaliation from India.

*Pakistan is bloody Hiranyakashyapu and it will meet with a similar fate if I have anything to say about it!*

Prahlad looked up at the night sky and took a deep breath. *I'm only Prahlad.*

He silently prayed for his Lord *Vishnu* to appear.

Razzak raised his arms over his head as the jeep stopped a few meters away from him. The vehicle's lights were so intensely bright that he felt as if they were burning a hole straight through his eyes. Four heavily-armed soldiers alighted from the vehicle, casting four long shadows against the glare of the dazzling lights. As three of the men took equidistant positions and stood in a tight circle around Razzak with their assault rifles trained on him, one soldier stepped closer, his INSAS rifle hanging by a strap from his left shoulder. With quick, efficient movements that spoke of both intense training and long-standing habit, he stepped close to Razzak and patted him down. With nary a blink of an eye, he recovered a gun from Razzak's jacket pocket which he examined closely and then handed it over to one of the other soldiers. He took a few steps back, turned towards the jeep and stood stock-still, as if waiting for orders. Razzak looked towards the jeep as well, and through the intense glare of the light, noticed a fifth man who was still sitting inside, watching the proceedings with an air of quiet command.

The soldier then turned back to Razzak, this time with his rifle raised and pointing straight at him. The officer stepped out of the vehicle and approached Razzak with a sleek, panther-like grace that Razzak might have admired and even considered worthy of emulation if not for the precariousness of his current situation.

"What are you doing here and why do you have a gun?" the officer barked, his large frame casting a shadow on Razzak.

"Jai Hind Sir, I'm just passing through for work reasons."

"What work reasons? Are you not aware that this is army area? You are not supposed to be here."

"Yes Sir. I'm a RAW agent, currently on an assignment which requires me to cross the border tonight."

"ID *dikhao*"

"I'm not carrying my ID Sir. I will be compromised across the border."

"We have not received information about anyone from RAW crossing the border tonight. And why would you cross the *rann* on foot?"

"I request you to recheck Sir. The control room has been informed."

"ID?"

"RW-8794ZD."

"Wait here while we verify your movement with the control room."

The officer threw a hard look at Razzak and strode back to the jeep. Razzak waited nervously as the officer barked the ID number into his wireless and impatiently waited for a response. Because it was common for RAW agents to cross the international border into Pakistan, the Ummah had already trained him to masquerade as one himself just for such an eventuality. So even though he gave every appearance of nervousness, he was confident that ultimately, the soldiers would let him through.

A few years earlier, he had been intercepted by BSF guards near Jaisalmer in Rajasthan, a popular tourist town less than 75 kilometres from the international border. Ummah, masquerading as an active RAW cell, had already informed the BSF control room about his planned crossing and had played him up as a hero and patriot back from an ‘assignment’ across the border. The Ummah was hoping that the BSF would not bother to look too closely into this made-up cover, and to Razzak’s relief, that’s exactly what happened. Instead of double-checking these ‘facts’, the naïve BSF guards saluted Razzak with a hearty *Jai Hind* as he went past their post.

The temporary ID and name he would be assigned by Ummah would belong to a real RAW agent, and Ummah somehow seemed to have access or contacts within RAW to fudge records. So when the border officer got his response from the control room, he would learn that the ID number was genuine and that Razzak was really a RAW agent on this specific assignment. He would have no choice but to believe Razzak and let him through.

Despite his confidence that this momentary hiccup would be resolved soon, Razzak still looked around the desolate, flat-as-a-pancake *rann*, searching for a possible escape route. *Nowhere to run and absolutely nowhere to hide*. But even if there were a suitable hiding spot or escape route, there was nothing he could do with four soldiers pointing their menacing rifles right at his face. It suddenly occurred to him that Rajasthan and Gujarat were both inhospitable places to cross the border – no trees to provide cover for stealthy movements, no rock-covered mountains to hide behind and no caves or crevices to conceal oneself. This left a person completely exposed to the harsh elements and vulnerable to the suspicious eyes of security personnel. Nonetheless, he didn’t have the luxury of waiting for Ummah to arrange a safe passage for him. *I’m on my own, I’m on my own, I’m on my...*

The officer strode back with an even more forbidding expression on his face. “Who the hell are you?! The control room has no idea who you are. Your bloody ID number does not exist! We’re taking you with us to the post.

Come on, move it!”

Razzak was struck speechless with terror. *Allah, what the hell is happening?! Ummah promised to take care of this! But what's with ID number not even existing? That has never happened in the past!*

He had to find a way out of this situation and fast! Striving for a calm tone, he said, “I’m sorry Sir but I don’t understand what happened. Would you mind trying once more? I can give you the contact number of the RAW cell I work with. Perhaps you can check directly with them? The BSF team must be aware of my arrival, so maybe you can...”

“Enough! Come with us. NOW!” the officer’s patience which had been hanging on by a thin thread as it is, was now at a complete end. Keeping an eye on Razzak, he pointed his gun at him and again barked, “Are you deaf?! I said, MOVE!”

Petrified, Razzak scrambled to obey the officer’s orders even while his mind raced frantically looking for an escape route. He took a few steps, hands still above his head and pretending to follow the officer’s orders. Then in a sudden movement, he dropped to the ground near the officer and kicked him hard behind his right knee. The sudden attack had the officer falling to the ground with a harsh shout. Quick as a flash, Razzak grabbed his rifle and turned around to face the other soldiers.

But before he could raise the rifle and use the officer’s body as a cover, shots rang out in the cold, dark night. The soldiers’ bullets found a last home in Razzak’s body, hitting him with what felt like the combined force of multiple trucks. As he struggled to draw in his final breaths, images of his family flashed through his mind. His beautiful wife Saida and precious daughter Ayshah who were awaiting his return to Tooh, his mama and mami who would be shattered if they ever learned of his life as a terrorist... *Saida my love... Ayshah... forgive me, oh please forgive me!*

As the life force oozed out of his body with the sureness of a gushing river and created unnatural crimson patterns on the pure white *rann*, his sister Fatima’s impish smile flashed in his mind. And as a bullet found a place right in the centre of his forehead and he lost consciousness for the last time, his *ammi* and *abbu* hugged him once again as if welcoming their little child back to their loving fold; his eyes closed, his dreams shattered... his life blown off years back by the *sevaks* of Ram.

Asit Patel startled violently as the phone rang right next to his elbow. He hurriedly placed his tea cup and the remains of his favourite snack *khakhra* on top of a pile of papers on his desk and picked up the offending instrument. *Damn idiots don't even let me have my tea in peace!* The rush of excited words from the party office worker at the other end rendered him speechless as his face flushed red and his big eyes almost popped out of his bald head. The Election Commission (EC) of India was up to its vigilante activism again.

He had always thought that the EC and the Supreme Court were two of the most infuriating institutions ever set up in the country. The Supreme Court in particular was his pet peeve with its penchant for focusing on frivolous causes (and cases!) and creating mountains out of non-issue molehills. Even more annoying was the fact that the Supreme Court routinely ended up wasting huge amounts of the government's resources – time, manpower, money – with very little results to show for all the unnecessary and time-consuming legal wrangling.

Many of the senior ministers allied with or belonging to the BNP were among the most respected lawyers in the country. They also had good connections within the Supreme Court, which meant that the BNP Government wielded considerable influence, not only on general court proceedings that affected the government but also on cases that directly or indirectly affected his party.

The Election Commission however was not so easy to influence or manipulate and therefore required careful handling. The institution was an autonomous constitutional body with a mandate to ensure that the elections to India's national and state legislatures were conducted in a free and fair manner. As a powerful independent entity, the EC was fairly safe from the usual machinations and manipulations of political parties and even the ruling government.

None of the morning papers had carried any news about the EC's latest move. And as of last night, his contacts in EC had not tipped him off about any important decisions taken within the institution. So it stood to reason that whatever the EC was up to now, the EC panel members must have decided to do it just this morning. Head still spinning from what he had just heard, he picked up the remote with a trembling hand and switched on the TV at the

other end of the room.

The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and two Election Commissioners were holding a joint press conference.

The CEC requested for silence and in a sombre voice said, “We are just over a week away from General Elections. I am happy to announce that all the groundwork for the elections is nearly complete. The Commission is both proud and humbled to guide the nation through the democratic process of electing its next leader. It is the Commission’s duty and mandate to conduct free and fair elections and to ensure that the citizens of our country have a *safe, uninfluenced* and peaceful voting experience. However, given last week’s unfortunate attack on our Prime Minister and the sudden escalation in tensions between India and Pakistan, the Election Commission is of the opinion that the current circumstances are *not conducive* for conducting General Elections in the country. Therefore, the Commission is temporarily postponing the General Elections. The new dates will be announced in due course.”

The room-full of seasoned journalists was shocked and rendered speechless initially and as the gravity of what had been just said struck, a wave of commotion hit the room like a huge tsunami. The CEC raised his hand for silence and continued his monologue ignoring the indistinct whispers in the room. “We realise that this has been a very difficult time for the citizens of India. We hope our Prime Minister is well and we pray for his quick recovery. We also hope for the current tensions between the two countries to abate so the nation may vote in peace. Thousands of crores of rupees and the efforts of countless workers have already been poured into initiating the election process for the world’s largest democracy. I’m sure you can all appreciate that this has been a very difficult decision for the Election Commission and not one that we have taken lightly. As I have already mentioned, we will announce a new date soon.” The CEC sat back in his seat, signalling to the assembled reporters that his speech was at an end. As a cacophony of new voices broke out – each trying to outdo the other in volume – the CEC and his team of Election Commissioners abruptly stood and walked out of the room.

What they left behind was utter chaos – mediapersons gaping at each other in shock, TV reporters yelling at their cameramen to ‘move it!’, and print journalists reaching for their laptops.

Asit continued to stare at the TV screen, appalled, speechless and rooted



to his chair. He could literally feel his blood pressure shooting up and his body temperature rising in agitation. *What the hell just happened?!* He was angry with himself for not keeping a closer eye on the Election Commission, particularly the Chief Election Commissioner and his band of Election Commissioners. Shaking his head to clear it of the panic and the cobwebs that were trying to make a permanent residence there, he reached for the telephone with a trembling hand. He made frantic calls to Rajendra Singh, the Home Minister, the Attorney General of India and others that formed the party's and government's legal team and called for an urgent meeting at the Prime Minister's Office. They needed to collectively find their way out of this new crisis and convince the EC to reconsider its decision. And they had to do this by tomorrow.

Once the Cold Start commenced and the country went to war, they would lose all grounds for contention. *The elections cannot be postponed!! They have to be held as per the original schedule.*

He made one final call to his party's chief of media communications.

"Gather the media and bring them to the party office in one hour."

Some of the members of the Joint Task Force were on a short, well-deserved break. A few of them, married men and women with children, had been allowed to take a half day off after working for almost 6 consecutive days and nights. Piles of notebooks, loose papers, ceramic and disposable coffee cups lay in disarray on almost every desk in the control room. Many of the chairs, were pushed back from their desks and lying about in no particular configuration, the room looking more like a laidback vacationers' place than a control room where a serious, nationwide investigative effort was being executed and coordinated. A few members of Vijay's team had fallen asleep at their desks, two were lying on the sofa – dead to the world, and one even lay on the floor in the far corner of the room. The large monitor was auto-flipping through a few programmed news channels that only the inanimate objects in the room were *watching* while the animate ones were busy trying to catch up on lost sleep.

The members of Military Intelligence and the Intelligence Bureau were still wide awake though, regularly checking their monitors to see if any pertinent information or unusual news came in. Vijay, too was sitting in the corner of the room, going through the notes in his head for the umpteenth time.

The pieces of the puzzle were finally falling into place. The Central Government's Mass Watch application (aka MAWA) had auto-analysed hundreds of CCTV feeds that had come in over the past few days and compared them all against the available still photographs of Ahmed Salaam. The software was not perfect so it had taken its own sweet time to complete its analysis. It had even crashed a few times, leaving its operators on the verge of tearing their hair out in frustration. Still, their patience ultimately paid off as MAWA presented important, actionable results and justified its handlers' faith in the program's far-reaching potential and ability. Salaam had been positively identified at Mumbai's Andheri and Borivali railway stations, even though he was almost 'hidden' among the teeming masses that characterise these places. Each time the powerful program identified him through his facial contours, Salaam's appearance and outfit were found to be different. He was obviously an expert at hiding in plain sight. He used wigs, beards and probably even make-up to avoid exposure. He even changed his posture and walk, which made it virtually impossible for even a well-trained

eye to identify him.

A day after the attack, CCTV cameras caught Salaam getting off at Bhuj railway station. However, they lost track of him in the city due to a paucity of CCTV deployment in the city. On the same day of the attack, Ranjitsinh was also caught on camera first at Mumbai Central station and then near Kamala Mills, Lower Parel, some 5 kilometres away. The TV producer's body was found in the area so it stood to reason that he was killed nearby before his body was dumped. Investigations were not complete yet but the officers investigating the murder suspected that Ranjitsinh was the murderer.

The fake army men were clearly a secondary team whose job was to kill Ranjitsinh, which they did. And since Ranjitsinh had failed in his goal to kill Salaam, their job was extended to killing Salaam too – at Bhirandiyara.

Maybe, at the end of the whole operation, only the secondary team was supposed to remain alive. Vijay was quite sure that the fake army men who were killed in a real army encounter were simply paid lackeys. They probably had no idea who Ranjitsinh was or the man at Bhirandiyara they were contracted to kill. *And they probably didn't even care!* To them, this was just another *supari* operation that made them money. If the mercenaries had not been killed by the army, then they would probably have met their end at the hands of the mastermind. Within a few days or weeks, they would have been taken care of as well and the mastermind would remain the last man standing.

But while the others were executed one by one, the operation to neutralise Salaam failed. *How does this fly in the ointment fit into the mastermind's evil genius scheme?*

Vijay received his answer soon as Prahlad Dev called him to his office once again and informed him of a shocking development under an oath of confidentiality. Last night the bullet-riddled body of Ahmed Salaam alias 'Razzak' had been found in the *rann* of Kutch close to the India/Pakistan border. The matter was hush-hush and not many among the administration knew about Salaam's death.

*But why was he killed? And by whom?* Vijay suspected that the Indian army had something to do with his disposal although he would not dare vocalise this suspicion aloud, at least not without solid proof. *But why kill him? Why not simply arrest him? Who ordered this?!* Arresting Salaam and then questioning him might have yielded some useful information about Pakistan's ISI and its possible role in the attack on the Indian Prime

Minister... *unless someone didn't want this information out.*

India had been demanding of Pakistan to hand over the men responsible for the attack on the PM. Announcing the discovery of Salaam's body in its own territory would weaken India's case against Pakistan. Then if the world came to know that Salaam was an Indian citizen...

Now, there was simply no way for anyone to figure that Salaam was anyone but a Pakistani agent, and even if Pakistan moved heaven and earth to locate Salaam, and placate an angry India which was demanding under the threat of war, handing over of Salaam and other culprits in two days, they would not be able to find Salaam within their borders, or anywhere... *A war was inevitable. Genius!*

Back to the JTF control room, Vijay's eyes went to the wall-mounted monitor, still auto-flipping channels like a demented robot. Newsreaders on every channel were talking about the Election Commission's pronouncement to postpone the General Elections. It was quite late in the election season so this decision, although understandable, was still quite shocking. Politicians and so-called 'experts' were questioning the timing and appropriateness of this decision in no uncertain terms. A few others continued to vociferously criticise the government's refusal to release pertinent details about the Prime Minister's condition. The Indian media was trying its best to find a connection between the two issues – no matter how tenuous – despite a discernible lack of evidence. Whereas some supposedly-impartial senior journalists alleged that the EC was in the government's pockets and that the reason they postponed the elections was to ensure that the PM would be well enough to participate, other 'impartial journalists' were alleging that the EC was in the opposition's pockets, for the postponement would only benefit the opposition and not the BNP which was already in a good stead anyway.

The word on the street was that the Prime Minister remained in a serious condition and might not survive past the next few days. All over India and even abroad, people were gathering in huge numbers for candlelight vigils and praying for his recovery. A number of petitions had been filed in various courts of country by opposition parties and individuals alike to pressurise the government to shed information on Prime Minister's health but the government continued to remain tight-lipped playing its own legal cards and citing national security reasons to not releasing the information, adding to the sense of mystery and gloom that pervaded the entire country. Vijay had tried

to find out for himself but every time he asked someone in a position of authority – even Prahlad Dev – about the PM’s condition, all he got in response was a ‘No comment’, or in Prahlad Dev’s case, an awkward, seemingly teasing smile. This deliberate elusiveness was maddening but there was nothing he could do about it.

Indians in the country and the world over had risen in staunch support of a war between India and Pakistan. Some political commentators and experts were claiming that even if the General Elections were postponed, the BNP – who was leading the war cry – was nevertheless likely to enjoy an unprecedented landslide victory. The polls were showing that the BNP already had a clear, simple majority which would likely convert into a huge post-election win. This was a complete turn-around from the situation from just a week ago, when BNP was lagging the opposition’s grand coalition or *mahagathbandhan* in the polls. The fates had obviously decided to smile on the BNP.

*What the...?!*

Asit Patel suddenly appeared on TV and just as quickly disappeared. *Damn auto-flipping TV!* Vijay walked over to the other end of the room and picked up the TV’s remote control. He flipped back to the channel where Asit had just started speaking. Vijay increased the volume and with rising incredulity listened to what Asit had to say.

As he checked the microphone in front of him, Asit Patel knew that this was going to be one of the most important speeches he would ever make in his political career. His party workers had made all the necessary arrangements at the BNP's party headquarters in Delhi's Ashoka Road to ensure the assembled media personnel's comfort. At one end of the garden, a make-shift counter had been set up to serve juice, tea, coffee and snacks to the attendees. Before the conference started, Asit had made a conscious effort to hobnob with journalists from well-known print publications and TV news channels. This was a task he had tried to avoid in the past – *Networking my eye!* – but because these people would take his message to the Election Commission, the Supreme Court and the people of India, he had to make sure that he spent time with them and maintained his already cordial relations with them.

He looked out at the bank of cameras mounted on tripods and placed at the end of the lawn and then stared straight at the sea of mediapersons in front of him. The air of excitement and anticipation was palpable.

Asit's voice boomed out of the microphone, "*Mere saath boliye. Bharat Mata Ki...*" (say with me – Hail Mother India!) Some of the startled journalists completed his sentence with a timid '*Jai!*' while the rest simply looked at each other in confusion in an attempt to 'find' their voice the next time around.

Annoyed at the tepid response, Asit Patel spoke once again, this time even louder than before, "BHARAT MATA KI...!" This time, every reporter, cameraperson and party worker assembled there responded with a thunderous "JAI!" Even the millions of Indians who were tuned in to their television sets and watching him live shouted 'JAI' – a fact that would have pleased Asit mightily.

"Once again, my friends. *Bharat Mata Ki...!*"

"JAI!"

As the final note faded away, Asit paused and took a sip of water from the glass at his elbow. He continued to look directly into the eyes of the reporters and journalists listening to him in thinly-veiled anticipation and then continued "*Bhaiyon aur behnon!* (brothers and sisters!) As you are all aware, the Election Commission has decided to postpone the General Elections. Although we respect their decision and understand their reasoning,

we would still like to humbly state our opposition to it. As a party, we feel that a postponement is akin to meekly surrendering ourselves to the malicious intent of COWARDS across the border who want to destabilise our country with their evil machinations. We are the land of the Jhansi ki Rani, Shivaji Maharaj, Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and Subhash Chandra Bose and WE MUST NOT FORGET IT! Instead of timidly bowing to the malevolent plans of our enemy, we need to stand up for the ideals that these brave *Hindustanis* gave their lives for. We simply cannot acquiesce and we sure as hell cannot accept defeat!

This is an extraordinary situation and a huge challenge not only for our country's future, but for democracy as well. We are still trying to recover from the horrors of the *Pulwama* incident which was less than three months ago..."

Asit's voice choked on the last word, and the assembled journalists looked at each other in discomfort at this obvious evidence of his raw, untrammelled anguish. Once again he took a sip of water and then clearing his throat, he continued in a steadier voice, "... and then this cowardly attack on our respected Prime Minister just two weeks before the world's largest democracy holds its elections! Our free and fair electoral process lies at the core of our great country's very existence; it forms the base of our constitution. Elections are a sacred ritual for our country, and not just a 'process' that we can start and stop, and we request the esteemed Election Commission to not let this sacred norm succumb to the wicked plans of our evil neighbours."

The assembly broke out in applause at this speech. Asit gave them a few moments to calm down and continued, "We have to show to the world that the Indian spirit – the spirit of our motherland – spirit of a billion citizens – cannot be crushed. Yes, even if they attack our Prime Minister, and yes, even if there's a war at the border! *Bhaiyon aur behnon*, the time for quiet, measured responses is well and truly over. We have to show to the world that we refuse to be daunted and cowed! Let this be a warning to the enemy across the border. If we are pushed, we will damn well push back and with even more force than they can even imagine. And that *bhaiyon aur behnon* IS A PROMISE!"

He paused to acknowledge the applause – and even whistles and shouts of encouragement – from the worked-up audience.

"I would also like to question the motivations and reactions of our

respected opposition parties. They are all celebrating the postponement of the elections which makes us wonder. WHY? What exactly are they cheering about? Are they happy that our country has responded to the enemy in such a timid manner? Are they celebrating the heinous, unprovoked attack on our soldiers at Pulwama? Or are they celebrating the attack on our leader, our much-loved Prime Minister? And the biggest sin of all – are they rejoicing that the world’s largest democracy and its constitution, our dear Mother India, is being held hostage to the evil whims of a maniacal yet cowardly enemy?”

He paused to modulate his voice to a softer tone.

“I openly urge these people – my brothers and sisters – to rise above their selfish party-pettiness and take the time to do some much-needed soul-searching. This is not the time for antagonism or belligerence, but a time to come together beyond party lines, and fight for what we all believe in – our democratic values, our motherland and our future.

Once again we humbly urge the Election Commission to reconsider its decision to postpone the elections. I’m sure that I speak for each and every citizen of India when I say that India wants to respond to the attack! *Hindustan wants to vote! JAI HIND!*”

Asit Patel folded his hands in a *Namaste* gesture and then invited the reporters to ask questions. A cacophony of sound greeted these words, each reporter trying to out-shout the others to get himself heard in the babel of voices. Asit tried his best to respond to each question, wielding his oratory skill and poise like a well-used, albeit a razor-sharp weapon.

Once the press conference was over, he stepped away from his seat and turned to his secretary with a raised eyebrow. Having worked with Asit for years, by now the secretary could almost read Asit’s mind and quickly respond to the question hovering in his worried eyes. “Sir, a petition has been filed in the Supreme Court seeking an urgent hearing against the EC’s postponement order.”

“Bring my car around.”

“Where are we going Sir?”

“AIIMS.”

*We’ll need more ammunition to change the EC’s mind.*



“I’m telling you, no matter what anyone says, we are inevitably and inexorably inching towards Armageddon! Eventually when doomsday arrives – and notice how I said *when* and not *if* – I predict that it won’t be because of North and South Korea or even Russia and USA. It will be India and Pakistan that would bring a nuclear winter to the planet. Millions will perish and the world will never be the same again. World War I & II will seem like a pleasant walk in the park compared to what’s going to happen. Mark my words Prahlad!”

Prahlad Dev was thinking about this particular conversation that took place almost two years ago with the Commander of the nuclear-armed *Arihant*, a Ship Submersible Ballistic Nuclear (SSBN) submarine built under India’s ambitious Advanced Technology Vessel (ATV) project. With the *Arihant*, India’s nuclear ‘triad’, i.e. her ability to deliver a nuclear strike by land, air and under water, was now complete. Furthermore, while land and air weapon systems could be detected and even destroyed by the enemy, it was virtually impossible to detect a silent, nuclear-powered, underwater submarine, much less avert the devastation it could bring about. This is why when the *Arihant* was first commissioned at Visakhapatnam and dedicated to the service of the nation, the sight of the huge, beautiful vessel had engendered a sense of immense pride and patriotism, even tears of joy, among the assembled guests. The other submarine in the ATV stable, the *Arighat* had just completed its trial run. *Arihant* and the *Arighat*, along with four more SSBNs in the pipeline, formed India’s crucial second-strike capability.

Prahlad Dev recalled another conversation with a leading defence strategist he had met at a conference in Geneva, six months back. “During the decades-long Cold War between the United States and former Soviet Union, both countries possessed hundreds of nuclear warheads and both knew that a war between them would bring nothing but the destruction of both. Thus the underlying dynamic driving both countries’ international strategy was that of *Mutually Assured Destruction*. But the case of India versus Pakistan is way different. We know that Pakistan is an underdog. Pakistan has been anything but submissive, and because India has not set a precedence for stronger responses to its rogue neighbour’s machinations, it has been able to carry out

terror activities on Indian soil with impunity and more importantly, *without fear of retaliation.*”

True, Prahlad Dev thought, as he absently studied the sinister-looking form the smoke emanating from his cigarette took as it rose towards the white ceiling of the room. Over the years, Pakistan had developed a reputation for deliberate mischief-mongering in India, and the Indian armed forces were frustrated with what they saw as successive Governments’ meek ‘wait and watch’ responses.

The current Prime Minister acknowledged this and refused to be as meek as his predecessors – both in rhetoric as well as in action. Uri had been responded to. And immediately after the attack on Indian soldiers at Pulwama, he had convened an urgent, closed-door meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security. During the emotional meeting, the PM had even raised the possibility of declaring war against Pakistan. Despite the prevailing anger at Pakistan, cool heads eventually prevailed in India’s political establishment. The war idea was dropped in favour of a more calibrated, surgical air-strike approach.

Following the recent attack on the PM, India was once again ready to shed its formerly passive mantle and respond more aggressively to its neighbour’s cowardly provocations. For the most part, that was good news. But the fact remained that Indian defence and intelligence forces did not yet have a comprehensive grasp on Pakistan’s nuclear capabilities or its nuclear ‘threshold’ – it was not known at what level of Indian ‘response’ would Pakistan send its nuclear warheads towards India. India could simply not afford to wait for Pakistan to strike with nuclear first and had to be more proactive in finding a way to permanently deter its pesky neighbour.

The NSA’s thoughts were interrupted by a timid knock on his office door. When he bade the person to enter, his secretary walked in and handed him another sealed manila folder marked ‘Top Secret’. Dev nodded his thanks to the lady and without another word, she turned around and left.

He broke open the seal, extracted the one-page intelligence report and quickly read through it. After reading it twice more, he placed the document on the desk in front of him and turned around to look out the window in silent contemplation.

The military leadership of Pakistan had taken over control from the civilian authority and mobilised its Strategic Plans Division (SPD) to arm the country’s nuclear assets. Pakistan’s Naval Strategic Forces Command had

also been instructed to arm the nuclear missiles on one of its French-built diesel-electric submarines stationed in the Karachi naval dockyard. Pakistan was getting ready.

A few hours ago, the US Government had informed the Indian Government that they – or rather their moles in Pakistani intelligence agencies – had found no concrete evidence of Pakistan's involvement in the attack on the Indian Prime Minister. US and many other Western governments were long-term allies of India and the Indian Government was under extreme pressure to prevent an act of war. India was a peace-loving nation but countries like Pakistan and China were forcing her to rethink her passive stance. Dev himself was not in favour of going to war with Pakistan. But after the Uri attack, Pulwama attack and now the attack on the PM, war seemed like a foregone conclusion, no matter what the Western powers thought, said or did about it.

From the intelligence brief he just read it was clear that Pakistan already knew that India was planning a Cold Start. And the deployment of its nuclear submarine indicated that Pakistan was readying its second-strike capability.

The thought of what was in store for future India-Pakistan's relations had the NSA shuddering in anxiety. *Hah! As if we had any relations to speak of!* "A nuclear war would ensure complete annihilation of both countries; a mutually assured destruction that neither nation will ever recover from," read a highly-confidential defence report he had recently reviewed. Those fateful words portending doom now echoed in his brain with the force of a hammer. Deliberately shaking off their effect, Dev shifted his attention to the defence strategy meeting with the Defence Minister that was scheduled to take place in less than 15 minutes from now.

What Pakistan did not know was that India had already moved past thinking about a Cold Start.

In fact, at the slightest whiff of a nuclear deployment from Pakistan, India was ready to implement its Massively Pre-emptive Nuclear Strike (MPNS), a little-known strategy to obliterate Pakistan right off the planet.

*There's no alternative!*

The Prime Minister slowly opened his eyes, blinking in the glare of the bright light. A team of doctors and attendants was standing around his bed, hovering over his supine form. One of the doctors removed the saline drip from his right hand, ignoring the PM's slight grimace of pain. An attendant adjusted the electric bed so the PM could sit up comfortably. Finally, he was lifted off the bed and placed on a wheelchair that a nurse had wheeled in.

The PM looked at the wall clock: 8:40 PM. He had less than 20 minutes to prepare himself for the most important speech of his lifetime. Four men from the Special Protection Group were standing outside his VVIP suite and they immediately flanked him as he was wheeled out and moved into an adjoining room. Once inside, the PM greeted the crew of camerapersons and technical assistants waiting for his arrival with a quick Good Evening. Fighting off a smile at their awed responses, he requested his wheelchair attendant to take him close to the full-length mirror in the corner. He studied himself in the cheval glass and winced at his uncharacteristically dishevelled appearance. He was in a light blue hospital gown and both his legs were encased in knee-length plasters. He looked emaciated and frail, almost half the size and brawn of the man he used to be before the attack. His signature white beard – always neat and well-trimmed in the past – now looked long, untidy and scruffy.

A makeup man approached the PM and requested permission to work on his appearance. Getting a polite *haanji* in response, he started by first trimming the Prime Minister's beard and hair. Once he was done, a costume assistant helped the Prime Minister put on a smart blue Nehru jacket over his hospital gown. The assistant then moved away and the makeup man got to work on concealing the dark, puffy circles beneath the Prime Minister's eyes. He then handed over a mirror to the PM. *Ah! Finally, I look presentable!*

Hair, makeup and costume done, the PM was wheeled into yet another room. Like the others, this room too had white walls and gave off a strong antiseptic odour that had him wrinkling his nose in disgust. Unlike the other rooms though, this room was set up with a high-end video camera. Additionally, the Indian flag was hoisted on a stand in one corner and a sturdy wooden desk stood in the centre. *Of all the weird things in a hospital room – a desk?! Where did it come from?!* Shaking off his irrelevant

thoughts, the PM waited quietly while his wheelchair was positioned behind the desk. The flag was moved to his left. He placed his joined hands on the desk and looked straight into the camera with his customary poise and confidence. He cleared his throat and requested a trial, speaking softly in both Hindi and English.

Once he was settled, the camera began rolling and the producer started his countdown “5-4-3-2-1”, finally mouthing the words, “You are live.”

“*Mitron...*” the PM began. Unlike his usually sonorous and powerful tones, his voice now was feeble and lacking in intensity. But he pushed on, determined to get the words out.

“*.. Mere bhaiyon aur behnon... Kal ka Bharat dekhega ki humne aaj ke kshan mein kya kiya tha. Kya humne kaayarta dikhai thi, ya humne himmat rakhkar Bharat ma ki raksha ki thi? Kal Bharat humse yeh puchega. Kya humne apne elections rok diye the, ya humne atmavishwas se aage badhne ka nirnay liya tha? Kya hum apne apne gharon mein chhup kar baithe rahe the, ya hum nidarta se dushman ka mukabla karne ke liye unhi ke ghar mein ghus gaye the?*” He paused to catch his breath, the effort to speak tiring him out completely. “*Kal ka Bharat hum se puchega.*

*Aaiye bhaiyon aur behnon ek sunehre kal ki aur milkar chalen, milkar laden aur vote karen!*

*Bolo mere saath!*

*Hum dat kar ladenge.*

*Hum vote karenge.*

*Bharat Mata Ki Jai!*

*Bharat Mata Ki Jai!*

*Bharat Mata Ki Jai!”*

After a minute’s break, he repeated his speech in English for the worldwide media. “Dear brothers and sisters. The India of tomorrow will judge us for the decisions we make and the actions we take in the grave times of today. Did we cower in fear or did we protect our country with courage and bravery? Did we stop the elections or did we vote with confidence? Did we succumb in silence or did we take the fight to our enemy?

Let’s move on, my country men, brothers and sisters, towards a brighter future. Let’s walk together and fight together. Let not the enemy deter us from our true path. We will fight and we will vote!”

He paused and took a sip of water to cool his parched throat. With a final

warm smile at the camera, the PM closed his speech with a rousing “*Bharat Mata Ki Jai!*”

The Prime Minister was more than ready to go back to bed but he loved public speaking and doing so after a long gap – and for such a momentous occasion – had adrenaline pumping through his body. He felt a sense of accomplishment and happy anticipation as he was wheeled back to his suite. An attendant helped him get back into bed and handed him a glass of water. A few minutes later, a member of his PMO team knocked on the open door and informed him that the meetings had been arranged. The first would be a video conference with the President of the United States. This would be followed by separate calls with the Prime Ministers of Israel and Iran, the President of France and the President of Tajikistan.

This would be the second time in as many days that he would be speaking to them.

## DAY 7

### 47

Vijay was on a plane to Mumbai for the second time in less than a week. He was tired and longed to spend time with his family. He missed his wife, their unborn child, his older children and mother with a ferocity that surprised even his pragmatic soul. *Probably you get used to having your family beside you; and without them around you feel a constant void deep inside you.* When he had spoken to Geetika earlier in the day, she had reported that the baby had been kicking really hard of late. She said that the unborn one was only mirroring her mother's feelings – missing her daddy and vocalising her anger in the only way she knew how. Vijay knew that Geetika was joking, but a part of him couldn't help but feel guilt at the barely-restrained censure he heard in her voice. He promised Geetika that he would come home straight from Delhi airport, upon his return from Mumbai.

Vijay walked out of Mumbai airport's private terminal, taken aback by the noise and pollution that greeted him like an ocean wave, even in the wee hours of the morning. He used to live in Mumbai earlier and it only had been a few years that he had shifted with his family to Delhi. He would be excited each time he landed in the city, but of late he was losing his enthusiasm – the pollution was much worse than he remembered. He quickly stepped into a black, unmarked Toyota Fortuner waiting for him right outside the terminal.

He had found it next to impossible to rest during the two-hour flight from New Delhi to Mumbai so he took advantage of his enforced break to catch up on other news and happenings that had nothing to do with the crisis he himself was so deeply entrenched in. The in-flight magazine had a very well-researched article on the melting Himalayan glaciers which he read with great interest. The glaciers at the North and South poles were melting at an alarming rate and raising the sea levels to dangerous proportions. In fact, environmentalists were predicting that one-third of all Himalayan glaciers would completely vanish off the face of the earth by the year 2100 and the entire Indian subcontinent would be left without drinking water. India and Pakistan would be most affected by this catastrophe, but the focus and priorities of both countries clearly lay somewhere else.

Once he got through the magazine from cover to cover, he closed his eyes and sat back, reviewing in his mind all the information he had read about the Cold Start doctrine earlier in the day at the PMO, and a possible nuclear war scenario between India and Pakistan. These reports published by the Strategic Forces Command scared him to death. He thought of the millions of children on the planet including his own two and the one not yet born and wondered what would become of them if an India-Pakistan nuclear war became a reality. *Where is the world heading to?* Pretty much every person on earth craves for one thing and one thing only – the ability to enjoy a healthy, happy and a peaceful existence with life’s basic necessities of *roti, kapda, makaan* (food, clothing, shelter) well taken care of. But greed – for power, money, fame – and the endless cycle of human wants had been driving the planet crazy for millennia. *Man is never going to change, so the craziness is never going to stop!*

An article spoke of a dead whale found off the coast of Philippines with 40 kilograms of plastic in her stomach. The apathy and carelessness of the human species continued to shock Vijay with every new piece of news he read. Human beings seemed hell-bent on their own destruction. *Man is his greatest enemy, hands down!* And one day, nature – or maybe some higher power out there – might just decide that human beings were not really the self-proclaimed ‘exalted’ creatures meant to enjoy grand lives, but simply parasites who did not deserve to even exist. *And who knows, in one fine swoop, the entire species might just cease to exist!*

“Sir, K has landed,” the black-suited man in black glasses seated in the front passenger seat interrupted Vijay’s musings. Keyur Shenoy, the head honcho of Moon Media had been in Dubai for the past two days and was scheduled to land in his private jet in Mumbai around the same time as Vijay. A team of sleuths from Intelligence Bureau would ensure that he ‘falls sick’ after clearing the immigration and customs at the private terminal, and a team of ‘doctors’ would pick him up and drive him to an undisclosed location in Navi Mumbai. His entourage would be held captive and incommunicado in a 5-star hotel near the airport till the time Shenoy was interrogated and released – for news of a billionaire’s health is extremely sensitive information, and no one in the outside world should know; at least not immediately.

Vijay nodded to the man. They were on their way to a Navi Mumbai destination.



Just before boarding the flight to Mumbai, Vijay had watched the live telecast of the Prime Minister's speech in awe. Vijay couldn't help but admire the resolve it must have taken the severely-injured man to push himself off his hospital bed and deliver a speech to the nation in that condition.

Until the PM appeared on TV screens all over the country, almost no one knew how he was doing. Was he recovering? Had his condition deteriorated? Was he on the brink of death? Or worse, was he dead already? At the time of his address, many Indian towns were so empty of life and movement that they resembled nothing so much as abandoned ghost towns. Most people stayed home, understandably glued to their TV screens, eager for this first glimpse of their Prime Minister after almost a week. The fact that this glimpse came through a nation-wide address excited them even more.

Earlier, Asit Patel's nationwide address was impressive and impactful too. The BNP was blessed with charismatic orators, talented public speakers who could easily touch the emotions of their listeners with a beautiful, heart-rending play on words.

Vijay was not a big fan of politics or politicians. But even he had to admit that the speeches, particularly the PM's powerful message for the nation – *we refuse to succumb to our puny neighbour's cowardly machinations!* – would win the hearts and minds not only of ordinary citizens, but even the powerful men that controlled the Supreme Court and the Election Commission.

*I think the PM has the right of it. The elections must go on, even if we are at war with Pakistan!*

Prahlad Dev walked into his office in the morning, a strange mixture of excitement and exhaustion vying for dominance inside him. The defence strategy meeting attended by the Defence Minister, Indian Defence Forces' chiefs and senior personnel, senior defence and intelligence strategists and planners from all services and most agencies, had dragged on through the night for well over six hours. To the surprise of almost everyone in the room, the Prime Minister had joined the meeting via video conference from AIIMS, looking worn to the bone but still very much alive. In fact, as soon as his visage appeared on the large monitor in the room, the meeting attendees all froze in shock for a moment and then broke into a heartfelt applause. Although the PM left the meeting after a few minutes, his 'cameo' appearance was more than enough to pump adrenaline into the room – and keep it there – for the next several hours. Through the long night, many different attack and response strategies were discussed and the attendees played out multiple permutations and combinations of possible 'what-if' scenarios.

Dev made himself an espresso from the coffee machine in his office and sank down on the comfortable mohair sofa placed cater-corner from his desk. A chronic lack of sleep had started to affect his performance and decision-making ability. After almost 20 hours of non-stop work, he was dead on his feet but he didn't have the luxury of rest – at least not yet. He took a deep draught of the hot coffee and deliberately pulled his tired brain away from his exhaustion and towards the papers he held in his hands. Placing the cup on the glass-topped coffee table to his left, he studied the summary notes he had prepared during the meeting. Either of two possible scenarios could play out by midnight tonight:

*Plan A:* India would succumb to the intense pressure brought to bear by the governments of USA, UK, Germany and other Western countries and decide not to initiate a Cold Start against Pakistan. India would halt all her plans of limited infantry incursion across the border and keep maintaining the status quo. Apart from the discouragement by powerful nations, a lack of direct evidence linking the Pakistani Government to the attack on the Prime Minister was also weakening India's justification for attacking Pakistan. If India could promise to consider looking for a diplomatic, 'warless' solution, many Western governments had assured India that they would push Pakistan

to take strong, time-bound actions against known militants. They also promised that they would pressure Pakistan – through multi-lateral talks, multiple sanctions and withdrawal of developmental aid – to hand over to the Indian Government not just Ahmed Salaam, but all militants implicated in all terror attacks on Indian soil.

*Plan B:* India would go ahead with a Cold Start and various services of the Indian Defence Forces would conduct a limited offensive operation on the Pakistani soil. No first use doctrine would be maintained by India till the time the country detected even the slightest nuclear movement by Pakistan, in which case India wouldn't wait and launch a Massively Punitive Nuclear Strike (MPNS).

Most of India's western allies – at least those whom Indian military and intelligence were closely coordinating with – were against Plan B although the country's Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) was overwhelmingly in favour of it. Deep, tactical strikes on Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and delivery systems would be carried out by the Indian Air Force during the Cold Start. At the same time, India would do everything possible – via its official communication channels with Pakistan and via allies – to ensure sufficient pressure was maintained on Pakistan to contain its nuclear threshold. To preclude any possible retaliatory actions from Pakistan's allies, most notably China, the Prime Minister would talk to their leaders and try to use his famed negotiation skills to bring them over to the Indian or at least a neutral camp.

India's CartoSat-2E and a dozen other spy satellites were continuously monitoring Pakistani and Chinese skies for any possible missile launches. For the first time, India's Ballistic Missile Defence System had been deployed in an actual war scenario. India had an advanced 2-tier ballistic missile shield over its skies. The missiles were designed to intercept and take out the enemy's missiles high over the Indian skies – in exo-atmospheric space (50-150 kilometres above the Earth's surface), and in the endo-atmospheric space (20-40 kilometres above the surface).

India had also recently tested its anti-satellite weapon system. Codenamed Mission *Shakti*, an anti-satellite missile (ASAT) destroyed a satellite in low earth orbit confirming India's capabilities to destroy enemy spy and telecommunication satellites.

Any missile – nuclear-tipped or conventional – launched by Pakistan would be intercepted and destroyed high over the Indian skies. And if

Pakistan had dared to touch its nuclear missile, let alone launch it, India would retaliate with MPNS. That would be the end of its neighbour.

The Indian armed forces were ready for war. There was massive military deployment on the ground as infantry and armoured spearheads had taken positions all across the border from Kutch to Kashmir. The forces on the North-eastern border with China were in a state of high alert. The Strategic Forces Command of India had declared nuclear readiness. By noon, weapon delivery systems on land, air and surface ships would be nuclear-mated and India would be ready to deploy nuclear missiles on Pakistan, and if required on China, at a moment's notice. *Arihant* and *Arighat*, India's two nuclear submarines were ready in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean respectively, their BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles mated with nuclear warheads, and aimed towards Pakistan and China.

And even in the midst of *should-we/shouldn't we* discussions with their Western counterparts, the Prime Minister was on his own diplomatic track speaking one-to-one with the leaders of a few countries convincing them to join Indian air strikes on Pakistan.

Prahlad Dev took another sip of his cooling espresso, closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of the sofa. When he assumed office as the National Security Advisor three years ago, he was not the only one to leave his quiet hometown of Port Blair in Andaman and Nicobar. His wife and two school-going children had moved as well. But while his position as the NSA required him to live and work in Delhi, his family had moved to the buzzing metropolis of Mumbai. As the NSA of the country, he had little time for his family, or for any kind of a personal life. His wife was from Mumbai and most of her family still lived there, so she and the children moved to Mumbai; at least they would not be alone in his absence. Although he missed them desperately, he knew that their decision to maintain households in two different cities still made sense.

There was yet another subtler reason for shifting his family to Mumbai from the peace and tranquil of Port Blair, he thought. While he had to be objective in his decisions as the NSA, he couldn't afford to be too cold and detached from the very people of the country he was trying to protect. In event of a full-fledged war, no one would want to decimate Port Blair. But a Pakistan or a China would surely launch nuclear weapons over Delhi and Mumbai. That's where his and millions of other families resided. He had to be sensitive, and scared even. He had to carefully devise strategies with his

teams, taking into consideration the human costs of war, and the risk of calculations not working out per plan. He had to avoid or at least minimize the risk of countless families being wiped off, including his.

Shaking off thoughts about his family, Prahlad Dev set the alarm to wake him in two hours. The Defence Minister had called a final strategy review meeting with senior strategists from the Ministry of Defence, PMO and the armed forces three hours from now. The Cold Start plans were ready and they had to re-examine all agreed-upon strategies and review possible scenarios one final time.

If things don't go according to plan, tonight might be the night of Armageddon – the end of the planet as we know it.

Plan B. *Tonight.*

His eyelids were getting heavy and he stopped fighting the overwhelming urge to close his eyes and sink into the oblivion of dreams.

He slept.

It was broad daylight and the bright Mumbai sun was bathing the city in its harsh yellow light. However, inside the room, it was gloomy, the natural light unable to penetrate the dim interior. The man lay still, not so much by choice as by lack of, and looked up at the dull off-white ceiling. Despair and frustration grappled for dominance inside his over-tired brain. Frustration won.

“I will have you bastards arrested for this!” he shouted. “I will call the Prime Minister himself and make sure you’re jailed for life! You bastards – are you listening? You...!”

As soon as he disembarked from his Dubai flight and stepped into the airport’s private lounge, Keyur Shenoy felt extremely sick and dizzy, and before he knew he was whisked away by two men in white hospital gowns waiting near the gate, their bland expressions and tight postures telling him without words that he was in for a rough time ahead.

“If you know what’s good for you Mr. Shenoy, you will not make a fuss and come quietly with us.”

A petrified and dizzy Shenoy simply nodded and meekly allowed them to lead him away.

Their fake politeness and solicitousness barely masking their aggression and repressed hostility, the Men in White (as he privately dubbed them) pushed him into a white ambulance idling near the kerb. As soon as he stepped in, both men stepped in after him, boxing him in from either side so he could barely move. One of the muscles blind-folded a confused and sputtering Shenoy and curtly commanded the driver to take off. The man on his other side then spoke five words, “K is on his way,” and nothing else. Shenoy’s repeated questions – *Who are you people? Where are you taking me? What the hell is going on here?!* – met with stiff, unbroken silence. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought that he was the car’s only passenger. Less than five minutes into the journey, he felt a sharp jab in his right thigh. Confused and petrified, he turned towards the man on his right, struggling to make out his details through his blindfold. Within a minute, he slumped in his seat, dead to the world for the next several hours.

“What the hell do you guys want?! Someone answer me RIGHT NOW!” he roared again, waiting for a response but once more, getting none. He was lying on a narrow cot in a small, non-descript room. The heat in the chamber

was stifling, making him sweat buckets inside his cotton *kurta pyjama*. *Wait! Why am I wearing a kurta pyjama? What the hell happened to my suit?! But at least I'm not blindfolded anymore!* His hands and legs were tied with strips of white cloth to the head and foot of the cot and no amount of thrashing could loosen his binds. His throat was parched but there was no one around to ask for water. "Can I get some water? Please, I beg you!"

The door to the room suddenly opened and two men entered. One of them was carrying a glass of water which he carefully poured into Shenoy's mouth. The other man grasped his right hand and ignoring Shenoy's struggles jabbed him with an intravenous needle. As his struggles ceased, the men wordlessly looked at each other and shook their heads. They stepped out of the room and closed the door. Shenoy's head felt heavy and a curious lethargy seized his limbs. Once again, he closed his eyes and slept.

A soft voice woke him up from a deep, dreamless sleep. Shenoy turned his head towards the sound and realised that many hours had probably passed.

"Mr. Shenoy? Are you awake? Mr. Shenoy?"

"Yes, yes I'm awake. Only just..." The voice to his left was deep and soothing. He was both awake and asleep at the same time. And although he was tired right down to his bones, he also felt calm and relaxed...

"Wake up Sir! Tell me your name. What is your name?!"

"My name is Keyur Shenoy," he slurred tiredly.

"And where do you live?"

"Mumbai."

"What do you do? Mr Shenoy – wake up! What do you do?"

"I am the chairman and owner of Moon Media & Entertainment, Moon Telecom and Moon Financial Services." Keyur Shenoy felt peace stealing over him in the dark room.

"How do you know Asit Patel?"

The question suddenly roused him from his stupor and he realised that he had been injected with a truth serum. What his questioner probably didn't know was that Shenoy was no stranger to truth serums, having taken them as part of his security training. As a high-profile public figure, threats to his business and person were an inescapable part of his life. His private security team had trained him to resist the effect of truth serums in different situations. *A truth serum can disable your brain's ability to think, to reason. More importantly, it will force you to speak the truth, even if doing so could cause*

*you irreparable harm. What you need to do is devise an 'alternate' truth. Create an alternative story for every truth that you want to keep secret. Practice speaking it out aloud. Start believing it because if you don't, no one else will. Practise saying this new 'truth' in front of the mirror. Say it as you prepare to go to sleep. This is the only way to convince your subconscious that this new truth is the only truth!*

These words, drummed into him for so many years, now came to his rescue.

"I have known him for many years now. He is the president of the BNP."

"When were you last in touch with him?"

"When Moon Media and BNP signed the promotion deal for the latter."

"Is it a big contract? Worth a lot of money?"

"Yes. The deal is worth hundreds of crores of rupees."

*Who are these people? Are they trying to get the value of the deal? Corporate espionage? Stop giving them information you fool!*

"What do you know about the attack on the Prime Minister?"

"Sad, sad, sad, sad, sad... one of my channels was covering the PM's visit live when it happened." *Why is this man asking me about the attack? Is he an intelligence agent? Careful Keyur, careful!*

"What do you know about the producer? Who killed him?"

"Producer? What producer?"

"Vinay Sharma, the producer of your show. The one covering the live event... Wake up Mr. Shenoy!"

"Oh, oh, Vinay... yes... well, he was killed... yes..."

"We know he was murdered. What we want to know is by whom? Do you know? Mr. Shenoy – do you know who killed Vinay Sharma?"

"All I know is that he was murdered and his body dumped in some old building in Lower Parel."

"Are you sure that's all you know? Mr. Shenoy?!"

"Yes... Vinay... he was a talented guy... it's a pity he died so young." *Think, think, think Keyur!*

"Why did you give him money?"

"So talented... killed so young..." *Think, think, think, Keyur.*

"You gave him a lot of money a few days before he was killed. Money that cannot be explained by his regular salary."

"I'm the king of the world! I give money to Jack and I give money to Joe. You want some of my money?" Keyur burst out laughing at his own words.



The man waited for Keyur's chuckles to subside before he picked up the investigation once again.

"Why did you give him money?"

"Such a talented fellow, he wanted to resign..." A sigh from Keyur that didn't fool the other man in the least.

"Why did Asit Patel call you?"

"He wanted us to run more BNP promotions on our channels, ha ha... how many ads can I run on my channel, ha ha... Is the name of my channel Kal Aaj Kal or Kal Ad Kal... ha ha ha. Or BNP TV..." Once more Keyur Shenoy broke into loud, raucous laughter at complete odds with the helplessness of his current situation.

"Mr. Shenoy! Stop it, MR. SHENOY!"

"... I am the king of the moon... I am the Moon King. I am the bloody *Chanda Mama!* Bow before me ya'll, bow! Ha ha ha... I am the 8<sup>th</sup> richest person in India... that's not enough... no no no! I want to be the richest person... in India... in Asia... in the world... I'm the king of the world.! And one day, you'll see, yes Sir, I'll own the moon!"

"Mr. Shenoy, FOCUS! Did Asit Patel speak to you about the attack on the Prime Minister?" the voice was now sterner, louder and reverberating in the confines of the tiny room.

"The Prime Minister is a good man... do you even know the cost of good content...? Do you know how much I pay? I am the moon king and the king pays through his bloody nose! Ha ha ha... the bloody king has a big bloody nose... ha ha ha!"

Vijay watched Shenoy's interview on the small TV in the next room, weariness dragging him down with every minute that passed. A strong need to sleep was trying to overpower his tired brain. This particular interrogation was leading nowhere. It had been a couple of hours that Shenoy had been brought in, and in all that time, Keyur Shenoy had done nothing but blabber incoherently and laugh like a maniac high on LSD. The interrogator of course would not allow Shenoy to sleep. To be useful, he had to be deprived of restful sleep.

Throughout the day, the serum's dosage had been consistently increased, but so far, it had not helped their cause. It didn't appear as if Keyur had any concrete knowledge about the attack on the Prime Minister. But this did not agree with the evidence they had amassed so far. Rather than torture – a

standard method of extracting information from hostile witnesses, no matter what official statements said – the interrogation experts from the Intelligence Bureau had decided to try a truth serum (aka Sodium Thiopental) instead. Although it was far from 100% fool-proof, they felt that injecting a serum would be a better option, mainly because unlike torture, it left no evidence behind. In this case, ‘no physical marks’ was a mandate they were determined to stick to.

However, so far the serum did not seem to be working.

Keyur Shenoy was obviously lying. *How is he able to resist the serum? Who are we dealing with here? Or is the serum leading him to delirium?*

They were running out of time.

Asit Patel was jubilant. The PM's first public appearance in almost a week followed by his passionate speech had been super-effective in garnering support for the BNP and boosting its flagging fortunes. Thousands of protesters had gathered outside the Election Commission's headquarters since early morning, trying to convince officials to reverse their decision to postpone the upcoming general elections. When the Supreme Court bench convened, it passed a motion ordering the EC to reconsider its decision, which the EC did promptly and to the jubilation of the protestors still camped outside its doors. The elections would now proceed as planned. In a week from today, the nation would go to polls in over a month-long voting process that would be carried out in seven phases.

While other political parties were crying foul over this new decision, BNP party members were ecstatic. Rallies were taking place all over the country celebrating EC's decision reversal. Prayer meetings also continued for the speedy recovery of the Prime Minister. The sight of the Prime Minister after a week of suspense over his health had boosted the spirits not only of BNP's workers but also of a billion citizens.

Patel was still smiling to himself at this reversal of BNP fortunes when another piece of news captured his attention. One of his informants called him on his private line to inform him about Keyur Shenoy's kidnapping from Mumbai airport last night. Although information about this high-profile kidnapping had not made it to the news – yet – given that Keyur was a well-known public personality, Asit was sure that it wouldn't be long before the bloodthirsty wolves who called themselves 'Indian media' sniffed out the story and tore it to shreds.

Asit thanked his informant and disconnected. *This is not good!* He immediately called the Home Minister who promised to look into the case and get back to him with more information.

This new unforeseen occurrence weighed heavily on Asit's mind as he started for the party office and turned his attention to devising last-minute election strategies and tactics.

Vijay watched the man in the room, shaking his head in frustration and worry. The prisoner's hands and feet were tied to the iron chair he sat on. His face looked haggard and sweaty, and his eyes had the wild, unfocused look of someone unsure if he was awake or still asleep. His lower lip was swollen and bloodied, adding an interesting – albeit savage – dimension to an otherwise unexceptional, yet a billion-dollar face.

After hours of questioning Shenoy with nothing to show for their efforts, Vijay felt helplessness washing through him once more. He felt agonizingly sleep-deprived. He could not remember the last time he felt so bone-weary and shattered. The exhaustion seemed to reach through his muscles, tendons and cells and right into his mind and soul. If he had been standing, he would have fallen down in a mindless heap, etiquette or situation be damned.

Keyur was their prisoner but it was them who were all at his mercy. Unless he divulged some useful details – soon – their chances of unravelling the mystery of who had attacked the Prime Minister and why were rapidly dwindling. Prahlad Dev had phoned Vijay several times, his anxiety and edginess growing with every call. *Tonight is when the Cold Start is!* He had said. Vijay knew that it was only a matter of time before Dev lost all patience and completely exploded.

They had given up the truth serum experiment seeing as it had no noticeable effect on Keyur Shenoy even in his sleep-deprived, exhausted state. Since the last two hours, they had adopted a more 'conventional', oft-tried approach that almost always guaranteed great results – physical torture. However, the Sodium Thiopental administered to Shenoy several hours earlier had not yet worn off which dulled his sensory reaction. Therefore, even extreme physical pain was not producing the results they were hoping for. So far the investigators had been careful to leave no marks on his body, except for the one impulsive, backhanded slap that cut his bottom lip.

*The man is hiding something. But how do we get him to talk?*

The only unambiguous bit of information they had been able to glean from Keyur's half-conscious babbling was that the payment he had made to Vinay, the producer, was an incentive – a sort of 'retention bonus'. The man had threatened to resign from his position at Moon. So he paid him a hefty amount – an amount that he wouldn't be able to say 'No' to – and convinced

him to stay on.

At this point, Keyur's fount of knowledge completely dried up. He claimed to have no insight whatsoever into the plan to attack the Prime Minister.

When questioned, his exact words were, "What bogus ambulance? What NGO?"

Questions about his connection with Asit were also adroitly fielded.

"He is an important man and I am an important man. I am the Mighty Moon King, don't you know? Ha ha ha!" This last outburst of maniacal laughter earned him a hard slap across the face and the swollen lower lip.

"What do you want me to say?! Asit and I speak regularly about the BNP-Moon promotion deal, but that's it! He's a bloody politician and I'm not. How the hell am I supposed to know what the bastard thinks or why he does what he does? Ask him, why don't you?! LET ME GO!"

"We will let you go when you give us something useful. Now, why did you pay 50 lakh rupees to Vinay when his annual salary was only 22 lakh rupees?"

"Why shouldn't I?! I thought it was worth it. I thought *he* was worth it. I liked him. Very talented fellow. I did not want to lose him to a rival network."

Vijay was worried. Keyur's story did make sense. *What if Keyur is telling the truth? Maybe he really paid Vinay to convince him to stay on? Maybe he's not involved in anything nefarious. Maybe we have just been chasing our tails for no reason.*

A part of Vijay was starting to believe that Keyur Shenoy was exactly what he claimed to be – a rich, power-hungry businessman with piles of money to throw around for the sake of his own ambitions.

Of the last few days that the IB was secretly listening in to the calls between Asit and Keyur, they had come across no conversations that had context or mention of the Prime Minister, but just instructions from Asit to Keyur – to play specific news and editorials on Kal Aaj Kal and Moon News, Moon's English news channel.

*What if the attack on the Prime Minister was a plan between Ranjitsinh and the producer directly, and Shenoy had no role to play?*

*But why would Shenoy suddenly be in touch with a middle-management producer in the first place, and why would he pay him a hefty 'retention bonus' when he hadn't ever worked with him, or even known him earlier?*

Vijay thought about the goings-on as he looked in the TV, his eyes, half shut. Human mind is certainly difficult to crack. It is still difficult – and in many cases impossible – to know without a doubt whether someone is lying or speaking the truth. Abuse and torture often don't have the same effect on strong-willed people. Their bodies may be battered and violated but their spirits often remain unbroken. No matter what is done to them, they are able to find a place in their mind that violence cannot touch. Such people would refuse to divulge the truth no matter what humiliations and pains are heaped upon them, and at times, even upon their families.

And then there were the people who would know and believe nothing but an 'alternate truth', even if that truth was actually an absolute lie. Islamist jihadists willingly blow-up innocents and themselves because they believe the lie fed to them by their trainers – that martyring themselves for Islam would guarantee them a place in *jannat* (heaven) with a bunch of *houris*, or heavenly virgins. No matter how much they are tortured when caught, they continue to believe the lie because that is their only truth and they know nothing else. Brainwashing is a powerful technique often employed by the perpetrators of religious hatred and violence. In the world of spies and secret services and global intelligence operations, some agents are fed only the alternate truth without them even knowing it, so when they were captured and tortured, that's what the enemies get and believe.

Vijay's thoughts scattered when he heard the sounds of a scuffle inside the prisoner's cell. Four men had Keyur pinned to the floor, hands behind his back and face kissing the dirty floor. Inside this non-descript room Keyur Shenoy was no longer the powerful billionaire who hobnobbed with other powerful billionaires. Instead, he was simply a desperate prisoner at the mercy of men who would not think twice before torturing him mercilessly to meet their own goals.

One of them turned Shenoy over and placed a hard, inclined wooden block beneath his body. He was now facing the ceiling with his head tilted back and the body inclined at about 15 degrees. A dirty rag was placed over his face and stuffed into his mouth. Another man hefted a pitcher in both hands and slowly poured water over the rag and into Keyur's mouth. Soon his windpipe and the upper respiratory system was filled with water and Keyur gasped for air, struggling to breathe through the cloth that was now saturated with water. His systems were filled with water; he couldn't breathe anymore – he was drowning! He thrashed his hands violently about for a

reprieve. And just before he would succumb to asphyxia or lack of oxygen due to drowning, the interrogators stopped pouring water over his face and took off the cloth, kicking him sideways off the block. If Keyur's head had not been tilted backwards during the entire process or if his interrogators had made the slightest delay in taking off the cloth, he would certainly have suffocated and could have even died of drowning. Vijay had already cautioned the four interrogators to be careful when waterboarding Keyur.

"Keep him alive. Is that clear?"

Vijay decided to step out for a while. He couldn't watch a man 'die' or even 'pseudo-die' right in front of his eyes. Keyur Shenoy would experience what drowning was like. He would wish for the sweet relief of death but he would be denied. *Mercy has to be earned, Mr. Shenoy.*

When Vijay returned an hour later, Keyur Shenoy was still alive – barely. He was naked and lying curled up on the floor in a pool of water that judging by its colour had quite a bit of urine mixed in. Alternately sniffing and coughing, his eyes darted around the room, on the one hand petrified that his tormentors would return and on the other hoping that they would put him out of his misery. Despite the waterboarding, the name-calling and the threats of castration, he had refused to reveal anything useful to his interrogators. As Vijay watched him, he thought, 'how the hell has he still not broken down?!'

One of the interrogators sidled up next to him. As Vijay turned to him with raised eyebrows and barely-veiled fury, the man muttered, "It will happen, Sir; it definitely will. He will give us what we need. It's just taking longer than we expected... but we are almost there."

Nodding curtly, Vijay looked at his watch. *Time is something we don't have much of. What if...*

Deliberately cutting off that line of hopeless, futile thinking, Vijay met the man's eyes with unnerving directness and barked, "Continue."

The Prime Minister was wheeled into the large meeting room of the PMO with the Defence Minister walking beside him. The other attendees were already there, reviewing the latest 3-page report prepared by the National Security Advisor. The Chief of Army Staff along with Chiefs of Navy and Air Force, along with the Directors of RAW, Defence Intelligence Agency, Military Intelligence, NTRO and IB and were among those present. The Home Minister, External Affairs Minister and Finance Minister were also in the room. As soon as the Prime Minister entered the room, each and every person stood up in surprise and as a mark of respect to his strength and resolve. He was in a wheelchair, leg in a cast, battered and bruised, but his spirits seemed higher than ever.

Once everyone was settled, Prahlad Dev walked to the front of the room to address the meeting. “Gentlemen, Prime Minister *ji* we are going ahead with Plan B. We are going ahead with Cold Start.”

He paused for a moment, looked at the Defence Minister and then at the Prime Minister, who nodded in acknowledgement. The Chief of Defence Staff rose up from his chair as Prahlad Dev took his seat. “The Chiefs of Army Staff, Air Force and Navy will take us through the joint operational plan for one final review. This will be followed by a joint intelligence summary by the Director of Defence Intelligence Agency. I’m happy to report that we are in a state of total war and nuclear readiness. Our forces and tanks are in forward positions. Our SSBNs Arihant and Arighat are in position to attack Pakistan at a moment’s notice. Our boats are keeping an eye on the one Pakistani nuclear-armed sub that has been deployed and detected off the coast of Karachi. Ballistic Missile Shields are confirmed operational both in the exo and endo-atmospheric spaces over India to ensure that the enemy missiles are intercepted and destroyed way before they can cause any real impact on the our territory.

So, gentlemen, here is the summary.

“The operation will take place in three stages.

During Stage 1, we will initiate the Cold Start. Seven strike teams of forty commandos each will enter Pakistan from seven different locations along the Line of Control near Poonch and Nowshera sector. The objective will be to demolish five terrorist launch pads that have been identified as operating near



the border. We will also attack and destroy two large terrorist training centres and four Pakistani army posts protecting them.

“In stage 2, we will strike. I hope we are all clear that once we initiate Stage 1, there’s no turning back?”

Nods all around.

“OK, good. Stage 2 will start after Stage 1. The Indian navy will track and ensure destruction of the Pakistani nuclear sub. The Indian Air Force would execute its massive plan to cripple and destroy Pakistan’s air force, army and navy bases, and especially the missile and nuclear delivery systems on ground and sea. We have received additional co-ordinates of Pakistan’s ground-based missile systems from our allies which we have incorporated into the plan. It’s a highly ambitious plan, one that has never been tried anywhere in the world before.

In this stage, the objective is to critically cripple Pakistan’s defence forces, and nuclear launch and retaliation capability – both surface and second strike. Clear so far?”

Murmurs of assent and nods from everyone had him continuing his monologue.

“Stage 3 is the critical ground movement. Stage 1 and 2 are expected to last for three days. On day 4 and 5 of the attack, upon achieving a pre-defined level of ‘confidence’, infantry and armoured brigades will cross over into Pakistan from 17 different locations along the International Border and Line of Control. As I’ve already mentioned, this will be a full-scale offensive, so in addition to our troops moving into Pakistan, special commandos will be airdropped at seven identified locations to seize control of Pakistan’s nuclear stockpiles. If you remember, in stage 2, we will have already destroyed their air bases and missile delivery systems so by this point, Pakistan’s nuclear capability will have been completely neutralised, at least theoretically, based upon the ground intelligence we possess so far...” he let out a sigh.

“OK, so that’s all for the summary. Stage 1 and Cold Start will commence at exactly Oh One Thirty AM.”

Dev turned to the Prime Minister who nodded in acknowledgement and finally spoke, “Thank you very much. For everyone’s benefit I must also...”

He was interrupted by a soft knock on the closed door. His secretary stepped in with an apologetic grimace. Bending to the PM’s level, he murmured, “Sir, I have the Prime Minister of Iran on hold.”

“On my mobile?”

“Yes Sir. Here you go.”

Taking the old-fashioned clunky mobile phone from his secretary with a murmured thank you, the PM wheeled himself to one corner of the room for a little privacy. He spoke for a full two minutes in hushed tones before disconnecting the call and once again facing the roomful of attendees.

“Gentlemen, good news! Iran has finally permitted us use of its air space and the air base to mount the attack. Of course, we’ll have to make further concessions to Iran under the US’ nose for their cooperation but nothing that can’t be met”.

He looked at the NSA and the Minister of Defence. “Gentlemen, I trust you know what to do next? Pakistan may be smaller and weaker than us, but it has never lacked for nerve. It is important to ensure that we wage our war on multiple fronts. Please get in touch with the Iranians right after this meeting.”

Listening to the Prime Minister outlining his plan in the crisp oratory tones he was so well-known for, the NSA was in awe. While he and the Defence Chiefs were busy planning for an out-and-out frontal attack, the PM did some diplomatic ‘behind-the-scenes’ manoeuvring with India’s allies. His cleverness and deep understanding of international relations took Prahlad Dev by surprise, although he realised that it probably shouldn’t. *This is a masterstroke. Exceedingly clever man, our supposedly-uneducated PM!* The Prime Minister had exploited the fact that India had been a long-time friend of Iran, and had been helping the country which was reeling under US sanctions. He had also exploited the weakness in the Iran-Pakistan relationship which had been tense for many years now. Iran was grappling with frequent attacks from terrorist organisations based in Pakistan’s Balochistan province and allegedly funded by UAE and Saudi Arabia. Around the same time as the Pulwama attack in India, a terrorist attack by a Pakistani terrorist group, *Jaish Al Adr*, in Iran’s Sistan-Baluchestan province had killed 27 members of the Iranian Government’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

However, Prahlad Dev was not sure how the geopolitics would payout if Iran played a role in an attack on Pakistan. Pakistan was a close ally of both Saudi Arabia and UAE, both of which pumped billions of dollars into the Pakistani economy keeping it afloat. On the other hand, Iran, with its majority Shia population was not on friendly terms with Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. Then he had received intelligence

that even Pakistan's relationships with both Saudi Arabia and UAE were strained of late. *Hmm, that should help...*

"Sir, what about Saudi Arabia? The Kingdom of Saudi would open another front with Iran in case Iran is involved," the Home Minister asked.

"Yes. I will speak to the Saudi King first thing as we begin operations, and only once after we begin. Iran's role is limited in that it's just providing an air base. So I hope Saudis shouldn't really have a problem."

"The US won't like it either," Rajendra Singh observed.

"We have also been in touch with the White House. They will be okay with a limited Iranian role. And they should help keeping Saudi and UAE in check too. Of course, they will need a promise that we stop aiding Iran and come up with a phased approach to withdrawing all trade with the country. We'll have to execute a delicate ongoing balance, nothing that we haven't been doing already. Once the war is over, we will probably barter the US demand on Iran with our next weapon order to the US – and that should settle it," the Prime Minister chuckled.

The Prime Minister's secretary stepped into the room once again. "Sir, you have a call scheduled with the Prime Minister of Israel. Should I put you through, Sir?"

At these words, the NSA felt a frisson of excitement tempered by anxiety running down his spine. He looked at the Military Chiefs sitting together near the head of the conference room table, all of them with identical expressions that probably mirrored his own. With a slight nod, he acknowledged the unsaid words writ large on their faces – there would probably be a last-minute change in the strike plans, but nothing that wasn't welcome and nothing that couldn't be accommodated.

Since the Pulwama incident, India had clandestinely transported two squadrons of fighter jets – 40 planes – via the Persian Gulf to a leased air base in Iran, and further moved one squadron from Iran to the Indian-controlled Farkhor air base in Tajikistan. *A massive stealth operation, right under the Pakistani nose. Just in case.*

The defence strategists had worked out numerous war scenarios based on how the geo-politics and alliances shaped up. They were in good stead now, the NSA thought, the result of painstaking intelligence gathering, analysis and numerous brainstorming sessions over the last few days.



Keyur Shenoy lay naked on the floor of his small cell. He was teetering at the edge of unconsciousness, curled-up piteously in a growing pool of foetid water and mewling in agony like a beaten dog.

Waterboarding, Vijay knew, was a powerful torture method made infamous by the controversy surrounding American intelligence agents' usage of the technique to elicit information from the men imprisoned at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp during the 'war on terror'. Although seemingly an American import, waterboarding – in its many variations – had been in use in many countries for over centuries now, its earliest usage documented in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. As far as Vijay was aware, Indian intelligence agents seldom used it on prisoners and even if they did, it required the approval of authorities at the highest levels. This was the first time he was seeing it done with his own eyes.

As Vijay watched from the doorway, two of the four heavies clasped Keyur under his arms and dragged him back for yet another round of waterboarding. Listless, pain-wracked and exhausted, Keyur could not even muster enough energy to mewl a protest. His body was barely clinging to consciousness – and life – but the interrogators were in no mood to show even the slightest smidgen of mercy. Once again they pushed the wooden block under him and prepared for another round.

*Multiple times they've 'drowned him' and he's still alive! How many lives does this useless piece of shit have?!*

Even though weak and emaciated, Vijay noticed that Keyur's eyes were still very much alive, darting about like a frightened rabbit. As their eyes met, Vijay had no trouble interpreting Keyur's mute appeal for mercy. He walked into the room and signalled to the four men to stop whatever they were doing.

Vijay squatted beside Keyur and looked him straight in the face.

"Mr. Shenoy. All you need to do is tell us why you paid the producer. You said the money you gave him was a retention bonus – a way to convince him to recant his resignation. But we know you're lying, Mr. Shenoy. We know for a fact that he had not resigned. Now the question is what are you lying about? Just tell me this and we'll let you go." Vijay held his breath, hoping that Shenoy would not recognise his last few words for the lies they were. *Everything is fair in love and war. This is war!*

Shenoy watched Vijay with bleary eyes, breathing through his mouth and struggling to make sense of what Vijay had just said. Hot tears were running down his face but he was way past embarrassment and pain.

“Maybe we’ve not said this before,” Vijay continued, “but the fact is we all admire you. You are the very definition of a ‘self-made man’. I’m sure you know that many young children in India look up to you and hope to emulate your success.

Mr. Shenoy, are you still with us?”

Shenoy nodded, a small sign of life entering his eyes at these words of praise.

“We are talking of a nuclear war here, Mr. Shenoy. Do you understand what that means? Millions of lives are at stake here because of what you did. Or maybe someone else did something and you just condoned it. Either way, trouble is brewing but you can prevent it. In fact, you may be the only person who can prevent a nuclear war between two countries!”

Keyur still didn’t speak a word although he also didn’t break eye contact with Vijay.

Vijay rose, turned to the four men still standing quietly in the corner and muttered two words, “Kill him.”

They nodded as one and Vijay walked out of the room, unwilling to breathe the same air as the despicable Keyur Shenoy for even another second.

Once again the interrogators placed the rag over Keyur’s mouth and nostrils, ignoring his muffled moans of pain and ineffective struggles to get away. As water started pouring into his mouth, Keyur thrashed around on the floor more tears leaking out of his swollen eyes. Suddenly, the interrogators removed the cloth off his face and pushed him off the block with a violent shove. He fell to the floor and a pungent stench filled the small room, leaving the four men gagging and rushing to the small window. The once-powerful Keyur Shenoy – media hotshot, business celebrity and self-professed superstar – had defecated in his pants. He couldn’t even muster a sense of humiliation. *Kill me, kill me now, please!*

Vijay entered the room once again. Ignoring the stench, he motioned to the interrogators to step outside. They were only too happy to comply. *He has to talk now.*

Vijay leaned close to Shenoy as the prisoner started speaking in a halting, tear-choked voice, “Asit...”

“Yes, Asit... Asit what? Speak up Mr. Shenoy! My men will be happy to

try ‘convincing’ you once again. Is that what you want?”

“No! No...

“I only did what Asit Patel wanted me to do...

Work with the NGO on its fake drama... cover it on TV...

I paid the producer for the drama...

I only did... I swear...”

Vijay continued to watch Shenoy as he broke down, sobbing in pain but also relief at having survived a horrifying, near-death experience.

“I swear I didn’t know what he was planning... the attack... the attack had nothing to do with me. You must believe me... *please!*”

Without another word, Vijay stood and left Shenoy’s piteous sobs behind. As soon as he stepped out of the room, he called Prahlad Dev. After a brief discussion, he gathered his overnight bag and went straight to the airport where he boarded the waiting charter plane.

As the plane left Mumbai behind, his thoughts were focused on what he needed to do next.

It never occurred to him that he had not left any further instructions for the four interrogators with respect to Keyur Shenoy.

Keyur Shenoy was no longer his problem.

The Prime Minister had just finished a quick dinner at his office desk and was reviewing some last-minute summary reports when a peremptory knock on his door had him looking up in surprise. Bidding his secretary to enter, he was taken aback when the NSA and the Director of IB stepped in, followed by his harried, sputtering secretary. While the men seated themselves on the sofa, the secretary helped the PM wheel himself closer to them. At a nod from his boss, the secretary murmured a quiet “Excuse me” and left. The PM suddenly noticed Vijay, the man he knew as the leader of the Change India Department, sitting quietly next to Prahlad Dev. As their eyes met, they exchanged smiles of genuine pleasure

“How are things Vijay? So, you’re assisting Prahlad now?”

“Yes Sir. I’m good Sir, thank you for asking.” Vijay was glad to see that the Prime Minister looked a lot better than last night’s TV appearance. His face was drawn, his body was more plaster than skin-and-bone and he was obviously still weak from his traumatic experience; but apart from that, he looked very much like the PM of old.

The Prime Minister now turned to the IB Chief. “So, Keyur Shenoy has disappeared? Kidnapped? Have you been able to track...”

“That’s what we’re here to talk to you about, Sir” Prahlad Dev interrupted.

“Sir, I’m afraid we have some disturbing news.”

Nonplussed, the Prime Minister stared at the NSA. “... and that is?”

“Sir, you were right. Keyur Shenoy was kidnapped. We kidnapped him.”

“What?! *You* kidnapped him?! Why?”

Prahlad, Shenoy is a powerful man. We cannot afford to make an enemy out of him. Besides, he is one of the top contributors to my election funds!”

“Yes Sir, I know that. But Sir, we had no choice. We had to interrogate him but we couldn’t do it officially without raising red flags everywhere. This was the only option we had available and we chose to grab it with both hands. Anyway, we will be releasing him shortly so you can stop worrying about him.”

The Prime Minister was shaking his head in disbelief as the Prahlad Dev continued his briefing.

“Sir, about the attack on you – it was a well-planned and very complex operation. I’m sorry to say Sir that the mastermind of the attack is not



Pakistan but your old friend Asit Patel. We have learned that the man who attacked you, Ahmed Salaam, was hand-picked by Asit specifically because of his links to the ISI. So logically this means that Asit planned the whole thing in such a way that the needle of suspicion would automatically point towards Pakistan.”

The Prime Minister’s face leached of all colour and his eyes lowered unseeingly to the floor. His shock was a pulsing, palpable presence in the otherwise quiet room. As Vijay watched him, he worried that the poor man would collapse in a heap right there on the floor.

After a few minutes of fraught silence, the PM visibly gathered the tattered shreds of his composure and wrapped it around himself like a cloak.

*And he’s back in business.*

“Do we have any proof? Of Asit’s involvement?”

“No Sir, we don’t, unfortunately,” Vijay said.

“What about motive? Do we know why he would do something like this?” he asked, unable to keep his voice from trembling.

Vijay looked at the NSA, silently urging him to answer the PM’s question. The IB Director spoke up.

“Sir, our conjecture is that Asit could have planned this campaign for all of these three reasons. Number 1 – an attack on you would generate sympathy for the BNP, as it did, and thus increase its chances of winning the upcoming elections by a huge margin.”

“I see. And what about reasons 2 and 3?”

“Reason number 2 could be that he thought to pin the attack on Pakistan and thus create justification for war. And if the BNP Government declares war, it will convince the people of India again that it is a no-nonsense party that is willing to take on Pakistan by the throat and hit it where it really hurts. This would help BNP gain additional advantage in the general elections.

The third reason is the most mercenary – and personal – of all. If you were to die in the attack, Asit would be considered your natural successor for becoming the country’s next Prime Minister. This is also the most dangerous and probable reason in my mind.

Fortunately, the additional chassis-floor reinforcement in your armoured car saved you. Without it, the attack would certainly have been fatal.” The Director of IB tried to inject a note of positivity into this grim meeting, but the PM was having none of it.

Waving away the IB’s words about his ‘good fortune’, the PM observed,

“I’m still not convinced. Asit would never do a thing like that. And you are basing your conclusion just on Keyur Shenoy’s words, yes?”

“Yes Sir.”

“How many people know what you’ve just told me?”

“Just us, Sir.”

“Are you sure? Absolutely sure?”

“Yes Sir, positive.”

“And can you guarantee that this information will not leave this room?”

“Yes Sir. We will ensure that there are no leaks,” the IB Director spoke again.

“Not to the media or anyone else?” the Prime Minister wanted to be sure.

“Yes, Sir, absolutely no one,” the Director responded.

“Okay fine. So what’s next?” he asked, with a visible effort at pragmatism.

“Sir, with your permission, we would like to bring him in for questioning. We will absolutely keep this under wraps. We need to know why he wanted to kill you.”

The Prime Minister took a few moments to consider his response. “Let me be very clear here. I have known Asit for decades now and I still don’t believe that Asit wants me dead. There could be an alternative explanation to everything and we just can’t go on the basis of one Keyur Shenoy’s statement. For all we know, he must have said something under duress. At the same time, I do not want to stop this enquiry and it is essential that we find out the truth, and soon. Of course, I do want to know who planned this attack, and how. But I want you to hold off on his questioning, at least until the current situation with Pakistan is defused and the elections are over and done with. Then and only then may you call him in.”

“Yes, Sir. Of course Sir.”

“Today’s a big day. and the world knows that Pakistan is responsible for the attack on me. No one has even remotely considered any other possibility, and I’m sure there is none other. We cannot afford to lose this golden opportunity to deal with Pakistan’s menace once and for all.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Let’s focus our energies on the Cold Start. This is an opportunity we will never get again. Prahlad, I will see you at 11:30 PM for the CCS meeting.

Thank you, gentlemen.”

The men all rose and left.

The Prime Minister wheeled himself back to his desk. Once again he picked up the intelligence summary he had been reading before he was interrupted, but this time he found it very difficult to concentrate. His mind was distracted, flitting about from one thought to another like a bee in search of nectar.

Giving up, he threw the papers down on his desk and picked up his mobile phone.

## DAY 8

55

*01:00 – 01:10 AM*

14 MI-17 helicopters took off for seven different locations along the Indian side of the Line of Control. The helicopters flew low to evade detection by Pakistani radar systems. Like clockwork, the choppers all landed at their destinations at exactly 01:25 AM. Commandos quickly deplaned from each bird, and within seconds seven strike teams of forty commandos each disappeared into the dark forests and mountains as the choppers took off back to their bases.

A few hours ago, the Pakistani Coast Guard had been alerted to the presence of an unauthorised fishing vessel cruising in the Pakistani waters of the Arabian Sea off the coast of Karachi. Before the Coast Guard or Pakistani Navy boats or planes could reach the trawler, it had changed its course and crossed into international waters. Chasing the unidentified vessel in that direction would have meant a direct confrontation with the Indian Navy. At the time of detection, the fishing vessel had been deploying *sonobuoys*, small sonar-equipped buoys that could detect under-water sounds – such as those caused by submarines – and transmit them via radio signals to the surface boats. For the past three days, at different coasts including that of Karachi and other coastal towns, multiple Indian boats (disguised as fishing vessels) had been working in tandem to detect the locations of Pakistani submarines and communicate them to the Indian warships cruising in the international waters.

*01:30 AM*

Operation *Buland* began.

Two MH-60 Romeo anti-submarine helicopters took off from INS Jalashwa, Indian Navy's Austin Class ship cruising in the international waters, fifty nautical miles off the coast of Karachi. The helicopters flew low, almost touching the inky, choppy surface of the sea. Once they reached the last known coordinate of the Pakistani nuclear submarine as indicated by the sonobuoys, one helicopter continued hovering over the location while the

other veered off in the anticipated direction of the submarine's movement since the last gathered coordinate. Both choppers simultaneously dropped their torpedoes into the churning water while continuing to hover low, guiding the torpedoes and listening in for a hit.

The presence of the Indian choppers had not gone unnoticed and three Pakistani jets were immediately scrambled off Karachi Naval Base to launch an attack. But as soon as they were airborne, the Pakistani war planes were met and engaged in fierce combat by four Indian MIG-29 planes.

About 250 metres below the surface of the Arabian Sea, at different locations not too far from where the MH-60 choppers were dropping their torpedoes, two Indian Akula Class attack submarines were cruising along silently, the personnel alertly waiting for their sub's sonars to detect the underwater echo of Pakistan's French Agosta Class submarine. The torpedoes that had been dropped from the helicopters would not destroy the submarine, but they would certainly force the sub to move and reveal its current position.

In quick succession, two torpedoes were released from one of the Indian Akula Class submarines. A Pakistani submarine, escorting the nuclear sub, had been detected and targeted.

A distance away, three more torpedoes were released from another Akula Class. Except for some additional agitation on the surface of the dark water, there was nothing else to indicate the destruction and sinking of the Pakistani nuclear submarine.

*02:10 AM*

Sirens were heard all over the Western Pakistan province of Balochistan. A squadron of 20 fighter jets had broken into the Pakistani air space from Iran, bombing specific targets. The sudden attack from Iran took the Pakistani defence establishment by surprise, leaving them scrambling for a response. *No one expected Iran to attack!* It was too early for them to realize that the jets belonged to the Indian Air Force.

In 7 minutes, a squadron of fighter aircrafts broke into the Pakistani air space from its northern border with Tajikistan.

*02:25 AM*

While Pakistan's defence forces were engaged in responding to a sudden, unanticipated aggression on its Northern and Western skies, six squadrons of

the Indian Air Force, each consisting of 24 planes took off from different air bases in Western and Central India and broke into the eastern skies of Pakistan.

A few minutes later, two additional Indian Air Force squadrons flew into Pakistan from its South, over the Arabian sea.

By 2:35AM, all 10 squadrons of around 280 planes were inside the Pakistani airspace, their complex routes and altitudes chalked out, and their targets clearly mapped and coordinated.

*02:50 AM*

The Government of India called a last-minute press conference. India declared war on Pakistan in retaliation to its attack on its Prime Minister.

*02:55 AM*

In Washington, the US spokesperson confirmed an escalation between India and Pakistan. The US was also moving its aircraft carrier and bombers towards Pakistan from the Mediterranean. The warning to Pakistan was unambiguous: Do not dare use nuclear weapons.

Asit Patel switched off the television and walked to the kitchen.

With steady hands, he lit the LPG gas stove and consigned his private phone to its blue flame. Very few people knew about this second phone. Before Asit threw this phone on the burner, he had already reset it to its factory settings, permanently erasing all apps and data. *Just in case!*

He was ecstatic. India had declared war on Pakistan. At this very moment, both armies were locked in combat and fighting for supremacy.

The BNP would surely sweep the coming elections. And going by the word on the street, the win would be by a huge – even historic – margin. It had taken just one week, a measly seven days to change the perceptions of a billion plus people and pull the odds back in BNP's favour. But only Asit knew that staging this one week of sensational melodrama had required over two months of careful planning and preparation. *I have given this my blood, sweat and tears. I have nothing else left to give.*

He wondered if Bhartiya National Party would bag at least 400 of the 545 seats in Parliament. *Hell, let's aim for the stars! Why not 450?!* The thought made him smile. Precedent being what it was, he didn't think the BNP would do particularly well in the four Southern states and the eastern state of West Bengal. *Then again, he thought, you never know.*

He left the kitchen and walked straight to the antique *almirah* in his bedroom. He opened the safe and removed the single item hidden in its depths.

He thought about the Prime Minister, the dynamic, decisive and assertive leader of the world's biggest democracy, and Asit's best friend.

If only the party had come into power decades ago, India would surely have been a completely different country by now – progressive, clean (in more ways than one!) and advanced. *But at least we're on track now. That must count for something, right?!*

The older, outdated, immoral thinking of the past had to be destroyed, and newer, more principled thought patterns had to be introduced and promoted. *Nayi disha, nayi umang, naya Bharat!* (a new direction, a new hope, a new India!) To do this, it was imperative that the BNP remain in the driver's seat for the next couple of decades at least. *It's my duty to ensure that we win the upcoming elections by hook or by crook. The end will justify the means!*

Pakistan had been another factor that had forced Asit to push the

envelope in such a drastic manner. *We've sat on our arses long enough. No more!* Despite the war declaration, Asit still believed that India would progress more if the neighbours followed the path of peace. But the decades-long struggle to contain the menace that was Pakistan was draining India's exchequer and sapping her energies. Still, Pakistan's cowardly attack on Indian soldiers at Pulwama woke up the sleeping tigress and how! India had had enough. The chapter and the menace of Pakistan had to be erased from India's story, once and for all, so they can focus on India.

For the nation was their *raison d'être*, the only reason they even existed. To the BNP and its leaders there was no other higher purpose than the motherland.

*Saam, Daam, Dand, Bhed*; every approach would be considered, every method would be tried and every opportunity would be snapped up. No stone would be left unturned. And if all this required a massive sacrifice, so be it.

No one was above the nation's interests.

Not the Prime Minister.

*Not even me.*

*JAI HIND!*

Asit sat on his bed, closed his eyes and took a series of deep breaths as he considered his next step. *His last.* Keeping his eyes closed, he felt the two small white tablets that he held in his hand.

Within moments, he raised the tablets to his mouth and swallowed them.



## ONE MONTH LATER

Vijay held his new-born daughter in his arms, cradling the sleeping infant like the precious jewel she was. He looked back at his wife, sleeping the exhausted sleep of the dead in her private hospital room. Geetika had been awake all night, bravely bearing up under the pain and trauma of an emergency C-section surgery. He hoped she would stay asleep for another few hours before the little one woke up again, demanding her mom's full attention with all the power in her little lungs.

For such a tiny package, his baby was quite heavy, much heavier than he remembered his two children being at the same age. She had her mother's large, expressive eyes and his thick, dark hair. *She looks as if she could really use a comb or brush to tame her wild mop*, he thought with a fond smile.

Vijay's mother and older children stepped into the room after a quick breakfast at the hospital's cafeteria. The quiet room suddenly transformed into a lively, sparkling space full of light, chatter and life. The noise woke Geetika as well as the baby, who promptly let out a wail at this disturbance of her beauty sleep. As expected, the children started quarrelling – loudly – over who got to hold the baby.

Leaving his family to their devices, he strolled out of the hospital room and went to the cafeteria, one floor below. As he placed a breakfast order for *idli sambar* and filter *kaapi*, his mind turned to the events of the past month.

The war had ended in only two weeks. By the second night of the war, grapevine had that air planes from the US, France and Israel too had quietly joined the strike under the guise of Indian Air Force, lest it seem as a multi-country attack that could potentially spiral into a World War. There were thousands of coordinated air-strikes over Pakistan, and the massively unprecedented scale of the strikes completely overwhelmed and destroyed the country's air force, army and naval facilities and bases, and missile delivery capabilities within the first three days of war.

On the fourth day of the attack, multiple swarms of Indian attack drones flooded the Pakistan border skies with India at numerous points attacking army forces and equipment, and the storage and supply-chain facilities, besides known terrorist compounds,

Shortly thereafter, Indian troops and tanks crossed the International Border and the Line of Control and moved into Pakistan. Transport planes

airlifted and dropped thousands of specially-trained Indian commandos into Pakistan's myriad nuclear weapons' storage facilities. Indian troops were also airlifted and dropped in large numbers into the hundreds of *jihadi* compounds that dotted the country. Thousands of terrorists were killed and dozens of their leaders – many on India's (and international) *Most Wanted* lists – were either captured or killed.

Hundreds of Indian troops and citizens were also martyred in the war. Pakistan had fired numerous missiles at India – some, over Mumbai and Delhi specifically, were reasonably destroyed in the skies by the Ballistic Missile Defence shield, but not all cities had the shield, and some had to bear the brunt. Missiles were also fired at Iran.

Fortunately, none of the missiles had carried nuclear warheads. Pakistan had been categorically communicated on the repercussions of making a nuclear choice – it would be obliterated. The Pakistani establishment had been given dire warnings in its several secret meetings with Indian and US counterparts.

There was no turning back for India or her allies because they knew that this was probably the only opportunity they would ever get to neutralise the threat of a nuclear-armed Pakistan. Apart from the US and France, Israel was also a staunch supporter of India, given that the 'Islamic Bomb' was being destroyed, hopefully forever. To no one's surprise, China continued to remain a silent spectator, still playing its self-appointed role of a 'friend to Pakistan' by complaining about the war in the UN and other international forums. But China's tactics fooled no one. After all, the extremist activity flourishing in Pakistan had been affecting China as well and increasingly so over the past decade.

By the ninth morning of the air strike, the United Nations stepped in, and while stopping short of admonishing the Indian action, called upon India to end its attack on Pakistan. Soon UN troops were transported into Pakistan, and the country's nuclear stockpile placed under UN control.

The Pakistani army was severely hobbled by the destruction of its bases, outposts, arms storage depots, fuel storage facilities, roadways and railways. Indian troops had entered deep inside Pakistan and it didn't take long for Pakistan's armed forces to admit defeat.

The Pulwama Accord was signed between India and Pakistan after three weeks of the day India began its attack on Pakistan. Pakistan Occupied Kashmir was now officially an integral part of Kashmir, India.

Even while the war was underway, India's general elections went ahead as planned. In some places, the voter turnout was as high as 95%, an unprecedented figure in the history of independent India. The results were overwhelmingly in favour of the ruling BNP.

As he waited in the cafeteria for his plate of *idli sambhar* to arrive, Vijay watched TV and sipped on his tumbler of piping hot filter coffee. The Prime Minister was on a wheelchair giving his victory speech from the *Ramlila Maidan* in Delhi. As the camera panned out to show the huge audience, Vijay noticed that there was an empty seat in the first VVIP row. *Probably Asit Patel's.*

Vijay thought it likely that the Prime Minister had revealed what he had learned to Asit Patel. After all, the PM probably held Asit in high esteem. *Strong bonds are not easily broken, after all.*

On the very day that India declared war against Pakistan, Asit Patel was found dead in his home. The post mortem concluded stroke as the cause of death. There was a high probability in his mind that Asit Patel was the mastermind behind the attack on the PM. But now the only line of investigation available was over, and the matter closed. The news of his sudden demise played along but was dominated by the bigger news – that of the war. Two days after he died, Asit was quietly cremated. His funeral pyre was lit by none other than the person he always called his brother – the Prime Minister of India. Asit Patel's dream of seeing his party coming into power with a grand majority had been fulfilled. *But he couldn't achieve his dream of becoming the Prime Minister himself, if that indeed was his dream.*

About a week after he was kidnapped and released, Keyur Shenoy was found dead in his home. Ironically, his death was caused by accidental drowning in his swimming pool – or so the official investigator's report said.

Deepti, the reporter who had a front-row seat to the attack on the PM quit her job at Moon Media. Last he knew, she was in the process of establishing a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to fostering free, fair and unbiased journalism in India.

The Muslim politician whose Endeavour was stolen had gone back to his business activities and political game-playing. It was said that he would never get a nomination from his party ever again, given his purported role in the attack on the Prime Minister.

Ranjitsinh's family was notified of his death but neither his wife nor his

children came to claim his body. The Government of India paid for his funeral.

Razzak alias Ahmed Salaam was given a proper Muslim funeral and laid to rest in his village of Bhirandiyara. News of Razzak's death reached his mama and mami who, shattered at the loss of their beloved nephew, left Surat and rushed to Bhirandiyara – right in time for his funeral. His death had been attributed to the gunshot wounds he received from terrorists who were found holed up inside his home and later killed.

A photo of his wife and little girl had been discovered from Razzak's wallet. His family was traced to the Sistan province of Iran by RAW agents operating in the Chabahar region of the province. They were living in comfort, and a deft enquiry by the agent revealed that while Saida had expected Salaam to join her in Tooh, she also knew that he might never be able to. She mourned Salaam's loss and promised herself that she would do her best to ensure that her daughter never lacked for love.

A.P. Durga, the Deputy Commissioner of Mumbai Police who had been suspended after the attack, had been reinstated in the Mumbai Police and transferred to some godforsaken department.

“*Saam, Daam, Dand, Bhed,*” the Prime Minister was saying.  
“My dear brothers and sisters of India, in the recent past, we have gone to extreme lengths to ensure that the enemy is vanquished. And I promise you here and now that we will continue to go to extreme lengths to ensure that the enemy does not rise again, ever! There will be no Uri ever. There will be no Pulwama ever! Our *Bharatmata* is counting on us to be brave, to be fearless and to take the fight to the enemy. If we take care of her and if we take care of each other, then she will take care of us. I know and you know that we have a difficult road ahead of us. Unity is the key. We have to stay united and we have to treat our fellow country-men with respect and dignity.

We cannot take shortcuts because there are no shortcuts to success! The *Sab Chalta Hai* attitude that has poisoned our country for so long needs to be destroyed once and for all, otherwise the new, progressive India we all dream of will remain just that – a dream.

I urge you all to ask questions of your leaders.

Be brave.

Take risks!

And most important, be ready to make sacrifices. After all, if we don't

sacrifice for our motherland, WHO WILL?!” He paused and gracefully acknowledged the thunderous applause that greeted these words.

“My friend and brother Asit Patel is no longer with us. But I know that even if he’s not here in body, he is here in spirit.”

Looking up at the sky, the PM murmured in a voice still choked by grief and pain, “I miss you, my dear friend. I wish you were still here to see the dawn of this wonderful time in India’s history.”

Facing the crowd of his admirers once again, he continued, “Let us not forget that Asit Patel gave his life’s blood, sweat and tears to bring us here today, celebrating our victory over the cowardly enemy. We need more leaders like him. I request you all – and those watching on TV – to stand up and close your eyes for a minute of silence.”

Vijay watched as the people in the cafeteria rose as one and dutifully bowed their heads in respect. He stood up as well.

After a minute, he went to the counter to collect his plate of *idli sambar*.

When he returned, the Prime Minister’s speech was winding down. The channel was playing a picture-in-picture recording of the Prime Minister arriving at the *Ramlila Maidan* about an hour ago. He was helped out of his BMW 7-Series car - the sister of which had been blown up by Razzak – onto a wheelchair.

*The Prime Minister had 2 BMW 7-Series cars.*

Suddenly Vijay recalled the IB Director’s words when they had met with the Prime Minister to report upon Keyur Shenoy’s kidnapping “... *the additional chassis-floor reinforcement in your armoured car saved you.*”

Vijay dashed from the hospital cafeteria and sprinted to the parking area. He quickly got into his car and sent a brief text to his mother informing her that he would be back soon. That done, he then drove to the PMO like a bat straight out of hell. On his way, he called up the ex-Director General of Special Protection Group who had resigned almost immediately after the attack on the Prime Minister’s motorcade in Mumbai. He also spoke to the IB team that reported to him in the Joint Task Force.

Arriving in less than 20 minutes, he took the stairs to the second floor and his desk. As he waited for the computer to boot up, thoughts were violently jangling around in his brain, almost – but not quite – giving him a headache. Once the machine was on, he queried the database, and in less than five minutes, got the information he needed.

Prahlad Dev was in his office as Vijay stepped in without knocking or

asking for permission.

“Vijay?! What the hell! Why are you here? Your wife just had a baby, didn’t she? Why aren’t you with her and with your little one? Boy or girl?”

“It’s a girl, Sir. Sir...?”

“That’s great! And is she...” For once, the NSA was blind to Vijay’s frantic body language.

“Sir! Later! I’ll tell you about her later!”

“But...?”

“Sir, please listen! I think I’ve found something that you need to see!” Vijay was almost incoherent in his excitement, unmindful of rudely interrupting his superior.

Prahlad Dev raised his eyebrows and motioned him to sit.

“Sir, the Prime Minister had two BMW 7-Series cars, both with a similar security setup. In February, just a week after the Pulwama attack, the Special Protections Group was instructed to enhance the chassis and reinforce the passenger cabins of both sedans.”

“So what?”

“Sir, why was this enhancement needed? Both cars had already been customised to meet the extremely stringent security criteria of the SPG. In fact, the SPG even argued against this particular special requirement, saying that the current configuration was already quite rigorous. However, the objection was overruled by the Prime Minister himself. Finally, one BMW 7-Series car was modified as per these new specifications.”

“Again, so what? This is quite a regular occurrence, Vijay, nothing strange or unusual about it. The Intelligence Bureau or other intelligence agencies would have predicted a specific threat to the PM’s life and accordingly advised SPG to enhance his cover security. Then we just had Pulwama...”

“Agreed Sir, but there is something strange here. The instruction for this particular upgrade wasn’t based on specific intelligence input from the agencies. This went directly from the Prime Minister’s Office to the SPG. The Intelligence Bureau was only advised later of this requirement for modification. The PMO was directly involved in following up with the SPG for status updates and the like. From what I’ve been able to find, this seemed to be a rather urgent request made by the Prime Minister himself. Believe it or not, the entire upgrade was finished in one and a half months!”

The NSA shifted his position on his seat. “OK... well this doesn’t really

prove anything... the IB, PMO, SPG are all in the loop, right? And this was right after Pulwama, I believe.”

“Hear me out Sir. There’s another thing. This particular BMW 7-Series was scheduled to be in maintenance at the same time as the PM’s Mumbai trip. The other car was still available but the PMO insisted that the PM needed the car with enhanced security. Eventually the SPG had both cars ready for the Mumbai rally. Just a week before Mumbai, the PM held rallies in Lucknow and Bhopal but there the PM’s motorcade had only one BMW 7-Series – the non-modified one. That was the car he sat in and travelled by in both places. At rallies in many other cities, the PM didn’t even take along his BMWs – he made do with the local Mahindra Scorpios and Toyota Fortuners. There was no insistence for the modified car. But by the time Mumbai rally rolled around, the other car *had to be available* for the trip to even take place.”

The NSA stood up from his chair, his voice sounding agitated “Vijay, the threat perception at Mumbai could have been much higher than at Lucknow and Bhopal! This is nothing out of the ordinary!”

Vijay stared at the NSA.

“Did you know about this already?” Vijay asked bluntly, all pretence at good manners and subordination to a superior completely forgotten. “We had two sources of truth – Keyur Shenoy and Asit Patel, both no longer alive...”

Prahlad Dev’s eyes met Vijay’s. “Vijay, I need you to think about what you’re saying. Maybe you should...”

“Yes, Sir. I understand. But may I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Was *he* the mastermind?”

Prahlad Dev’s eyes conveyed nothing. He simply blew a ring of smoke up his face, his lit cigarette burning brighter than ever.

Vijay left the PMO – slowly this time – for the hospital. He wanted to be with his family, work be damned. He would rather witness Geetika’s smile and his children’s innocent playfulness.

He switched on the car radio and smiled grimly as he once again heard the familiar baritone voice. It took him back to a day almost 5 years back, when he had heard it for the first-time during Operation Jai Mata Di. The passion in the voice had not changed and neither had the words it spoke.

The voice continued to play over and over again in his tired brain as he

drove all the way to the hospital.

*“Saam, Daam, Dand, Bhed,  
Saam, Daam, Dand, Bhed,*

*Fuckin’ SAAM, DAAM, DAND, BHED!”*



## **Your Review is Super Important**

Dear Reader

I hope you enjoyed reading the book.

For an independent author-publisher like me, every little word of encouragement matter, and each book review goes a long way

May I request you to take a few minutes off and review 'The Pulwama Aftermath' on Amazon, Goodreads or any of your favourite site.?

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Look forward.

Thank you!

Pratik Shah

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## **Index**

AASMA - Advanced Application for Social Media Analytics

(An advanced tool used by agencies in the country to track and monitor social media accounts of individuals using facial recognition technology)

BSF - Border Security Force

CAG - Comptroller and Auditor General of India

(Authority responsible for auditing all government receipts and expenses)

CBI - Central Bureau of Investigation

(Domestic investigating agency of India)

CMS - Central Monitoring System

(A platform that links all telecommunication infrastructure set up by the different private and public providers in the country.)

DIA - Defence Intelligence Agency

(Agency responsible for providing and coordinating defence and military intelligence)

HEAT - High Explosive Anti-Tank (warhead)

(HEAT warheads are very effective if launched against armoured vehicles and some tanks)

IB - Intelligence Bureau

(Indian agency engaged in domestic intelligence, internal security and counter-intelligence tasks)

ISI - Inter Services Intelligence

(Pakistan's counter-intelligence agency)

JTF - Joint Task Force

(A task force created to centralize the work of various intelligence agencies and government departments)

MAWA - Mass Watch

(A centralized facial recognition tracking system that integrates the different facial tracking systems of various central organizations and state governments; fictional as of yet)

MI - Military Intelligence

NATGRID - National Intelligence Grid

(An integrated intelligence master database that collates and collects data from various core security agencies database as well as other intelligence, financial transactions, immigration and other government database)

NETRA - Network Traffic Analysis

(A software indigenously developed by the scientists and engineers at the Centre of Artificial Intelligence and Robotics (CAIR) and Defence Research Development Organization (DRDO) for monitoring all internet traffic in the country.)

NIA - National Investigative Agency

NTRO - National Technical Research Organisation

(Provides technical intelligence to other agencies, including satellite and terrestrial monitoring and intelligence)

PMO - Prime Minister's Office

RAW - Research and Analysis Wing

(India's counter-intelligence agency)

RPG - Rocket Propelled Grenade

(Shoulder fired missile weapon that launches rockets equipped with an explosive warhead)

VOIP - Voice over Internet Protocol

(a technology which enables voice to be carried over the Internet instead of traditional copper / phone lines)

## Reviews of Operation Jati Mata Di

“An interesting tale with a twist... it is because of books like these that inspire the saying 'don't judge a book by its cover'.” – *Hindustan Times*

“Superb read. A great thriller. If you have seen the movie ‘A Wednesday’, this is Wednesday, Thursday n Friday...” – *a reader on Goodreads*

“...the beginning was as hair raising as any best in class international thrillers. The whole book took me on a mission along with the characters in the book right from the word go. It kept me on my toes and turned out to be a page turner...” – *a reader on Goodreads*

## **Snippet from Operation Jai Mata Di**

The lights at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji Domestic Airport gleamed under a veil of smog, beneath the starry, cloudless night. Even at this late hour, the airport was a blur of activity; passengers rushing in and out of the huge building, and cars and three-wheeler auto rickshaws making their way to the pickup and exit areas through the confusion and chaos.

Vijay alighted from the front passenger seat of his grey sedan and looked around. He ignored the impatient honks of vehicles queuing up behind his as he opened the rear door, hugged his two kids tightly, and kissed them with a softly uttered goodbye. The children, more than half asleep, groggily opened their eyes; both put their arms around him, and waved back.

His mother was sitting beside them, an arm enveloping each sleeping child. He took her hand and bent lightly to touch her feet. She didn't know it, but he really needed his mother's blessings on this particular day.

"Take care, Son," the frail, old lady, well into her seventies, advised lovingly as she touched his head lightly, blessing him.

"I will, Ma. Take care of the kids for me. I probably won't be reachable for a few days but I don't want you to worry, okay?"

With moist eyes and a heavy heart, Vijay stood gazing after the car as it slowly disappeared into the sea of red rear lights. He flew to Delhi frequently and wouldn't normally ask his family to accompany him to the airport; especially not at this time of the night. But tonight was different. If things didn't work out as planned, he reminded himself grimly, this could turn out to be the last time he'd be seeing his family.

Vijay stood in the check-in line, his calm, relaxed posture not giving away his nervousness. There were many passengers for the 2:20 AM, red-eye flight to Delhi, and the young girl behind the only open counter was taking her own sweet time checking-in each passenger. He could feel his agitation building with every passing minute but controlled any visible expression of it by clutching his hand luggage tightly. He had no bags to check-in; just had a modest, carry-on black rucksack, common enough to arouse no particular interest or suspicion in anybody whatsoever.

"Enjoy your flight, Mr. Vijay," the girl smiled, handing over the driver's licence and boarding pass to the clean-shaven, medium-built man in his late



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**KAPWING**

thirties. One look at his steely, unsmiling eyes and her smile dissipated like fog. She shrugged and moved on to the next passenger, not giving him another thought.

After the security check, Vijay settled himself on a seat near the boarding gate. He glanced at the LCD TV on the near wall playing the late night news. Even with the volume on mute, it was clear that the earnest newsreader was expounding on yet another corruption scandal, trying to out-scream his studio guests about the deteriorating law and order situation in the country. Vijay shook his head. *It will all end soon*, he told himself silently as he stood and stretched.

He entered the airport's gift shop and roamed the aisles, browsing through the array of new products lined up in anticipation of hectic Diwali festive sales through the next few days. He walked over to a nearby coffee counter and ordered a regular cappuccino – not that he needed artificial stimulants to stay awake. It was 1:15 AM, and he wasn't drowsy or even tired. As he sat sipping his coffee, he dug out his phone and thumbed through the keypad.

#### *04:30 Vasant Vihar, New Delhi*

Three hours later, Vijay's cab stopped in front of a nondescript building in Vasant Vihar, an affluent neighbourhood in South-West Delhi.

Once the taxi drove off, Vijay continued walking for about five minutes until he arrived in front of a modest house with a small front garden. The lights in the garden switched on automatically as he walked up the small pathway and knocked on the door in a pre-decided pattern.

The door was opened and he was let in.