

Who painted my

Lust

Red?

When Bollywood meets Cricket meets Politicians

A work of fiction

by

Sree Iyer

BOOK 2 of the MONEY SERIES

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## Cast of characters

### Bollywood

**Vishaal “Six-pack” Saxena** – Once upon a time body-builder/ aspiring hero turned producer, his nickname comes more from his ability to down a six-pack of beer cans in one shot than his once impressive abs. Added an extra a after advice from his astrologer.

**Preeti Ahuja** – A budding Bollywood actress, beauty with brains, unable to understand why despite talent she does not get the breaks she thinks she deserves, until…

**Sonya Keni** – Smart as a whip with looks to match, she decided to leave a professional career in the US to pursue a career in Bollywood. And then luck smiled on her.

**Pragya Gupta** – An upcoming model, hoping to make it big in Hollywood, usually found on the arm of a cricketer, her latest beau being Ronnie Irani.

**Nirav Chopra** – Smart, aggressive but quirky, Nirav came to Mumbai chasing stardom and found success as an Agent/ Manager.

**Nitin Kapur** – Self-made actor, rose through the ranks of junior artists to stardom. Believes that this formula for success is to be unpredictable in the choice of roles he takes up. Popular at the Box Office but not so much at the Awards Office.

### Cricket

**Ronny Irani** – called R2 because of his homophonic name, this sometimes-express pace bowler intimidates his adversaries with this build and bounce.

**Arif Masood** – Pakistani cricketer, thinks he is modern-day Javed Miandad but there is one catch – Arif is yet to win a match with a last ball six. Flatters to deceive on the field.

**Vikas Mehta** – The first of the three **V**s of India, a solid #3 batsman, who often held Indian innings together.

**Vijay Surya** – Flamboyant, fastidious and a fabulous stroke maker, the ideal #4 batsman that any team could ask for.

**Viraj Verma**- Rounding out the three Vs, Viraj can blunt any attack and make it look ridiculously easy. A nervous starter, he can get out fishing outside the off stump but once he gets his feet moving, can score quickly and hurt the opposition.

**Varun Singh** – Arguably one of India’s best all-rounders, he was roped in to run a new league and tasked with signing big-name yesteryear stars.

### Politics

**Mailapore Damodaran** – Smooth, suave, and sophisticated, this clad-in-white politician from Chennai can charm anyone to his bed. Often ragged by his nickname Maida, always tries to one-up his perceived rival Dalda.

**Dalpat Dalvi** – Oily, smooth, and slick, Dalpat can match Maida manoeuvre for manoeuvre, always trying to beat Maida but often coming up short. Called Dalda for short, he lives up to his nickname.

**Giridhar Gulati** – Rising from the earthy Gangetic plains, with a rustic humour and wit that never fails to find its target, Girgut can surprise himself with some of his decisions, often made for the general good.

**Madhav Mantri** – Mama-ji as he is fondly called, controlled the shots in the ICB till an upstart industrialist from Chennai Sambasivam Natrajan spoilt his applecart. Soft spoken but always carrying a big stick, he never allowed anyone to challenge his hegemony.

**Maker Funtoosh Wirewala** – Pronounced Makar. Flamboyant and free-spirited, this poster-boy for a Barbara Cartland hero went to all the right schools and colleges. Known more for his bombastic use of the Queen’s English and his sexploits than his intellect.

**Rajshree Solanki** – Catapulted into the Chief Minister’s seat due to the sudden demise of her husband, she relied on her childhood friend Manohar Munim to run her state, increasing his stature, and giving him a larger-than-life image.

**R K Ranga** – An upcoming Maida wannabe, thinks that by aping the senior minister, he can attain the same dizzying heights. Goes by the nickname Rocky.

**Supremo** – A charismatic, self-made man, who rose from the Gangetic plains to rise to become a Cabinet Minister. Fluent in several languages, a scholar and a gentleman with a steely resolve.

**Dipika Sharma** – Granddaughter of the first Prime Minister of India, quietly controlling the levers of power without assuming any responsibility.

**Joginder Parshad** – An ex-Freedom Party member, bright, ambitious, and enthusiastic, from the most populous state of India, lost out to Maida but proved a point by contesting and winning his Lok Sabha seat as an independent.

### The Bad guys

**Dilawar Mustafa** – A bright kid forced into becoming a Don because of a mistaken identity, Dilawar enjoyed political protection in the form of Mama-ji, giving him carte blanche powers.

**Matka Dada** – Local hoodlum of Mumbai, whose empire Dilawar steals with the help of Saroja, Matka’s girlfriend.

### The Good Guys

**Karan Dixit** – Born leader, smart, shrewd, and articulate with a penchant for languages. Speaks Urdu, Farsi, Arabic, and many Indian languages fluently, accent and all. Leader of the mission and ace solver of the Rubik’s cube.

**Priya Menon** – A striking beauty, intelligent and quick witted. Proficient at handling weapons and can go head-to-head with men on just about any physical exercise. A wizard with computers.

### Other

**Steve Langer** – Tough as nails, an ex-Special Forces operative who is troubled by what he experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan, is also a gentle giant. Especially when he is around Preeti Ahuja.

**Harshvardhan Agarwal**- Swashbuckling entrepreneur, Media mogul, started Bharat Cricket League with commentaries in English and Hindi and used his channels exclusively to garner ratings despite India’s official Cricket Board putting obstacles in his way.

**Manohar Munim** – 2M as he is called, born into a rich family and quick to learn the ropes of how things worked in India, he became the prime mover of the Indian Professional League.

**Anmol Rane** – Mumbai based journalist, who starts an internecine gang warfare. Considered to be close to Madhav Mantri.

**Dr. Arvind Rajan** – Rocky’s childhood friend and physician. For all the flamboyance and flair of his friend, he was the exact opposite – solid, dependable, almost dull. A friendship that proves the adage that “opposites attract.”

**Nikhil Shirke** – Owner of Blue Bulls Securities financial company in Mumbai. A man with a roving eye.

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# Where it all began

The Miss World Pageant had promised the world for Preeti Ahuja. She had made it through the various stages of the contest and reached the final. It had been a tough battle, and winning the Miss Femina India contest, which enabled her to participate in the world event, was only the beginning. A lot of sweat, tears, and hard work – watching what to eat and drink, sticking to a rigorous regimen of workouts, and brushing up on her general knowledge had gone into the exercise. Preeti now understood that behind the glamour and public adulation lay years of sacrifice. She had that dazzling smile which won hearts; that perfect body whose every contour had been sensuously accentuated in the tight dress she wore; that measured gait which would be the envy of a nubile deer; and, she had given the most politically correct answers to questions the jury had posed. For instance, when she was asked the tricky question as to how she viewed the Rohingya refugee problem, Preeti had said that both humanitarian and security considerations had to be taken into account by the government before taking a decision.

After all these rigours, she had naturally expected to win. Sadly, for her, it ended with a whimper. She came fourth, and Preeti was gutted. It had been so near and yet so far. Miss Kenya had been crowned the new Miss World, and the other two slots had been taken by Miss Malaysia and Miss Canada. It took weeks for her to get her life back on its axis, as she consoled herself with the thought that there was more to life than winning a beauty contest. She was both pretty and intelligent, shrewd, and ambitious. The world beckoned her, and when she got a scholarship from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Preeti grabbed it with both hands. She had been a good student in school, nearly always coming first; she had also been among the top three in the final school examinations. She enrolled in the Films, Television and Digital Media program of the university. The UCLA had a reputation for being among the best institutions in the US to teach the course, and for Preeti, who nurtured ambitions of a career in films, this was the right opening.

The UCLA campus was beautiful. Nestled in the hills and across the Bel Air Estates and just a few miles from Santa Monica beach, it had some of the best dining halls in the college campuses across the entire United States. The dormitories (dorms for short) are placed at the top of the hills, and there is a steep climbdown to get to the classrooms. People often joked that the geographical placement was one of the reasons that students at the university looked lean and fit. A fitness freak, Preeti loved the trek. One day, while negotiating the steep angles on the staircase, she slipped and fell headlong down. Dawn was just about cracking and not many people were about. As she tumbled, with no means to regain her balance, the quick realisation that she was doomed to god knows what, flashed across her mind. But to her surprise, a pair of huge arms appeared from nowhere and saved her up from further damage.

Steve Langer saw the pretty Indian American take an awkward fall down the steep set of stairs as he was walk-jogging towards the gym. Fit, buffed and handsome, Steve had the natural chiselled look that one finds often in Hollywood heroes (before they attain stardom, after which the plastic surgeons take charge to ensure its sustenance). As Preeti nestled in his arms, he set her down gently on a flat surface and examined her ankles, which had begun to swell. An ex-Special Forces soldier, who had seen action in Afghanistan, Steve could speak fluent Pashto and hold a conversation in Urdu. While relaxing (if you could call a 4-hour nap break that), he would watch the feel-good musicals of Bollywood and even follow the snappy dialogue that some of them dished out. In the process, he had picked bits and pieces of Hindi as well.

“You don’t want to put weight on your legs. Let me carry you,” Steve gently lifted Preeti and effortlessly took her to the UCLA Urgent Care building.

All Preeti could say amidst the pain she was enduring was “Thanks.”

Steve waited till the attending physician finished examining her. Tendons stretched but no tear and no broken bones. Preeti was fitted with crutches that she was advised to use for at least two weeks till the ankle healed. Steve got his car around to Urgent Care and gave her a ride back to her dorm. Realizing that she would need help getting around, Steve offered to give her a ride to her classes and drop her off thereafter. The solicitations had followed in quick succession and Preeti was somewhat baffled by the concern demonstrated by this stranger. She was also immensely thankful.

In the days that followed, a friendship blossomed without either one realizing it. From being platonic, it graduated to a physical one, with Preeti spending increasingly longer times at Steve’s pad, a single-occupancy dorm. There was an easy elegance about Steve that Preeti liked. Over time, the two opened out to each other, speaking about their lives, ambitions, career dreams, families. While Preeti was impressed by Steve’s stint as a soldier, he in turn was gob smacked by the realisation that a would-be film star had taken a liking to him. At that moment, both knew nothing about how long their affair would last, though they must have wished it would be for forever.

# challenging the powerful in cricket

A few years ago

Harshvardhan Agarwal was a shrewd man. He had to be else he would not have in a space of just over two decades emerged as India’s undisputed media mogul, albeit controversial. Agarwal owned a clutch of English and Hindi language newspapers, a Hindi news channel and various news-and-views digital platforms. In fact, he was the first to exploit the explosion of direct-to-home television channels across the country, signing up with foreign agencies for the supply of content and also reaching out to Indian firms to develop India-specific material. Soon, others joined in and the competition grew fierce, but he held on, slowly expanding his influence among the political class, and eventually ending up as a member of the Upper House, the Rajya Sabha. Agarwal had his political leanings, but he also built a sound working relationship with everyone in the political spectrum. A good businessman, he understood well that he should cultivate friendships all over. Politicians come and go but businesses need to flourish in all situations.

The boom in private television channels did not only provide an opportunity to tap into the soap-opera kind of viewership but also the lucrative sports sector, and cricket in particular. A nation obsessed with this game held enormous potential for channels to churn out profits by telecasting live international matches. Agarwal spent loads of money to win those rights. Sponsorships were not a problem and advertising revenues followed in good measure. But he was not alone in the competition. Soon, others joined in and began to aggressively bid for telecast rights. The time came when Agarwal’s firm, Skyline Media Limited, lost the rights to telecast India’s cricket matches.

It was a setback, but he was not about to give up. He suspected foul play and believed that a cabal was pulling strings from behind, ensuring that the rights went only to an ‘approved’ entity. He had the option to approach the courts, but that would mean a long legal battle whose outcome was uncertain. There was no time to waste. He was a fighter and decided to do a Kerry Packer on the Indian Cricket Board (ICB) which had snatched away his recast rights and given it to a rival. An Australian media tycoon, the maverick Packer had founded the World Series Cricket after his television network clashed with cricket authorities over telecast rights in 1977. He attracted quite a few bigwigs from the cricket world, both as commentators and players and became a huge problem for the office cricket establishment not just in Australia but across the cricket playing world.

Drama surrounded the failed bid by Skyline. It was rumoured that the bids were renegotiated by the ICB to ensure that Agarwal’s firm was kept out and the contract be awarded to a rival organisation with a global footprint. This despite the fact that Skyline’s bid was the highest. A powerful lobby in the ICB led by an influential Cabinet Minister had aborted Agarwal’s prospects, despite Skyline improving upon its earlier bid and agreeing to add an additionally substantial sum for a slightly higher period. But when the ICB dragged its feet, Skyline took the matter to the courts — and lost.

Agarwal, like Packer, had the platform to air matches — his own television channels, including a sports channel — but he needed tournaments to telecast, because the ICB-approved matches were out of bounds. There was another problem. The ICB had denied him access to the popular cricket stadiums to host any match that was not approved by it. Thus, he had to not only create a new tournament but also find suitable venues to host them. He decided to turn this challenge into an opportunity. He and his team began scouting for lesser known cricket grounds, and having identified them, pumped in money to prepare them for world-class tournaments; this included the installation of floodlights of international standards since such matches were played day-and-night to draw the maximum crowds.

Packer and Agarwal had a few other similarities. Both came from well-established business families. Both had summoned the courage to venture into new areas not just to explore better revenue opportunities but also to establish their individual profiles. Both became trailblazers. Both rattled the official establishment and compelled them to take notice of the new kid on the block. And, as subsequent developments were to show, both were to fail for a variety of reasons.

Agarwal was mild-mannered and soft-spoken with an inclination towards the spiritual. He had experimented with Buddhism and Jainism before settling down to his inherited religion, Hinduism. He loved Sufi music and ghazals. His companies were in the forefront of sponsoring several Hindustani classical shows across the country, which saw some of the country’s leading vocalists and instrumentalists take part. He was also a great advocate of yoga. But behind the affable veneer lay a sharp and at times ruthless business mind. He would give heart and soul to a new business venture but would not hesitate to close it down if it failed to break even. He believed that sentimentality and business were anachronistic to each other. Few corporates could match him in the number of business ventures he had floated and shut down. slightly built and of medium height, his preferred attire was a safari suit, generally white or creamy in colour.

Around the time Agarwal was facing hostility within the Indian cricket establishment, the 20-20 format had caught the people’s imagination, with India having just won the first T20 World Cricket Championship, beating Pakistan by a narrow margin. And, he established a rival organisation named the Bharat Cricket League (BCL) to take on the ICB. The next step was to form teams and rope in players. This was no easy task either. The best names were already part of the official teams. He had to offer something more, much more, by way of financial incentives to attract fresh talent and lure some of the established players as well. There were quite a few of the latter who were dissatisfied with the pay they were receiving by the ICB and were disgusted by the constant politics that determined the selection process. Over a period of time, Agarwal and his team managed to win a few of them.

The stage was eventually set for the inaugural tournament to be conducted by the Bharat Cricket League. It had 12 teams, eight domestic and four foreign. The teams came with catchy names — Punjab Puttars, Hyderabad Champs, Chennai Thalaivas etc. High-profile players past their prime were also included at relatively low prices. For such players, this was a godsend opportunity to make some useful money as they did not have many options post-retirement. The crowd loved watching the games, even though the yesteryear heroes were the ones playing along with newer ones who had a chance to make a name for themselves. The players trained hard and since it was just twenty overs a side, threw themselves headlong into the game. Backed by massive publicity and all sorts of attractions such as cheer girls attired in short skirts, the tournament garnered a big viewership on Skyline’s television channels, and people flocked to the stadiums to watch the game. At the end of the first season, BCL had decidedly opened a new avenue of entertainment. Even women, many of whom did not really care for cricket, began taking interest. A new form of the gentleman’s sport was born. Harshvardhan Agarwal had pulled off an incredible concept.

While the BCL was scaling new heights, even coming up with populist suggestions such as awarding eight runs if a shot cleared the stadium, the ICB was fretting and fuming at the challenge thrown by the upstart. It had placed several roadblocks in the way but the BCL had managed to attract good crowds even in tier-2 and tier-3 towns. Agarwal had, in a way, democratised cricket. Dalal Street had gone gaga, complimenting him for taking the risk of rising against the establishment. The stocks of his Que Group — the holding company for Skyline Media Limited — soared. It appeared he could do nothing wrong. But trouble was lurking around the corner. Big money attracts bigger money, and often in pursuit of the bigger money, short-cuts and devious methods get adopted.

Allegations of spot-fixing began to surface. It was said that Mumbai Maharajahs had collapsed deliberately while chasing a modest score to win against Chandigarh Cheetahs. Some Mumbai batsmen were accused of getting out purposefully after receiving coded signals from the stands. The allegation was that they did so on an assurance of a hefty amount being paid to them for the ‘service’. Skyline put Varun Singh in the forefront to quell the controversy.

Varun was an iconic all-rounder who had been won over to the BCL to manage the new firm’s affairs. He had played for India and won the hearts of millions of cricket-loving people not just in India but other countries as well. He also had some administrative experience, having been on the ICB board and served on the official body’s selection panel. But in the run-up to his switchover, he had fallen foul of the establishment because he had taken them on allegations of corruption in the management of the country’s cricket affairs. Varun had also raised doubts over certain selections to the Indian side, saying that they were influenced more by regional considerations than merit. Soon, he was side-lined. He was struck off the list of approved television commentators and sports management firms were persuaded to drop him as a columnist for the print media. Worse, the cricket mandarins also initiated an inquiry into his tenure as a selector, claiming that he had favoured certain players. He took the establishment to court and the court cleared him of all charges. Vindicated, he crossed over to Skyline.

Varun sought to allay doubts by pointing out that batting collapses do happen in cricket and that it would be wrong to impute motives. He pointed out that strong batting sides had been bundled out for less than 100 runs even in Test cricket. But the issue refused to die down. Meanwhile, there were charges that, riding on the controversy, the Indian Cricket Board was planting fake news in the media to discredit BCL. Ironically, later, the ICB itself would be embroiled in a similar issue of spot-fixing in the otherwise highly successful T-20 premier league cricket tournament that it would launch.

Although the new league operated by BCL had got off to a rousing start, the financial returns were still far from satisfactory. At the end of the first edition of its league, the firm could recover less than five per cent of its investment. In the following year, it was better; ten per cent. But by the time the third edition came around, a global meltdown had adversely affected the flow of revenues from sponsors. Skyline had made the mistake of owning all the participating teams, instead of selling them off to individual bidders. That, and the controversies over spot-fixing — and betting too, with the involvement of dubious elements and triggering fears of money laundering for a variety of purposes including fomenting terrorism and converting black into white — had placed BCL in a precarious position.

The end for the BCL appeared near. But there was to be no end to the intricate network of illegal and unlawful activities that had been attracted to the game, with the ICB being the focus of attention.

# The ICB fights back

A year later…

Before the Bharat Cricket League fell into trouble, the Indian Cricket Board, the country’s official cricket management body, had to contend with its rise. But it could not just sit back and see its rival steal the thunder. It was a matter of prestige. Not only had somebody summoned the courage to challenge its hegemony but that the upstart also threatened to adversely impact the ICB’s mind-boggling cash flow. If the finances were hit, the ICB would lose its preeminent position among Indian sports bodies and also its influence in the political class. So far it had used its financial muscle to ensure that the Board was kept out of the jurisdiction of accountability laws of the land, such as the Right to Information Act. The ICB knew that any failure on its part to effectively counter the new rival could result in influential politicians who were part of the setup, even deserting the system, thus leaving it vulnerable to all sorts of inquiries into its hitherto opaque functioning. The ICB turned its attention to the one man who could save it from possible ruin — Manohar Munim.

Munim had been born with a golden spoon in his mouth. The only son of an entrepreneur who built an industrial conglomerate around cement and steel, he had no interest in the family business. Like most industrial honchos did with their children, the founder of the empire sent his son for education abroad, ensuring that he got admission to the best schools and colleges. The first school he attended expelled him after he was caught skipping classes to watch a film. Had he been in India, he would have escaped such harsh punishment because of his family’s exalted status. In the second school he went to, the young Manohar was more careful and managed to pass with moderate marks. He was then asked to graduate from a leading business school in the United States of America. But he gallivanted around the US, doing everything but studying, even sowing wild oats. After he was back in the campus, he was caught with drugs and thrown in prison. It so happened that he, along with a few other students, tried to buy a substantial amount of banned drugs from a seller in a cafe, and was caught red-handed, because the ‘seller’ was a decoy set up by the drug enforcement agency. He did three years behind bars. The experience sobered him up quickly to the realities of life and he put his head down, completed his studies and returned to India to join the family business. The more he sunk his teeth into it the more he realised the depth of the enterprise and its fabulous reach in various sectors. Meanwhile, he fell in love with a divorcee and the two decided to marry, much against his family’s wishes. But there was a happy ending to it. Both settled down to family life and there was every indication that Manohar Munim had given up his wayward ways.

But there was restlessness still in him. He wanted to do something of his own, craft a distinct identity. He persuaded his father to loan him money to start a new business venture in sports management. His sights were on cricket which promised big money. Within three years, his new firm had broken even and was looking forward to profits. The success, meanwhile, drew him into the inner circle of the country’s cricket management, though he held on to the family’s traditional business as well. By a quirk of fate, during those days, political developments in the northern State of Rajasthan, where he was based, were to impact him in ways that changed his future.

Rajasthan had elected the People’s Voice party to power, and one of its tallest leaders took over as Chief Minister. She was Rajshree Solanki, who happened to be Munim’s childhood friend; the two had also studied together in the US for a brief while. Raj-*ji*, as she was fondly called, was a member of the erstwhile royal family of an obscure kingdom of Mithilagarh. Her marriage into a political family in Rajasthan notwithstanding, she would have probably continued to play the role of an efficient housekeeper but for a change in fortune. Her husband, a political heavyweight, died in a road accident and pressure mounted on her by well-wishers and family to step into his shoes. She was initially reluctant but was persuaded by veterans of the party. In the months to come, Rajshree Solanki emerged as a politician in her own right, vindicating the trust the party had placed in her, and proving her critics — who had carped that she would be a failure — wrong.

Part of the guidance to her in the initial days of her political avatar had come from Manohar Munim. Caught like a deer in the headlights, she had turned to 2M, as he was called, for support. 2M, ever the man to seize an opportunity, started slowly expanding his tentacles in Rajasthan. All big deals had to get his blessings since Rajshree trusted his judgement. Along the way, he cut some side deals for himself with the movers and shakers of society. Spurred by the success, 2M began to think big. He realised that it was time to spread his wings. And the time was just right.

Feuding groups in the ICB national committees had begun to routinely court 2M for his support (and finances). In a short time, he had collected several IOUs from prominent members of the cricket fraternity, and he intended to cash in on them now. Thus, when the ICB was confronted with the BCL challenge, 2M stepped in to help, and reverse-engineered the BCL strategy. To the template, he added glamour by bringing in Bollywood, and validity by roping in politicians of every hue and shade. In a glitzy seven-star hotel in Mumbai, he gathered the bigwigs from industry, Bollywood and political parties. Everyone had to leave their cell phones outside the closely guarded conference room. After the mandatory snacks and coffee, the assemblage settled down to listen to 2M.

There was just a one-point agenda: What should be done to strike, and strike hard, at the upstart BCL? Munim had it worked out in complete detail, as he had been giving a lot of his time to the issue before coming to the meeting. He announced the start of the Indian Professional League (IPL) cricket tournament under the aegis of the Indian Cricket Board to take on Agarwal’s venture. He unveiled a simple yet tantalising logo. With the help of an impressive PowerPoint presentation, he took the audience through his brainchild, detailing everything — from the format to the revenue flow. He announced that players would be auctioned to the various teams, and that the teams themselves would be owned by private entities.



Figure 1. The IPL logo

“The glamour and glitz to draw crowds to the stadiums will be provided by stars of Bollywood. There will be after-match parties where the cricketers would mix freely with starlets,” 2M said. What was left unsaid was the fact that with politicians also jumping in, this would form a potent mix of love, lust and libido. This suited the politicians just fine – most were hedonists while projecting a do-gooder image to the public.

What the audience understood (2M naturally did not say this in so many words) was that the league would be built on the shoulders of the cricketers; Bollywood was the bait that kept the cricketers in check and the politicians would be the puppet masters — having placed themselves as presidents in many State associations, they were in a position to control it all. Members of the industry shook their heads in bewilderment. Not only were they being used as *benamis*, now their names would be out there for the public to see. They would be blamed for any scandal that erupted, but the money games would be only for the politicians. But many of them were indebted to 2M and did not dare question him. A few who did, were appeased by assurances that their interest would be taken care of and that they would not become cannon fodder in case something went wrong. After all, 2M, argued, he too belonged to the business fraternity and there was no reason why he would harm its prospects.

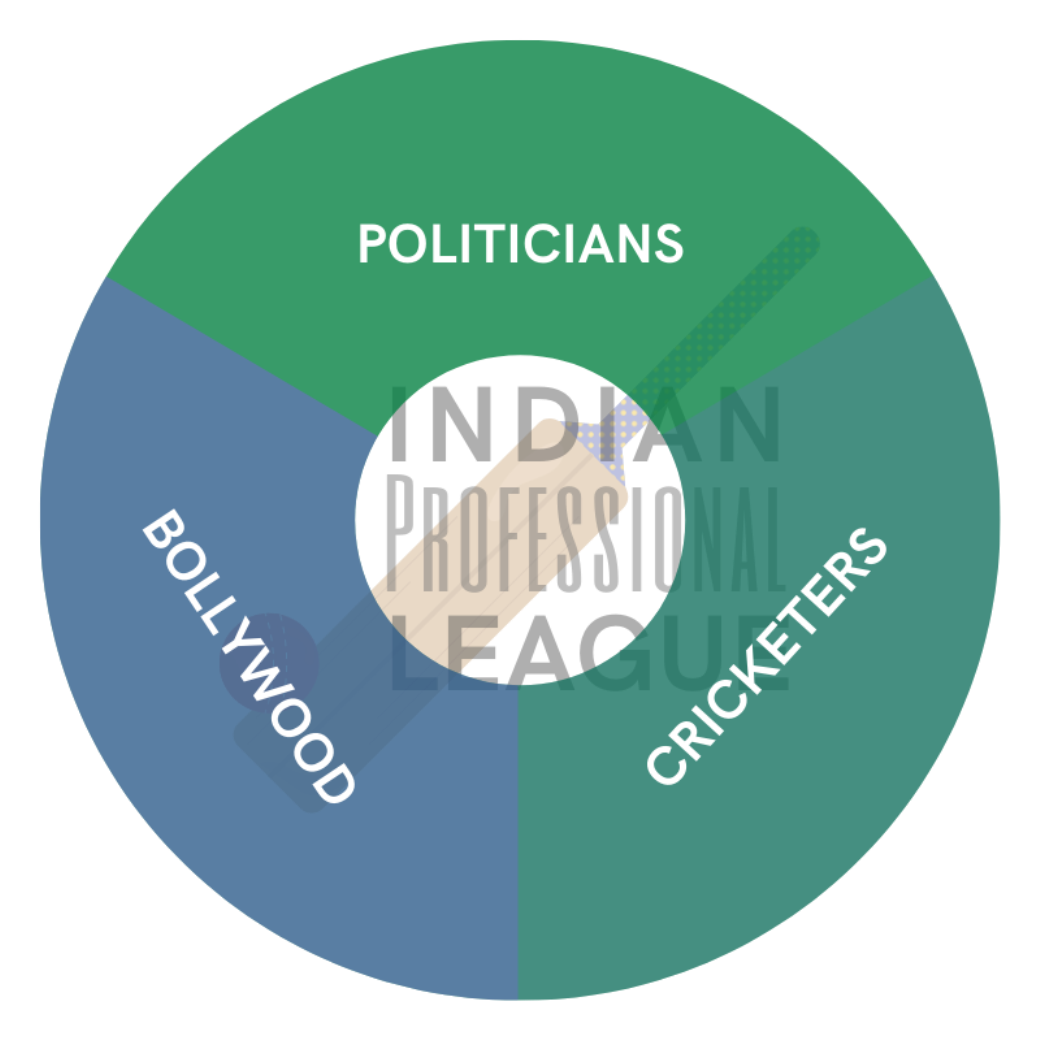


Figure 2. IPL stakeholders

The arrangement suited everyone. Politicians were sitting on a pile of black money which they wanted legitimised. The IPL gave them a venue to accomplish it. 2M set up what appeared to be ‘open auctions’ for the eight teams that would comprise the first edition of the tournament. Many politicians with loads of illegitimate money signed up through their proxies (*benami*) and there was only a cursory check of the finances of the bidding coalitions. It was an elaborate hoax on the gullible public. With the politicians and Bollywood came the hawala agents of nefarious firms such as the D-Company, and counterfeit currency too. Betting on events (though illegal) had always been on in India but with IPL’s new Twenty-20 extravaganza, the betting amounts went through the roof. With so much money sloshing about, it was just a matter of time before the matches were steered to certain conclusions, that benefited the owners of the teams.

To drive the BCL out of existence, the ICB then announced that players who were still active in their State teams would be banned for life if they played for BCL. On the other hand, if they returned to the ICB fold, they would be granted amnesty and allowed to play for their respective States. This was supposed to be the last straw on the camel’s back. But was it?

# GIRGUT CAUGHT WITH HIS HAND IN THE COOKIE JAR

Shyamala, the long-suffering wife of Giridhar Gulati, was busying herself in the kitchen, keeping an eye on the breakfast being readied. Girgut, as Gulati was known popularly and jeeringly, was in town (the Parliament was in session) and handling two conversations on two cell phones simultaneously. It was not difficult in this given situation – on both calls, the persons were venting their frustration and all Girgut had to say was “*ji… ji*” to make both speakers think that he was all ears, and with none the wiser that he was juggling two calls. Eventually both wound up their respective diatribes and Giridhar turned his attention to the images on the television. It was an expensive 65-inch set with the colours sharply contrasted. It was his favourite Hindi anchor Prachi Raut shrieking out a Breaking News story. It was the one Girgut had just moments before heard on one of his cell phones. It was a juicy one. He smiled lasciviously at her image on the screen.

The information was no surprise for him; after all, he was the one who had passed it on to Prachi just days before. But he was not in the habit of doing favours for free. The material he had given to the journalist was explosive and all that he had demanded from her was a short sexual encounter. She had obliged. As the one to break the news, she would be flooded with public acclaim, whereas her interaction with Girgut would remain private and unknown to the general public. It was a win-win deal. Prachi was an ambitious professional who was willing to make some compromises to further her career.

Giridhar Gulati was a dyed-in-the-wool politician from the politically important northern belt of India. He was born to a poor family of farmers, and both his parents worked in the fields owned by landlords; they were themselves landless. As a child, Girgut would be lucky to have two square meals a day. Because basic education was free in the nearby government school, he attended it. The main draw was not the classes, though. it was the free mid-day meal served in the afternoon. Often, that was the only full one had had in the day. He was not a bright student, barely managing to scrape through. He hated the casteist environment in the village and grew up disliking the upper caste landlord community. This was to set the tone for his later political life.

Somehow, he managed to gain admission to a nearby college and that’s where his political career began. Not good at studies and generally shunned by the better-off classmates, Girgut began taking an active interest in student politics to gain relevance. His rustic humour and a sense of understanding of the grassroots issues soon made him a popular figure. He won the president’s election to the students’ union and, as is normal, came to the attention of the local politicians. It was not long before he was rubbing shoulders with mid-rung politicians who professed thoughts and ideologies similar to what he nurtured. He formally joined a party and left it a few years later after establishing himself and a figure of some consequence, to float his own outfit. The new venture grabbed the attention of the local populace and it was only a matter of time before he emerged as among the tallest politicians of his time in his home State. But Gulati was nothing if not ambitious. He had set his eyes on a central role, even if indirectly. His outfit tied up with a national party and when the latter came to power at the Centre, he was part of the alliance and became a minister — and a Minister of State for External Affairs at that. He was after all, adept at managing ‘external affairs’.

Girgut caught his wife glancing at him surreptitiously as he remote-tasted his favourite anchor. Her first instinct was to throw the scalding tea at her cheating husband’s face. But something held her back, something that had made her reconcile to the realities of life. While she deliberated on what to do with her cheating husband (she came from a family of proud freedom-fighters) the Prime Minister came to Girgut’s rescue. He wanted him to visit the Scandinavian countries as part of a goodwill troupe led by the PM himself.

“Shyamala, you won’t believe what happened! I will be accompanying the *Pradhan Mantri* on his trip to Sweden!”

Shyamala was still furious from the morning episode. “Who will be sharing your bed there?”

Girgut was charm personified. “*Aisa kuch nahin hai Shyamala* (It is nothing, Shyamala). I have many political enemies and they have the media write up nasty stuff about me.”

Shyamala was silent, although her anger was palpable.

“*Accha suno!* I must leave in a few hours so please, please, please pack my bag and send it with the driver to the VIP Lounge at the International Terminal. Have him wait there till I come.”

“How cold does it get in Sweden? Do you want your greatcoat?” Shyamala was thawing.

“Yes, please. And one more thing! I promise you that in my next *videshi*(foreign)trip, I will take you along.”

For a change, Girgut was on his best behaviour during the trip, staying away from the rather large Press contingent, especially the fairer sex. It was a trip he was not initially scheduled to make. At the last minute, the External Affairs Minister (MEA), Boom Boom Banerjee had opted out, allowing him, the Minister of State for MEA, to accompany the PM and he intended to make full use of this opportunity. There were a lot of photo opportunities as the team hopped from one spot to the next and Girgut managed to get into just about every photograph that was taken, and on all the TV channels.

Shyamala too followed the progress of the entourage on television and was inundated with calls from friends to strangers, complimenting her on her husband’s impending elevation (there were rumours of a cabinet reshuffle and the MEA was talked about as one of portfolios that might have a new face). She was having mixed feelings; angry at him for his wayward ways, and at the same time pleased with the attention his visit was fetching her. Within the confines of the four walls she did give her husband a piece of her mind — though to no avail. Girgut would act like he is all ears and let it come in via one ear and out the other. She was in a bind — she could not walk away from the marriage because her association with Girgut brought her many advantages. At the same time, it was getting difficult for her to put up a brave face. Someday, the charade would have to end. The occasions when he was out of town were both a source of relief and anxiety for Shyamala. His absence calmed her nerves, but it also fuelled doubts on which woman he was bedding.

Satisfied with the way events went, Giridhar wanted to take a break in Dubai on the return flight for some R & R (rest and recreation). A plausible excuse was given to the PM for the break in journey. Girgut was the president of his State Cricket Association, and he told his boss that some cricket-related matter had to be urgently sorted out in in Dubai, for which he needed to be there just for a few hours. What was left unsaid was that Girgut was hoping to catch up with a budding starlet, the name of whom he could not remember. It was a moot point whether his boss believed him or not. If it was cricket, then it was fine because he knew of the underhand deals that were going in the name of that sport. And if it was a private affair, then it was none of his business; the PM knew of Girgut’s sexual escapades and his only concern was that they should not blow out in the open, since the expose would harm not just Girgut but also his party and his own image too.

# GIRGUT CHANGES COLORS

The International Cricket Council (ICC) was founded in 1909 as a global body to govern world cricket. Originally called the Imperial Cricket Conference, it comprised just three countries – England, Australia, and South Africa. In 1965, it was renamed as International Cricket Conference and was yet again rechristened in 1989 with its present name. Today it has 100 members, of which around a dozen are full members that play Test matches, and the others are associate members. The ICC has an overwhelming role in cricket administration across the world - organising major tournaments, affiliating various cricketing bodies, appointing umpires who officiate in the ICC-recognized matches, including the T-20 and one-dayer tournaments. It has its own code of conduct, has the powers to punish erring players and teams and coordinate efforts to combat corruption and drug abuse. It is headed by a chairman who is either elected or chosen unanimously. India is a major member, being not just a prominent cricket-playing nation but also one that has considerable financial muscle.

Strangely, the ICC moved its headquarters to Dubai in 2005. Strangely because Dubai is not a major cricket-playing entity, nor is the United Arab Emirates as a whole. Nobody knows the actual reason for this shift to a location that has no cricket history except that it was a ‘neutral’ ground for the game, especially when it came to two nations that did not wish to play in each other’s country. There have been murmurs that the move to Dubai was driven by tax considerations. But there is no doubt that Dubai has benefited immensely as a result.

There were some protests over the decision, but the ICC made it clear that it would not revoke its decision. It said that the matter of relocation was now “closed.” Earlier the headquarters was at Lords’ (in England) — considered the Mecca of cricket. It was perhaps believed that serious cricket and serious money should be kept as far apart as possible, but frauds don’t respect geographical boundaries, and money-power keeps the rules flexible enough to be bent at will.

The shift was supplemented with a host of strict rules to regulate the game and save it from disrepute. But these rules existed only on paper; often, they were enforced selectively. For instance, there was a drug-usage policy for all countries, but the Indian Cricket Board refused to follow it, citing a number of anomalies. After making the mandatory noises in protest, the ICC abandoned its resolve. Smaller Test playing nations were not so lucky. The reason for the Indian board’s success lay in its revenue-generating capacity which also benefitted the ICC. The international body did not want to harm the goose that laid the golden egg.

Besides, shrinking revenues from gate receipts, especially for the Test matches and One-Day Internationals (ODI) in many countries had forced the ICC to promote the Twenty-20 format, a bang-bang-bowler-be-damned form of cricket which threatened to take over the game. This increased its dependence on the Indian Cricket Board, since without one of the world’s strongest short-format game teams on board, the ICC’s Twenty-20 experiment was certain to fail.

Big money attracts big power — the vice versa is equally true. Across the world, and more so in India, politicians jumped into the arena of cricket administration, either directly or through proxies controlling the game at the national level as well as at state levels. Heavyweight politicians became presidents or general secretaries or treasurers of state cricket boards. While they fought one another bitterly in the political arena, they were thick friends as cricket administrators, scratching each other’s back. They had common interests to protect and politics would not be allowed to come in the way. Of course, there were lobbies, but they were cross-political.

Girgut was no exception to this trend. His connection with cricket was about as remote as his links with an Ivy League college. During his school days, the only sport he had played was wrestling, and he did it with such passion that he would fling handfuls of mud from the ground into the eyes of any opponent who threatened to outsmart him. He regarded cricket as an elitist game, and therefore worthy of nothing but condemnation. But as he rose the rungs of the political ladder, his advisers told him of the enormous potential of cricket, and the money to be made through selections and fudging of cricket board accounts. But it was one meeting with Mama-ji that changed it all.

“Look Girgut! The days of making money by taking cash are over. The amounts are huge and storing them becomes a problem. Instead, become the President of your Cricket association. Betting on games will give you money beyond your dreams! And all of it gets stashed away in *phoren* (foreign) banks. No one will even know that you are making this kind of money.”

Girgut sat up with a start. “Sir-ji! You are a revelation. Why did I not talk to you about this sooner?”

“It is never too late, Girgut. All you need to do is take care of this small list of administrators and the Presidentship is yours for the taking,” Mama-ji handed a slip with names and a second column with letter P or G or PG against each name.

Mama-ji let it sink for a bit, before continuing. “P is Paisa, G is Girl and PG is both. My team has done the research…”

“And what do I do in return?”

Mama-ji smiled and replied, “I will tell you at the appropriate time. Are you in?”

“Yes!”

Mama-ji took out another piece of paper and gave it to Girgut. “This is the Gold list. Here are the amounts you need to give…”

As Girgut scanned down the page, he noticed an additional column with numbers. He noticed a number 2 on a row that had G in the bribe column.

“What does 2 mean here?” Girgut asked, innocently.

“It means you need to send him a pair.” Mama-ji observed with amusement how Girgut’s eyes had lit up as he added up the numbers.

“Trust me, it is worth it. You will be notified on your share for betting. There are some rules that must be observed strictly. Not doing so would result in expulsion and you will have so many scandals written up about you that you will never be the same again.”

“But what if the bet goes wrong? I will lose my shirt!”

“Don’t worry. The pay-out in the unlikely event of a loss is made out with part real and part fake currency. The *jaali* (fake) note looks so real that even banks can’t detect it. It is all taken care of. You only pay one-third of the actual amount for fake currency.”

Girgut was reeling. How is all this possible?

Seeing the questions crossing his face, Mama-ji continued… “Say you lost five crores on a bet. And you want to pay two crores real and three crores fake. Your cost would only be three crores – two crores of real money and one crore for the three crores of fake money.”

He let that sink in and concluded with “All bets to be settled within 24 hours. No exceptions. If you are traveling, you may appoint a trusted assistant to settle. IPL is just around the corner. This is where maximum money can be made.”

Mama-ji finished with a flourish – “All the money you make will be automatically converted and credited into your *phoren* bank account. You do have a Swiss account, don’t you?”

Girgut nodded his head vigorously. “But I have to pay two percent fees to the Bank to keep my money there…”

“There is a better way. Get the money converted into US Dollars in Dubai, and you can stash it in any tax haven in the world. There is more... If you want *sone pe suhaga*, you can take it to a Financial company like JP Morgan Chase and ask them to provide you with a P-Note.”

Not finding any comprehension on Girgut’s face, Mama-ji expanded “Participatory Note. JPM will give you a P-Note with just the amount in US Dollars. No name. You then put that money in a Mauritius shell company and trade in Indian Stock Market with that. In a coordinated way many of us will put money on one stock and hype it up. The poor public will see the steep rise and jump in and we will sell it at a high. Because Mauritius has a no-capital gains tax treaty with India, all the profits are tax free! And you can move it out in US Dollars at any time you want. My assistant will set it all up. Just pay him two times what he asks for his services.”

Mama-ji winked. “He will do everything. All you need to do is play the game and watch your bank balance blow through your roof. He repeated it in Hindi for emphasis, *Bhagwan jab deta hai to chappar faadke deta hai* (when it rains, it pours money).”

“And one more thing. He will keep changing the banks, countries to ensure that no one can track your money. You will need to fly to Dubai once every three months or so to sign the appropriate papers. Everything will be arranged by him – new company names, countries, Directors for the companies, the companies’ stories etc. Everyone is doing the same thing. Just go with the flow.”

Girgut did a *Sashtanga Namaskar*. “*Tussi great ho!”* he whispered reverentially. Mama-ji watched the rainbow of expressions that crossed Girgut’s face with an amused look – What is not to like? The glamour and the girls that came with the T-20 format, and the cherry on top were the Bollywood actresses. And the *moola!* Girgut was convinced and raring to go.

And now, he too was a player in the IPL match fixing circus. And it was convenient that ICC was located in Dubai so for any “other” business, it was handy to say that he needed to discuss some details, like building a cricket stadium in a remote hinterland... His break in journey was just an excuse to spend some quality time (at least that is what his fixer from Dubai promised) with the latest Bollywood sensation Sonya Keni. All he had to do was to meet her, listen to her pitch, promise her a role in an upcoming film he was financing (through a benami) in exchange for what he hoped would be a mind-blowing experience.

As with cricket, Girgut had developed a late fondness for womanising. Throughout his early life of struggle, he had lived with an inferiority complex which ensured that he had no attitude for friendships with the fair sex. But as his political career soared, there were always a bevy of women who sought his attention. Temptation set in, and what started off as rare flings soon turned into a habit. He was trying to make up for lost time. On occasions, Girgut would thank his stars that cricket had come his way.

# Sonya Keni

Sonya Keni’s family had migrated from Uganda in the 70s to the United States, where its members managed to acquire green cards and buy a motel in the middle of Texas with savings accumulated over several years. This was the oil-boom town of Houston, and since the going was good for everyone living there, Sonya’s family too made a small turnaround for the better. Sonya was able to secure admission to the prestigious Rice University in the subject of Communications, and her natural flair for languages landed her the job of a news anchor in one of the more popular TV networks in Houston. Sonya had just turned 21.

Nothing had come easy to her. In school she had faced racial discrimination from sections of students and even her teachers, though it must be said that by and large she had been accepted by the inclusive society. She had to perform extra-well to be counted while for the others, excellence was taken as granted. She had seen the financial difficulties her parents had gone through and the hurt carried in her later years, even after the family had secured a firmer foothold. The good part of the ordeal was that it had made her even more determined to succeed, but without abandoning the scruples that had been ingrained in her as a result of her middle-class upbringing. While her parents had lived abroad for a good part of their life, their Indian-origin values had remained intact. Sonya still recoiled at the ‘free society’ she encountered, and never could understand how such behaviour could be associated with ‘liberalism’. To her, real empowerment came from tangible achievements, not from disrespect to traditions that teach values of morality and ethicality.

Although reticent about the so-called liberal life, Sonya was of a friendly disposition. She had an infectious charm that drew colleagues towards her. Her easy-going nature was at times misunderstood and people tried to take liberties, which she deftly fobbed off. That’s where her career hit a wall. No matter how much the smarts, the male-dominated television industry was demanding an entry fee from her to enter the next level, the bigger league — where she would anchor prime time shows. A crude attempt was made by a producer to bed her after an office party. His attempt ended in a disaster as she slapped him and rushed out of the party in disgust.

The following morning, her key card did not work. Seeing her struggle with the elevator buttons, two security guards came over and told her that they were to escort her to her desk. She was to take her belongings and leave. She had been fired. The Human Resources (HR) person, a lady in her mid-thirties, avoided eye contact as she told Sonya that her employment has been terminated with immediate effect. The reason she was offered for the sacking was an act of insubordination she had indulged in.

Every nerve in Sonya’s body wanted to strike out at the HR person but she quickly realized that the lady was merely doing her job. A million thoughts raced through her mind as she drove back to her one-bedroom apartment in up-scale Houston. It was barely 7 AM. As she was opening the door, she got a call from her classmate Karen Smith, who was working in the advertising industry based in Madison Avenue, New York.

Karen was Sonya’s Best Friends Forever (BFF). They had gone to the same schools and ended up graduating from Rice at more or less the same time. Karen had pursued a career in creative writing and Sonya was not surprised when she landed a job in a leading advertising firm in Madison Avenue. Before Karen could ask the reason for her call, Sonya poured out her anguish. Karen was planning to be in Houston for the weekend and wanted to know if Sonya was available to go for dinner and dancing, but sensing her friend’s troubled mind, he suggested that Sonya fly instead to New York and spend a few days with her.

New York was hot and humid, as the sun beat down mercilessly. Sonya was wandering aimlessly around the Central Park before meeting up with Karen, when she saw a film shoot in progress. Hearing Hindi being spoken, she got curious and joined the onlookers gathered at the spot. There are always people in any part of the world who have enough spare time to hang around at movie shoots and they also came in handy if there were dance sequences, something Bollywood prided itself in.

A perky heroine, her height boosted by fashionable high heels, was roaming the park with her hulk of a boyfriend, the hot Rana Kapoor, and appeared to be struggling with her lines. The director, Manav Sinha, a much sought-after commodity, was getting frustrated as both were mis-pronouncing Jamba Juice as Jumbaa Joose. Seeing those failed attempts and unable to contain herself, Sonya exclaimed loudly, “It is Jaamba Juice!” Manav turned around to see the unsolicited intervener and came face to face with a good-looking girl with a million-dollar smile, waving at the pair. In his career, Manav had seen many a bewitching beauty but something about Sonya, her confidence, and the way she had carried herself, sparked an interest in him. Eventually the shot was finished, and as Manav shouted “Pack up,” he waved Sonya over. He remembered seeing her somewhere and was racking his brains for a recall.

Sonya came over and shook Manav’s hand, and in halting Hindi, said, “Namaste Manav-ji! I loved all your movies... Such beautiful hits like *Jo Hai Sama*, *Pal Pal Dil Ke Paas!*”

Manav accepted the compliment somewhat abashedly and asked, “Have I seen you somewhere?”

Sonya replied, “Yes, if you happened to be in Houston and were watching The Early Edition.”

Manav’s eyes lit up and said he was indeed at Houston looking for locations and had tuned in to the TV News channel which she anchored. “Sonya Keni, right?”

After some more small talk, Manav invited her for cup of coffee with him. She accepted and they walked over to Starbucks located off the 86th Street. A few members from the film crew were also enjoying their brews, and Manav waved to them and moved towards a corner table with two chairs. Barely had they settled down that Manav offered to cast Sonya in his next film, based in the United States, with shootings planned at exotic locations like the Kauai Island in Hawaii. But first he needed to see if the camera would like her. It was not in Manav’s nature to be impulsive, especially in his professional work. He could not remember the last time that he had reached out to somebody with a film offer on the spur of the moment; he normally took his time even with established actors before seeking them out for his films. He was not to be carried away by an actor’s stature or market value; the actor had to fit his concept and the script.

The offer came like a bolt from the blue and Sonya was struggling to organise her thoughts. On one hand, she was thrilled at being offered a role in Bollywood. On the other, she was sorry at the prospect of having to quit her news television profession. Although she had been sacked from one channel, she was confident of landing employment elsewhere. Besides, being an avid Bollywood fan, she knew that most female parts were eye candy and glamour and not much else. It was a risk, and her career depended on making the right choice. If things didn’t work out well in the film industry, she could always return to television. And even if her first film clicked, she could still call it quits and go back to small screen. By the time the coffee was done with, she had makeup her mind. It was a yes.

Later in the day, when she met Karen, she told him about the incident and her decision. She was happy that Sonya had latched on to something that would make her forget the recent unpleasant experience at work. At the same time, she was also apprehensive. After all, the film industry was not very different from the news television sector — both were male-dominated and the threat to the likes of Sonya existed there too. But she kept the second thought to herself and grandly announced a party for her to celebrate her coming film debut. Of course, the party consisted of just the two of them.

Sonya took to the film like fish to water. Her screen test had gone off wonderfully and Manav was as excited as she was about the prospects ahead. Her debut film was titled, ‘*Kabhi Aar Kabhi Paar (KAKP)*’, and it was shot mostly in Hawaii and the Galapagos over a stretch of six months without a break. Time flew by, and in that period, Sonya scrupulously kept to herself. Despite some overt and often covert casting couch invitations, she managed to evade her pursuers. It helped that Manav was gay and was fussing over her, shielding her without her knowing it.

Sonya returned home after the film was done and renewed her search for a career in television broadcasting. While the Bollywood film was a good distraction, she never felt that she could make acting her career. But her efforts were proving to be in vain, as various channels she approached failed to offer an opening. It was possible, she said to herself, that her previous lecherous producer had spread malicious gossip about her ‘uncooperative’ ways. Meanwhile, KAKP went into editing and was released in three weeks. It had a quiet opening, but word of mouth and the brilliant locales with a ravishing new face had begun to create a buzz. The film slowly picked pace and turned into a moderate success. Before long, she started getting calls for new opportunities. There was a minor problem – she did not have a manager or an agent to manage her time - her call sheet, media appearances and appointments with potential producers and directors.

She trusted Manav and sought his advice. Manav readily assumed the responsibility of finding an agent-cum-manager and suggested that she fly down to Mumbai to interview three persons he had short-listed. After many years, she was in India, in the tinsel town of Mumbai. Of the three, she found Prakash Mehta to be on the same wavelength – he had studied abroad, and his family was in the film industry. He was easy to converse with and had a professional air about him that impressed her.

All of a sudden, with Mehta getting down to business, three role offers by big banner houses came her way, with established directors and mega budgets. All three had a plurality of male protagonists, with the females providing glamour and a tear or two, in a scene or two. Looking at the locales and time constraints, Sonya and Prakash decided that it would be best if they signed up for just one. But declining a big name had to be done delicately, especially by a newcomer. The usual excuse: “Much as I would have loved to work, I will not be able to make the time commitments owing to travel constraints… look forward to working in your next venture…” had to be given.

Sonya was glad she had Prakash by her side to handle these issues. Her first impressions of the man had been positive. But while first impressions are important, they can also be deceptive.

# Kuch to log Kahenge!

The Hindi film industry tends to follow tried and tested methods that are currently fashionable. The current trend was to name films after popular songs. Filmgoers could take a cue from the song and guess what could be in store for them. The construct of a sense of anticipation that fuelled a desire to visit the nearest screening hall, was indeed a marketing stroke which called for no financial investment. Even if lazy, it was an effective means. This was one of the reasons for Prakash to advice his newest client Sonya to sign for a film titled, *Kuch To Log Kahenge (KTLK)*. The title of her earlier film too had derived from a film song, and it had done well. Why not repeat the formula, he pointed out? She was willing, having little to lose since she had, despite her best efforts, failed to land another job in the news television industry.

Soon the media began calling the film Catluck, perhaps hinting that the big banner company was riding on the popularity of Sonya Keni, the newest, freshest face to appear in Bollywood. Thus, thanks to the Page 3 phenomenon, KTLK had created a furious buzz weeks before it was released. This suited the producer, director, and everybody else associated with it, and it served Sonya Keni well too.

She was soon to realize that the script was more like a guideline than a document the director adhered to. Some of the actors came with massive egos, and they had to be kept in humour. There were demands such as 10 close-ups, 2 dance sequences and 4 fight scenes (the difficult ones were done by stunt doubles) in which the hero always landed firmly and gracefully on his feet, regardless of the height he had jumped from. But then, in most run-of-the-films, such improbabilities that rebelled against laws of physics didn’t really matter. The audience loved and cheered every bit of it; as long as the hero ended up as the hero he was supposed to be, nothing was out of place.

*KTLK’s* storyline was simple yet complex – two male protagonists, each having 2 girlfriends, go at each other’s throats. One of the ways they try to outdo the other is by stealing the others’ girlfriend. This gave rise to hilarious sexual situations which took the plot forward. But the storyline kept getting changed as the shooting progressed, based on the whims of the two lead male actors. Sonya understood that they called the shots while the director remained behind the camera. As for the writer who had laboured hard to create a plausible screenplay and taken the trouble to present the director with a bound script, all he could do was to wring his hands in despair as he helplessly watched the emasculation of his work.

Meanwhile, there was a week-long shoot in Dubai, and that is where things unravelled rapidly for Sonya. It so happened that around the same time, the Indian government had announced that the Indian Cricket Board’s T-20 tournament, the Indian Professional League, could not be held in the country since it would coincide with the general elections scheduled. There were various reasons for the decision — security considerations being one. The ICB had, therefore, decided to shift the venue of the tournament’s edition that season to Dubai. The ICB’s move to take the game to Dubai was driven by many considerations. The most important was that the desert city had emerged as go-to place for a variety of glamour-related activities. There was Bollywood, and the rich and famous from different walks of life. For a price, anonymity and security for dubious pleasures were also available. The first-class section of the flight from Mumbai to Dubai was filled with cricketers and stars and crew of KTLK. Sonya drew admiring glances from the cricket fraternity on board. She was already a recognised face, and several cricketers were also Bollywood fans. One of them on board, Monty Chadha, came up to her, dramatically pulled out a $100 bill and requested her autograph.

Sonya was taken aback. She had been approached before, but this was rather brazen. Nonetheless, she was both pleased by the attention and amused at seeing the face of her female co-actors go green with envy. After all, a rank newcomer was stealing the thunder from under their very nose. She smiled politely at Monty and offered her signature with a flourish, adding her best wishes to him in the coming tournament. Monty introduced her to the other players and soon she was conversing with ease with the team members, laughing and joking. Needless to say, a lot of selfies were taken and shared on Social Media. She wasn’t in awe of them for the simple reason that, having grown up in the US, she didn’t know much about the game or its superstars.

This little rendezvous on board the flight was to be another turning point in Sonya Keni’s life, after her break in Hindi films.

# IPL game and the after-game party

Sonya’s agent Prakash was primarily responsible for her film career, but not just that. He had also the job of ensuring that she remained in the limelight through various other platforms because that would contribute to her filmy profile. Which is why he would wriggle out invites for her to parties hosted by high-profile but respected industrialists; appearances at fashion shows; participation in talk shows anchored by nationally-known television personalities; and, as a guest to reality programmes, such as those that judged dance or singing contests.

One day, Prakash came to see Sonya, full of excitement.

“Sonya, I got you a two-minute tete-a-tete with a Darshan Wagle, a popular cricket commentator at the IPL game that is being played in Dubai. Just be yourself and smash it and it will do wonders for your career,” said Prakash.

“Will do,” Sonya replied.

Havin been a news telecaster herself, Sonya aced the face time at the game. She had put up a great show. Towards the end of the interview, the commentator enquired about her current projects. Sonya answered truthfully that she had three offers but would have to sadly choose only one and refuse the other two. Prakash’s face had turned ashen at the response.

He had not yet told the two film companies that Sonya had turned them down. Once they were alone, he reprimanded her, “This is not the way. You don’t ‘turn down’ any offers. You only keep asking for time because one never knows when a female role gets axed.”

Sonya was taken aback that Prakash had not told the other two companies of her decision. “You should have warned me about this before the interview!” she shot back. “And what is wrong in telling upfront that you cannot take a film or two for various reasons?” she further retorted.

She had never seen Prakash so angry. This was his new face. Until now, he had been gentle and persuasive, a benefactor and mentor. She was cut up with him for keeping her in the dark. After all, she ought to have the final say and her agent should not hide matters from her.

But Sonya did not fully understand the complexities of the Bollywood system, which played by its own rules. She was still raw, and Prakash had experience. Angry though she was, she had to go through the wringer at the event which was part of the interview deal. She was obligated to attend the After-Game party. All talk was focused on her, although there was enough of cricket to be spoken about — the match had gone down to the wire. There were at least 300 people in a crowded hall, all swishing down drinks. There was much pinching and groping as the tipsy assemblage got unruly by the minute. Sonya bravely tried to fend off the inebriated, and the last thing she remembered was being escorted to the dance stage by one of the cricketers.

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She woke up with a splitting headache. It was 11 AM and she was in her room, on her bed, yet something did not sound right. She felt a pain in her private parts. She had no memory of who it was that took her to bed. And she was not on the pill. At first, Sonya was in a state of denial; perhaps she had stumbled into her room, having had a drink too many, perhaps a good Samaritan escorted her to her room. But the more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that she had been raped. She wanted a morning-after pill, just to be safe. But this was Dubai and Sonya did not want the news to spread. She called up the front desk and asked to be connected to the hotel doctor. The doctor was in, the front desk said, and she could visit the office in B1 (Basement 1) floor. Sonya freshened up as best as she could and went down to the doctor’s office. She saw another beautiful girl, looking just as forlorn in the reception area.

Preeti Ahuja’s eyes widened with surprise on seeing Sonya walk into the room. She got up and introduced herself. “I am Preeti Ahuja. I loved your role in KAKP.”

Sonya looked at Preeti and wondered if she had seen the woman before.

“Have I seen you before? You look very familiar,” replied Sonya. And then the penny dropped. “I know where! You are the *Nari* in that cute *Nari Shakti* ad. Pleased to meet you!” Sonya shook her hand and the two sat down and began to talk.

One thing led to the other and both found out that they were at the same party the previous night and had similar experiences. Preeti was auditioning for a part and was invited by one of the producers of KTLK for the party. She remembered seeing Sonya dance with a couple of cricketers and film stars but could not place exactly as to whom Sonya left with. She tried remembering who it was that she danced last with, but it felt as if someone had erased her memory. She too had woken up in her own room, dishevelled, with a migraine-like headache and with a dull pain around her genitalia.

The doctor ushered in Preeti. It was a male gynaecologist, and after a pelvic examination, he confirmed vaginal penetration. There were signs of laceration in in the upper vagina region. After the examination, he pushed his glasses back up his nose, adjusted it till it was just right, giving him time to collect his thoughts.

He knew that this was a first for her, and in a gentle tone, said, “You may have been raped but I cannot put it down on my report. I do not have the ‘morning-after’ pill but I can get it and have it sent up.”

He took down her room number and in a gentle voice, advised Preeti to forget that the incident ever happened. She asked him if he could find out if she was given a date-rape drug, but he gently shook his head and turned away.

The doctor knew which side of his bread was buttered. This was a high-end hotel with guests who routinely indulged in such activities, and he had no desire to ask questions but help in the best way possible. Preeti was in shock even as he gently escorted her out to the reception area. She needed time to sit down and think what she needed to do next.

It was Sonya’s turn. The doctor took his time, examined her pelvic area to ensure that there was no abnormal bleeding and told her that he would have the medication sent up to her room too. He cautioned that the pill had to be taken at once and that, if Sonya found any allergy symptoms, he should be informed right away. Sonya got the same spiel from the doctor — saying that he could not put rape into his report, that she should forget about the incident and refrain from reporting it to the authorities and assuring her of his medical services at all times.

As Sonya walked out of the doctor’s office, she saw Preeti still there, staring blankly into space. Two lost souls raped after being spiked with a date-rape drug in their drinks and not even knowing who did it.

Sonya gently touched Preeti’s shoulder and said, “Let us get some coffee. We need to get away from here.”

The time was almost noon and Prakash had sent several text messages, seeking her whereabouts. He must have gone to her room and knocked on the door in vain.

Preeti and Sonya went to the Executive Club room that was open for all guests on the 23rd floor and ordered double-shot espresso coffees. As they sipped the aromatic beverage, each realized that they had their daily engagements to fulfil and agreed to meet up at night. None, for the moment, shared their experiences, but there was no need to. Both knew what they had gone through.

# Maker pitches for an IPL team

Maker Funtoosh Wirewala was getting impatient. 2M would not return his calls nor would he reply to the frantic emails he had sent. He had promised Dipika Sharma’s family that he would get them a backdoor entry into the two expansion teams, the idea of which he had floated precisely to accommodate her. Maker had a hunch that Dipika would ease out the PM at the earliest opportunity and install a more pliable person. The competition for that pliable person was terrific, with the likes of Maida and Dalda falling head over heels to carry out every whim and fancy of the Queen Bee. Having worked in the United Nations where harmony and dislike, friendship and enmity, and tactic and strategy co-existed in an entwined helix form, Maker was confident of getting the better of the other two, when it came to gaining Dipika’s trust. Besides, she was enamoured of people who had foreign accents and spoke in a manner that floored listeners not so much with sense as with the complicated vocabulary used. Adding two new teams was his way of signalling to the Queen Bee that he knew how to take care of her family interests.

The existing council of eight teams was cool to the idea, not sure if adding two more to the list would help or harm them. The owners knew that they were merely faces for political heavyweights such as Madhav Mantri and Maida and had to do their bidding. Each team had a couple of go-to players who would, for a fee, help their cause. With the media looking at each twist with suspicion and blowing it up in the public domain, novel and more opaque ways of fixing had to be devised. Questions like, “Was that a good ball or a bad shot?”; “Did the fielder deliberately miss the catch or was it a case of butter fingers?” were being asked by the viewers, who had become highly circumspect as a result of the education the television channels had imparted to them. The owners were conscious of the downside of adding more games, and of viewer fatigue since already there were far too many games being played, with double headers on the weekends. Plus, with cricket being played year-round, there were not enough fit, quality players to fill up two more teams.

Maker was deep in conversation with a couple of owners in the after-match party in Dubai when he saw Preeti Ahuja sweep in. He was waiting for Manohar Munim to make an appearance so he could collar him on adding the new teams. Finances had already been lined up – every bidder had a chunk of the Sharma money, so regardless of who won the bidding, the investment would be Dipika Sharma’s. Needless to say, the games involving the new teams would be the ones that would have the most twists and turns (real and created).

Prime Minister Dhillon was aware of these machinations (the Intelligence Bureau kept him abreast), but he had a trick or two up his sleeve, which he would use when he felt the need. After all, he had not only survived the pulls and pressures of Dipika Sharma but even surprised her once or twice. Under the garb of fealty, he kept his cards close to the chest and sprung a surprise occasionally.

Maker had arrived the previous night and was whisked away from the private airstrip to a mansion in the Palm Island area, where a lot of retired generals from Pakistan lived. The opulent houses came with a beach front and stunning views of the downtown skyline. A tall man with a military bearing received him at the house, and after the usual pleasantries, assured Maker that his investments in various ventures in Dubai were doing well. They went over the numbers and Maker’s smile grew wider as he appeared to have hit the sweet spot with his investments in the Palm Island project. But he had one concern – Dilawar’s hawala guys in Kochi and New Delhi had hiked their commission fees from 15% to 20% and he was wondering if Mr. D could perhaps hold the line at 15% for the upcoming bonanza that would result in his owning stakes in the 2 new IPL teams. A quick call was all it took for the ISI handler to confirm to Maker that as long as the amounts exceeded Rs.100 crores per game, the commission would be 15%. Maker knew that the total amount gambled in one IPL game ranged between Rs.600 crores to Rs.1,000 crores. 10% of the total take should be doable. He nodded his head in satisfaction. But there was more.

As the ISI man withdrew discreetly, Maker was shown his bedroom (a mini mansion in itself with an attached bar and breath-taking views of the downtown skyline). He changed into his night clothes, humming a Beatles song. As he settled on his bed, he heard a soft knock on his door and when he opened, lo and behold, he saw the stunning Shabnam Khan. A budding Pakistani actor who wanted to break into Bollywood, she wanted to cultivate the suave Maker.

Shabnam had studied in the US, in New York, and was referred to Maker by an erstwhile friend of his from his UN days. After small talk and an offer of fine wine, Shabnam was treated to an impressively rendered but hollow soliloquy by Maker. “Succeeding in Bollywood takes beauty, brains and a certain X-factor. And the camera must love you unconditionally, in every type of ambience. Let me look at you,” he said, as he gently moved her head from right to left, trying to act professional. Maker was gauging his prey even as he was trying to give *gyan*. “It is an importunate, pertinacious occupation, that demands that one be on one’s A-game at all times. One can never predict how one’s movie will do, six to nine months down the road. Viewers are never sated, can be fickle, even exigent. One must develop an ESP, an extrasensory perception and must be able to converse telepathically not just with one’s co-stars but also with the audience.” It was time to reel her in.

Shabnam was following Maker till he hit ‘importunate’ but quickly synced up at A-game. But to Maker’s utter disappointment, she finished her glass of wine, got up, thanked him profusely and left the room. “Opportunity lust, er lost,” cursed Maker under his breath. Even as he heard her car drive off, Maker’s cell phone rang.

It was his latest squeeze, Shilpa Kaul, also based in Dubai. And she was hopping mad. “How dare you come to Dubai and ignore me? And where are you now?” she demanded to know.

Clearly someone had tipped her off after his arrival in Dubai. Since he had not told her of his plans, and for good reason, she was furious. She had suspected that he might be sleeping around just like he did with her – when they met, he was still officially married to his second wife. He had since divorced her and was now gallivanting around the countryside. Since she was not expecting Maker, she was on a brief trip to Canada to take care of some business there. And Casanova was playing in her backyard.

Maker had to douse the fires, and he did so with consummate ease that he had acquired over the years of his infidelity. “Something urgent came up, dear,” he cooed. “My good friend Dipika wanted me to explore the possibility of looking at a few opportunities and I came here on the pretext of watching an IPL game so that it did not look suspicious,” he finished. What he said was true – every act for Dipika had to be done in stealth mode…

Shilpa was not convinced. Both knew that Dubai was the playground of India’s politicians and an IPL game was the watering hole of the bald and the beautiful. “What happened to the deal you were working with 2M?” she probed.

Maker had promised that Shilpa would be the face for the equity of his money into one of the 2 new IPL teams and she wanted to ensure that he did not welch on his promise. Reiterating his commitment, Maker signed off with sweet nothings and decided to hit the sack. Tomorrow was game day and he hoped to get lucky.

Dubai was full of fixers who would set anyone up with anything for a fee. Exotic drugs, girls from various countries to perform services ranging from the positions in Kama Sutra to the unimaginable, drinks mixed with drugs to experience alternate universes, and so on. 2M was running late, deliberately, because he did not want to meet Maker as he had some other parties too that were interested in getting in on the IPL action. Their needs trumped Maker’s. But he could not tell Maker that – no one said no to a minister considered close to Dipika and lived to tell the story. So, he waited till the party was dying down and breezed in.

“Maker, long time no see!” 2M used a yankee phrase to break the ice. Maker eased 2M to a corner and reminded him of his promise to allow his consortium to bid.

2M was a master at massaging big egos. That’s how he had risen in life and in his career. “Totally, bro! We will ensure that your consortium wins no matter what others bid!” he winked. “I must catch a flight to London to take care of some business and I will stay in touch. Ta-ta for now.”

Maker was not satisfied with the meeting. He had done similar stunts himself. But this was a public place and he had to hold his temper. Just as he looked around him, he saw Preeti dancing with an upcoming fast bowler. He turned his gaze to his fixer who took the hint and nodded back. The die was cast. Maker wanted a tryst with Preeti.

# Girgut returns to Delhi

Girgut woke up, groggy. He was to have left for Delhi last night but had overslept. What happened after the party yesterday left him dissatisfied. He had arrived at his penthouse hotel room, showered quickly, put on a freshly pressed Dark grey Safari suit, and stepped out to the After-Game party. By the time his security detail got him to the club where the action was, many had left and there was no sign of Sonya Keni. A few starlet hopefuls were lingering around, tipsy and gave him an I-have-seen-you-before look. There was no gushing of respect and recognition or requests for selfies. It irritated him that he was not being recognised and worse there was no sign of the star he was supposed to meet.

Looking around, he decided to chat with a cricketer he had known for a few years, while the fixer left to find out where Sonya was. After a few minutes, the fixer returned and whispered something in Girgut’s ears. Girgut’s face brightened considerably and he made polite noises of having to leave for the airport and extricated himself from the cricketer and left the party.

The two of them walked over to an elevator that was far away from the bank of lifts for the use of the hotel guests. It was the exclusive, express chute that served the VIPs. Girgut was supposed to meet Sonya in his suite (as a way to impress her of his prestige and position in the totem pole of the Indian government) but he had to settle to see her in her room. The fixer assured him that the CCTV cameras have been turned off for the floor so Girgut would not be caught entering or exiting Sonya’s room.

He quickly entered the room and took in the view – the lights were dimmed, and soothing music was playing but Sonya was nowhere to be seen. The fixer has discreetly left after letting him into the room and would return an hour or so later, in time for Girgut to leave for Delhi on a private jet. Girgut had to hit the ground running the following morning and calculating the time differences, he needed to leave Dubai at 1 AM or so in order to land in Delhi by 6 AM IST. So much to do and so little time.

Girgut entered the bedroom looking for Sonya and saw that she was fast asleep, in her party wear. He could not make sense of what he was seeing but time was not on his side. He would make her acquaintance later and quickly disrobed and raped Sonya who stirred but was too drugged to fight back. Spent, Girgut cleaned up in the bathroom, made sure that he had not left anything behind and texted his fixer that he was ready. The whole saga had taken no more than fifteen minutes.

Girgut came back to his penthouse suite and thought since he had some time, that he will take a quick nap. He quickly drifted into a deep sleep and before he knew, he had slept for 4 hours and was going to miss his morning meeting. Plus, he would have to do some serious explaining to Shyamala, his wife. Gathering himself, told his secretary that he will be ready to leave for the airport in 30 minutes, thanking god for private jets, and stepped into the shower.

# Sonya confronts Prakash

Sonya suspected that Prakash knew what had happened (how else could the rapist have known which room she was in?) but did not want to broach this topic. But she needed to know if she could trust him or not, so she decided to test Prakash without letting him know that she was drugged.

In between shots, she drew Prakash aside and asked, “Prakash, I went back to my room and was about to sleep when I heard a lot of steps in the hallway and commotion. Someone was knocking on the room next door and muttering loudly in Hindi, *Darwaza khol!* and not seeing any response, cursing loudly. Did the minister ever come?” Even as she was asking this question, she looked at Prakash’s eyes and body language for any signs of betrayal.

Prakash avoided eye contact as he replied, “No! I never heard from the Minister. Let me find out what happened,” and bolted from the scene.

At that instant, Sonya knew Prakash was complicit and that only made her angrier. She had applied the Volatile Conundrum technique, something she had studied while in college, to catch Prakash on a lie and she had. Prakash not only failed to make eye contact (a dead giveaway that he was lying), he lied through his teeth. The technique put a liar in a position where he/ she had to make a snap decision. Prakash must have known about the drug and perhaps come to the conclusion that she was awake even after she went to her room. Maybe he thought the drug took longer to take effect. When put on the spot, he blurted out the first thought that came to his mind.

“Liars, hypocrites and scoundrels,” she muttered under breath. But her shot was ready, and she was too much of a professional to let the incident distract her. Looking into the lights, she turned on her 1000-watt smile and sailed through the shot. A few hours later, the director called it a “wrap” and Sonya rushed back to her room to collect her thoughts.

She figured the drug was mixed into her drink when she had turned around to watch the dance floor or when she was dancing. So, the bartender must have known what was happening and who it was that messed up her drink. But why would Prakash allow her to be drugged when he was trying to get her to meet the minister? Something did not add up.

# Preeti and Bollywood

It was three weeks after her fall that Preeti was able to start walking short distances without crutches. She distinctly remembered her first attempt – the pain was blinding and if it were not for Steve gathering her in his ample arms, she would have collapsed in a heap.

“Easy, easy Preeti. *Aaraam se, aaraam se,”* Steve whispered in her ears as he gently carried her back to the sofa and eased her in it.

Frustration at not being able to walk was writ large on her face. “But I want to walk! How long can I be a burden on you?

“You? Burden?? Ha!” Steve laughed it off, as he walked over to the kitchen counter and peeled her a baby banana – her favourite. The fruit is only four to five inches, but it has an intensely sweet flavour, especially when eaten ripe.

Every time she would decide to test her feet, Steve was with her holding her in case she stumbled, showing her strengthening exercises that perhaps only specialists could do. When Preeti decided to move in with Steve from the following quarter (UCLA practices quarterly system instead of semester) it seemed the right thing to do. They loved each other’s company but there were some spells of doubt too.

Some nights Steve would wake up screaming or shake violently while being asleep, due to Post Trauma Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Preeti would feel helpless as Steve would convulse and fall back into a deep sleep and would wake up the next morning and act as if nothing happened. Slowly Preeti drew Steve out of his shell and he started relating to his war experiences in Afghanistan, of not knowing when the next Improvised Explosive Device (IED) would explode. He had lost a half dozen friends in a Taliban ambush that lasted for 8 hours as his unit was trapped and had to shoot its way out to safety. The experience had scarred him and occasionally surfaced during his dreams.

While Steve just related one incident, Preeti had a lurking suspicion that he had worse experiences that he was not disclosing, perhaps because he was not sure how Preeti would react. Overall, it was a great relationship and Steve was a great raconteur who could regale Preeti with interesting stories all day long. She suspected that some of them were made up, but she was mesmerized by his story telling ability. Steve was easy to get along with, was not judgmental (unfortunately for her, many of the boys she knew back home were) and always willing to listen.

Before long, Preeti was done with her Communications diploma and headed back to Mumbai. Steve was also finishing his stint and headed back to Special Forces.

“I guess it is goodbye time…,” Preeti said.

“It does not have to be. I will always remember you and am close to you,” Steve hugged her tight. “Remember, I am coming back to Afghanistan in a week’s time and we can always stay in touch using this secure email system…”

“This is a secure browser and you need to click on this link to send me a secure email,” Steve explained. He then installed it on her laptop and also sent her a secure email from his computer.

“Got it!” Preeti said and pinged back with a “Wassup?”

Having established a two-way communication, they repaired to spend their last night together. At least for the time being.

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Preeti was not sure what to do next – pursue a career in Communications or do Modelling/ Bollywood. When an Ad opportunity came and had an interesting twist, she grabbed it.

It was a Mumbai Women Police advertisement – The 30-second commercial went like this:

A Woman Traffic Inspector tries to flag down a speeding car but the driver (and the co-driver) laugh at her and keep going, and the traffic cop takes out a hair pin and throws it at the receding car. The hairpin catches the rear tire, causing it to deflate and eventually come to a stop – right in front of the Police Station. Obey the Law - *Nari Shakti aap ko kahin bhi Rok Sakti*, ends the ad.

The swift pivot and shoot action by Preeti caught the audience’s eyes and the ad was a hit. Suddenly, the country was chanting *Nari Shakti* (Woman Power) and the Ad-World had discovered a new star. She decided to get a manager to help her navigate the Bollywood circus and took the help of the Director who had shot the *Nari Shakti* ad. She told him that she was on a tight budget and needed someone who could work on a contingency basis.

The Ad-man looked at her in surprise and said, “No one works in Mumbai on a commission basis! What you need is someone who is good and out of work and hungry. I have a friend, Nirav Chopra, who is brilliant and works with several up and coming stars. Let me see what I can do…”

Preeti was in luck. A few days later, she got a call from Nirav. He had been riding high with a couple of stars on whom fortune had smiled but lost one of them recently. He had just paid a large sum for a flat of his own and needed to find someone of equal talent/ beauty and he thought Preeti was his ticket to glory. He had seen her ad and clearly the Ad-Director had told him of her professionalism, so he wanted to sign her up. They came to an agreement that the first year would be on commission basis and after that, Nirav can expect a steady payment cycle.

The agreement signed, Nirav started working his contacts in the Bollywood world and chanced upon an Ad opportunity that was being shot in Dubai.

“Hi Preeti, I have an idea!” started Nirav. He was a bright and chirpy person, especially in the mornings. For Preeti, who liked to stay up late and wake up later, his phone call had shattered her early morning dream, which her grandma had predicted usually comes true.

“Uh… who’s it?” Preeti answered doozily.

“It’s Nirav, your humble manager. A thousand apologies for waking you up so rudely. Hope I did not disturb your dreams!”

“As a matter of fact, you did. In my dream, a hulk was serenading me with *You are my theme for a dream* and you rudely interrupted it by calling me. In my dream. I was so mad that I was chasing you with a broom stick, and when you got into your car and tried to run away, I got on the broom stick and flew by you, pulled you out of your sorry car and threw you 20 feet away into the Arabian Sea… So wassup?” By now Priya was bright as daylight and surprised at her creativity – perhaps someday she would become a script writer.

“Ha ha! I know you look bewitching but for a moment you sounded like one too! *Suno,* I have an offer for an ad to be shot in Dubai with some cricketers who are playing there. The IPL after game party in Dubai will be a blast. We will meet the movers and shakers and who knows where that will lead to?”

“Seriously? How much will the travel and stay cost?”

“The Ad-company will cover most of it. We can travel Business Class round trip and I will get us reservations as the Burj Imarat. That is where the team is staying and where the action will be.”

“OK, but please keep the costs low.”

“I understand. I will do my best.”

And they were off to Dubai.

Preeti checked into the Burj and was going through her messages and found that she had just enough time to freshen up and go watch the IPL game in a booth that the Ad-company had reserved. She showered quickly, put on a nice T-shirt and expensive jeans that hugged her. “Not bad,” she told herself, as she heard a knock on the door. It was Nirav.

# Co-operate or Close shop

**The night after the rape**

It was close to 9 PM when Preeti knocked on Sonya’s door. They both had to mingle with the crew, shoot some pictures, make small talk and smile and walk about as if they were enjoying it all while there was an emptiness inside – a violation of personal space, of being shamed. It was not as if they were Victorian in their sensibilities – there was the odd fling and some relationships, but it was consensual. What happened the previous night still hurt deep.

“What time did you come to the party?” asked Sonya, starting the conversation.

Preeti thought for a second and replied, “Around 11:45. Nirav was there with me and we met a few cricket players – I remember shaking the hands of Monty Chadha, Arnold Taylor and Salman Rustomji. All of them complimented me on my Nari Shakti ad and then the talk veered to the last ball thriller that played out in the stadium.”

Preeti continued, “We then met a few rich-looking individuals who were undressing me with their eyes, but I am used to that. I moved on and Nirav was talking to someone and I was making my way to the dance floor… wait, I think it was Monty, who asked me out for a dance and amidst the strobe lights and noise, we were just trying to make small talk. After that I sat down on a bar stool and asked for a Michelob Lite and I saw the bartender top a beer jug from the tap and give it to me. There were so many people around the bar that it was difficult to make conversation. I turned away from the bar to see who pinched me and could not find the perp and I probably spent a few minutes looking around before turning back to finish my beer. If someone mixed something, it must have been then,” she concluded.

Sonya replied, “I am trying to play back what happened. I remember looking at my watch before entering the party room – it was around 12:15 AM. I was immediately mobbed by a garrulous crowd of what appeared to be supporters of one of the teams, who were already tipsy and were trying to grope me.”

“Men! Absolute pigs!!” retorted Preeti.

“I was looking for Prakash who said he would connect me with someone important, a politician, who was going to be there just for the party. I managed to get out of the grip of the rowdy lot and started casting about to see where Prakash was…” Sonya continued.

“Then I saw Prakash’s text. He said that he was on his way and is waiting for the Minister who had not yet arrived. I had some time to kill, so I went to a less crowded bar, away from the main entrance and sat down. There were a couple of cheerleaders and gawkers but compared to the rest of the room, it was sparse. Iordered myself a daiquiri and texted Prakash back, telling him where I was.”

Preeti waited as Sonya gathered her thoughts. “Suddenly there was a commotion on the dance floor, and I turned around to see one of the dancers slip and fall awkwardly. The sea of humanity parted and allowed him to get back on his feet and the dancing continued. I turned my attention back to my drink and finished it. The politician never came. And that is all I remember,” Sonya concluded.

Sonya and Preeti were angry. They wanted to get to the bottom of the matter – find out who it was that was mixing date rape drugs into the drinks and then who was keeping tabs on them so they could follow them to their rooms and rape them. Was it a syndicate who were singling out women? Two of a kind seemed too coincidental. That the Doctor was not of much help made things worse.

In a foreign land that was debauched, they felt helpless; they had heard of Casting couch, but being new in the industry, had not faced it – yet. Were pictures taken? What about videos? And how many were there? As thoughts screamed through their head at the speed of light, anger was building up slowly but steadily. This had to be responded – there had to be a way.

# The Castrator

India’s premier defence training institution, the National Defence Academy (NDA) Is located about 17 kilometres from Pune on the banks of lake Khadakwasla and spread over more than 32 square kilometres of area. The land had been donated by the government of the former Bombay state. It was modelled after the United States Military Academy at West Point. It was intentionally chosen to be on a lake shore, with hills and rocky terrain close-by to help train the recruits, who were selected typically at the age of 16, right after they had completed high school.

Getting into the academy is tough – about 450,000 applicants wrote the written examination followed by extensive interviews by the Services Selection Board (SSB) which covered general aptitude, psychological as well as physical tests, and social skills, among others. Once the applicants meet this challenge, they have to undergo an extensive medical test. Of them, only about 6,300 make it to the next level, an interview. Finally, just around 640 finally make it to the academy every year. The training is tough, intense and pushes them to the limits. The students have to train for a total of six terms (two terms per year), and once they do it successfully, they go to their respective wings — Army, Navy or Air Force — depending on their specialty.

But even that is not the end. The chosen ones are despatched to their respective training academies (for Army, Navy and Air Force) located in other parts of the country. Once they pass out from there, there are granted commission in the Indian Armed Forces.

As a child, The Castrator was uncontrollable. He was obstinate to the point of being rude, overflowed with arrogance, got into scraps with the bullies of the neighbourhood, and often emerged with the upper hand in the tussles.

He was robustly built, with the effects of gym-visits and the heavy-weight training clearly evident. If there was one area where he was disciplined, it was in his exercises. Without fail, six times a week, he would visit the nearby gymnasium equipped with modern facilities and go through his exercise schedule with his partner and trainer. After a rigorous two-hour workout that he put in, The Castrator would walk out in his changed clothes, with muscles rippling underneath. He loved to show them off.

While he was sharp and intelligent, his marks never showed it – it was as if he was satisfied with being mediocre.

Complaints about him routinely arrived home before he did. When he was little, his Dad would cane him. As he grew, his Dad gave up and the only one he would listen to was his *Didi*, his elder sister.

*Didi* would often be the one cleaning up his scrapes, finding the right band-aid and applying salve. She would also talk to him like an adult, in a soothing way.

“Why do you erupt at the slightest provocation, *Chhotu*?” *Didi* asked.

“What do you want me to do, *Didi?* Vinod brings his bat and once he gets out, he wants to go home! What about the rest of us? Don’t we deserve a turn at batting?”

*Didi* stroked his hair gently as she replied, “If you come first in the class, I will talk to Daddy and ask him to get you a bat.”

“But I hate studies, *Didi!*” he replied, still angry. “I get it the first time – instead, I am being asked to memorize it like rote. Once I get it, I get it; I don’t need to read it again and again.”

On a whim, he sat for the NDA entrance examination. Nobody — neither his family nor his friends and or acquaintances, believed he would get through. But he passed. Not just that, he proved to be an exemplary cadet in the months to come, often topping his class at the NDA. By now he realized that NDA is a place that shunned mediocrity. If there was something to be done, it had to be done in the best possible way or not done at all. Since he was at the very top of his class, he could choose whichever branch he wanted. He chose the Army.

When he returned home after the three-year training program, he had changed dramatically, and for the better. His parents and siblings could not believe their eyes. They were naturally proud of him, and somewhat sheepish at having underestimated him. Now they paraded him before the neighbours like he was an object of attraction they had recently acquired. His parents had been apprehensive of his future, as their other children were brilliant at studies. Seeing him decorated as an officer was not even a dream they had nurtured. But now, he had found his calling – or so they thought.

His Dad was all tears as he captured him in a bear-like hug and held him long – without saying so, he was telling his son, “Sorry… I underestimated you.”

Freed from the hug, he held his Dad’s gaze and replied with his eyes, “Don’t be. Thanks for all your love.”

He then turned to his mother and swept her off his feet, “Are you making me *Gajar ka halwa* (carrot sweet)?*”*

Mom was quick with her repartee. “*Kitne kilo chahiye?* (How many kilos do you want?)*”*

His *Didi* was pursuing her MBA at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A) and could not attend his graduation function, but he wrote her a lovely letter, saying. “*Didi*, All I am today is because of you. You are the one who always believed in me and I will never forget that ever in my life. Yours, *Chhotu*.”

The off-the-books Special Forces

Seeing the aptitude and ability of The Castrator, the academy director recommended that he be considered for Special Ops Forces, a group so secretive that even many in the Army did not know of its existence. SpecOps, as they are called, are tasked to do exactly what their name suggests – Special Operations, especially in hostile territory. They trained in extractions from behind enemy lines, equipped with life-saving skills such as being able to do small surgeries/ stapling gun-shot wounds and so on in the field. The unit sizes are typically no more than a dozen, recruited from one or two batches spread over a few years, so there is a natural leader that emerges from a tight-knit group.

None of the operations that The Castrator was part of, was ever reported – his unit was an extremely successful one, having near 100% success rate. Except for the one instance when it had its target in the crosshairs and had to merely squeeze the trigger, the operation was called off by the high command, which in turn had to accede to the wishes of the politicians. The target was an extortionist, drug peddler, pimp, smuggler, and militant rolled into one, and had taken up residence in a neighbouring country inimical to India. The recce operation took months, many were bribed to facilitate the operation, but it all came to nought because some politicians were worried that the nabbing the man would lead to his spilling the beans on their carnal exploits.

Once the operation was called off, the unit returned safely to base, but The Castrator was disillusioned. He and his team had taken inordinate amount of risks and eliminated threats along the way. The unit had left its footprint in enemy territory. If the hostile neighbour did not know of the SpecOps existence, it did now. The cover had been blown just because some high-level politician had stuff to hide, which he feared would have come out, had the assassination or capture gone through.

Just around this time, a private military company, The Akademi, came calling. Established by an ex-Navy SEAL (US Navy Sea, Air, and Land Team), the company was looking to recruit security experts for its Middle East sector of operations. The pay was good, the responsibilities light – more importantly, it was based in Dubai. The firm had heard of The Castrator, and he was contacted. The Castrator thought it over for a couple of days before deciding to accept the offer. The contract was for a period of 3 years, with overtime bonus and all-expenses-paid breaks to India. It would also give him the right amount of resources and contacts in case he decided to branch out on his own any time in the future.

# Steve and The Castrator meet

**Somewhere between Abu Dhabi and Dubai**

The Castrator drove up to a desolate part of the beach, halfway between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, to meet up with Steve Langer. Steve was in United States Special Forces and had deployed in Afghanistan and thumbed a flight that did sorties between Abu Dhabi’s Al Dhafra Air Base and Afghanistan. He had to build a back story about wanting to take care of some personal papers and errands. Preeti had briefed him about what had happened in Dubai and her meeting with The Castrator. Steve and he then communicated via secure email. Even though they worked for different countries, they instinctively understood what the other person was thinking.

It was late in the evening and the sun was going down as they met for the first time. Steve had brought with him beer and sandwiches for the meeting and they opened the back of the Army Hummer that Steve was driving and sat down to talk. Steve spread out the tools and medicine that he had brought for the job; he had fashioned a castrator used on horses and sharpened the jaws where the two met to cut through skin so that the process would be as quick as possible.

“The first step is making the person completely unconscious. Here is chloroform spray that will make the person sleep for up to 4 hours. Inject Lidocaine on the scrotum area. Then do the castration procedure. Once that is finished, apply the blood clot medication. Make sure that the medication is working – it should take no more than 30 seconds to form a scab and stop the bleeding. Wait for the area to become dry. Here is a nozzle spray that you can squirt on the affected area. It also acts like an anti-tetanus shot. The whole area would be numb for 24 hours. That is enough time for you to vanish. By the way, you never told me how you are going to get into the suite and out without getting detected by the CCTV cameras,” Steve said.

“That is easy for my first target – he is a low-level Minister and is coming to move some kickbacks to tax havens. Usually he makes sure that the CCTV cameras for his floor are turned off just before the girls come to his room. I have observed this in the past. As soon as the guy goes to sleep, the girls leave. They usually go to the executive lounge located on the 23rd floor, smoke a cigarette or two, have a drink and then leave. During this time, the CCTV is still off as it gets turned on only after the girls leave the hotel. This is on the off chance that one of the girls was staying longer. There is a 15-30-minute window during which I can do the job and exit.”

“How do you know the itinerary of a Minister of India in advance?” Steve asked.

“You will be amazed how much a loose tongue reveals, after downing a few drinks! Much preparation happens before a Ministerial visit, especially in meeting the specific requirements of ahem, some ministers,” he replied, winking.

“One more thing,” Steve said, handing him a pair of goggles that looked unusual. “You need both your hands to perform the surgery and you may want to video tape the whole thing, just to be sure; it will also come in handy in case you need to buy your way out of a tricky situation. These Goggle-Cams are Infra-Red (IR) enabled so they can film amazing details even in darkness. As soon as you turn this on, the video feed will start getting recorded at this web address. Here is the access code and the password. Once you are finished, take off the goggles and it will automatically shut itself off,” he finished.

Steve also gave him a spare pack of batteries for the Goggle-Cam and said, “these are rechargeable. While one is being used, the other can be charged.”

The Castrator put them on, and they felt very light. “Titanium,” Steve smiled, “and very strong. They are plain glasses with IR capability. They will record at 720p resolution. All features will be clearly visible even in complete darkness. Good luck.”

He started rummaging through the sack Steve gave – there were a pack of latex gloves so thin that when he put them on, it fit like natural skin. “So your fingerprints won’t register anywhere,” Steve grinned. Their colour was transparent and fit so well that it blended perfectly with his hand.

“The skin stapler with forceps will close the skin and the staple itself would dissolve into the skin, to sew the edges along the cut and ensure that it would help in the healing. This was just in case the scab was not formed properly, since you say the Minister is a diabetic,” he added.

The Castrator figured that after the job was finished and the place cleaned up, he had to wait for a minute or two to ensure that Rocky would not bleed to death. He did not want to put any band-aids – he wanted Rocky to take as long as possible to not realize that he was missing an organ.

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“Let us go over your plan,” Steve started. The sandwiches were eaten, the six-pack of beer consumed and there were just a few potato chips left.

The Castrator thought for a bit and replied, “I am on duty that day. My offices are on the 157th floor with huge sets of monitors with controls to look at a plethora of cameras. The party room is located on the 34th floor. From there, entourage will have to go to the 82nd floor, which is where Rocky will be staying. They will be routed to the Executive Access elevator, which skips all floors till 80 and then goes up one floor at a time. The cameras from the party room to the elevator, the cameras in the elevators and along the walkway to Rocky’s suite will be switched off. They will remain off for the duration the girls are in Rocky’s room. Since there is no exact way of knowing when the action will move to Rocky’s suite, they will turn the cameras off about 15 minutes prior to the party winding down, just to be safe.

“I am getting off my shift at 12 in the night and instead of heading home, I will hang around one of the restaurants located in the 84th floor and will be watching the IP address of the CCTV cameras of the 82nd floor on my iPad. I go there all the time so there won’t be any surprises. As soon as the feed stops, the picture will disappear on my smart phone and I will walk down two flights of stairs and get inside Rocky’s room before he gets a chance to come in. There is a service closet in these executive suites, and I will hide and wait there till the girls leave. There is a slight possibility that the security personnel accompanying the minister may do a scan of the premises before he comes in but, in my experience, this is rarely done. They do it before the Minister checks in and that’s it. All said and done, I will have a window of about 30 minutes to get the job done and leave before the CCTV cameras are turned on.”

“What about the CCTV cameras on the flight of stairs from 84 to 82?” Steve queried. The Castrator smiled and said “there are no CCTV cameras there. All I need to do is stay in the blind spot of the 84th floor corridor camera and leave down the flight of stairs. I have done a dry run and checked the cameras already and they did not catch me.” Steve was impressed with the meticulous preparation, and he did not impress easily. He knew that the Special Forces Groups of the Indian Armed forces were good; he was finding it out first-hand.

# Tryst with destiny

Saturday

R K Ranga (Rocky as he was called) was fair skinned, unusual for someone from the south of India, where the sun really beat down. A convent education, combined with an all-expenses-plus-donation-led degree from an Ivy League university in Public Studies, had given him a suave, sophisticated look and an American accent, which drew admiring glances from the Lutyens’ crowd of Delhi in general and the fairer sex in particular. Rocky did not mind the attention, and indeed took full advantage of it. Those who didn’t possess his qualities envied him and plunged into an inferiority complex, while those that did instantly took him into their inner circle.

Rocky was in the business of making deals, or more precisely, making deals happen. In polite terms, he was an enabler; in the crass and more accurate description, he was a middleman. To the world, he was a confirmed politician, and quite an important one. He was a minister too in the government, holding the Minor Irrigation portfolio. Still in his mid-forties, he was among the youngest faces in the ministry. In normal circumstances, all of this would not have given him the heft that he commanded, but he was close to his party’s high command and could swing deals as deftly as Tiger Woods wields the golf club. Those who dealt with him on his terms were assured of favourable results, and Rocky almost always delivered.

He could not be accused of being directionless in life. He was clear in his mind that by the time he turned fifty, he would be so financially secure that he could give up all the wheeling-dealing and retreat into a farmhouse nestled in one of the Himalayan towns — even run a charitable institution to shore up his personal stature in society while in retirement. He had contempt for middle-aged people who struggled to make both ends meet, and even more contempt for the elderly who were dependent on family to survive. In his view, they were failures in life and would be better off being dead.

Right now, Rocky was in Dubai. A quick dash to this happening city had to be done to set some papers right. Kickbacks in a recent defence deal he had successfully managed to close, had arrived at his account in a Dubai-based bank, and it had to be spread around tax havens without delay. Even though the bank was officially closed on Saturdays, the HNI (High Net-worth Individuals) Manager had rushed to Burj Imarat, for Rocky to sign the necessary papers. Such transactions could have of course been done through the wire, sitting in India, but Rocky wanted to be doubly sure. Besides, he had a crucial meeting to attend with an important person.

Leaving quietly from a small airstrip near Meerut on a Lear Jet requisitioned from a Mumbai-based jeweller indebted to him for a past favour, Rocky arrived around noon in Dubai and got all the paperwork and gossip out of the way by 8 PM. A party room was requisitioned for a select few who sought an audience with him. There was always something that needed to be done. Permits were needed, an uncooperative bureaucrat had to be managed, a rival to be taken care of. Rocky had gained mastery over such matters. He did not hesitate to use any or all means, fair and foul, to get around problems. The means justified the end for him, and scruples had no place in his scheme of things. He used foot-soldiers of the underworld to rough up particularly obstinate people. One dreaded his calls because, while these conversations began on a polite note they invariably turned into disguised and at time brazen threats. Those who believed they could get away by not answering those calls found to their rather immense cost the folly of doing so.

The conversation in the party room veered to the changes in taxation laws in various havens and the new go-to-places to park illegal monies. It was decided that a small portion of the loot shall be placed in Cayman Islands, the new best place, which promised to ask no questions on the source of income. An autonomous British overseas territory in the Caribbean Sea, the Cayman is a bunch of small islands that has no recorded archaeological evidence of an indigenous population. With neither history nor civilisation worth the name, its administrators hit upon the idea of converting it into a global financial hub and secure some status. Over the years, it has emerged as an offshore tax haven, and got blacklisted by the European Union for its efforts. But that did not stop the greedy HNIs from flocking to this miniature island, which asked few questions on the origin of the money they were keeping.

But history was far from the minds of those who had gathered in Dubai that day. They had other important matters to attend to — the division of spoils. The following was agreed to - Sixty percent would go to the party chief, a third of that for the party, a sixth for the bureaucracy and the rest for others. Rocky insisted that no one write these down but commit to memory the 6-2-1-1 formula. When asked about his own cut, Rocky first pretended to be abashed and brushed off the suggestion. However, sensing that one of his guests was taking his words at face value and getting up to leave with some relief, Rocky quickly asked him to lop off 20 percent of the top line. He nodded in the direction of his personal secretary who then whisked away the visitor. The fruitful meeting had come to an end, and Rocky would be richer by 20 percent. He would celebrate the actual figure later.

One of the lucky ones among the others, a Dubai-based jeweller, was calculating in his head how his bribe of Rs.100 crores will split as Rs.20 crores for Rocky, Rs.48 crores for the party president, Rs.16 crores for the party, and eight crores each for bureaucrats and the rest. But this was not all; parking the money safely was critical. The amounts would be put into a complicated set of blind trusts spread over three continents, thus making it near impossible for any probe agency which smells a rat to trace the real beneficiary.

“Here are the detailed set of instructions. Call this company and they will create a shell company with a full slate of Directors, accountants, and bank accounts in tax havens. Everything is above the board. The whole process can be set in motion and completed within 24 hours,” explained Rocky’s personal secretary.

“But you are asking me to do all without taking care of my request! All the money is being paid in advance! I am feeling like I am going down a dark alley at night with no lights and only hope. What assurance do I have that the minister will keep his word?”

“Don’t worry sir-ji. It will be done. You have my word and my word is as good as the minister’s word. The ED fines on your Indian company will be reduced to 200 crores from 1000 crores.”

ED or the Enforcement Directorate had levied a Rs.1000 crores fine on the jeweller who had fled India and was holed up in Malta. He had come down to meet Rocky to negotiate the fine amount. If everything worked out right, the jeweller’s properties and inventory (worth Rs.500 crores) in India would be freed by the ED. In exchange, he must cough up 100 crores to the Minister. The market value of his assets being frozen by the ED was close to Rs.1500 crores (the value was understated) so the jeweller would get to recover Rs.1200 crores of this property, after paying the new, reduced amount of Rs.200 crores fine.

With the hard work done and as the desert cooled, it was time for recreation. Suddenly, from apparently nowhere, a dozen girls, all scantily dressed, and from various nationalities, swooped in and the all-male audience of about 10 — including the jeweller, were soon opening bottles of Champagne, Black Label Scotch Whisky, Hors d'oeuvres, drugs and Cuban cigars. Someone had cleverly arranged the pairings as young escorts zoomed in on their mates, leaving Rocky in the company of three nubile babes. After a heavy dinner consisting of three different meats, four flavours of ice-cream and Baklava, it was time for the hard-working Rocky to retire to his suite.

In a carefully choreographed move, Rocky left first, minutes before which the security detail contacted the hotel desk and disabled the CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) cameras on the floor where Rocky had retreated. The girls were whisked into his suite. It was close to 2 AM Dubai time, and a different kind of action was about to start.

Rocky, for his youth and bluster, needed help to rise to the occasion. The blue pill, along with three more shots of a cocktail that was sweet, hot and intoxicating at the same time, raised his temperature. The girls were teasing him, divesting each other of their clothing, one handkerchief at a time as he sank into the practiced arms of the escorts.

An hour of unbridled passion ensued wherein all peaks and valleys were explored and travelled. An hour later, exhausted but satisfied, he had fallen into a snore-filled stupor. The clock was nudging 4 AM.

Sunday

Rocky woke up with a start and looked at his watch. It was 11 AM Dubai time and he needed to be back in Delhi by evening for the Sunday cocktail at the Supremo’s house. He could still make it if he rushed and left by 1 PM. As he showered, he felt a sense of unease but could not put a finger to it. Perhaps it was the hangover of the past hours, he thought to himself as he sought to brush aside the discomfort and think of the productive hours that lay ahead. It never occurred to him that he was missing a vital organ. The effects of anaesthesia still lingered.

Back home, the cocktail party had the usual razzmatazz as guests, that included ministers, ambled about, making small talk and looking smug. There was the usual bunch of ministerial hopefuls too, who were trying hard to catch the eye of the Supremo. They knew that Dipika Sharma, the person wielding power trusted his judgment. The heir apparent swooped in with a girl on each arm, followed by Maker Funtoosh Wirewala, a minister whose primary claim to fame was the ability to conjure new words in English that only he knew the meaning of — besides of course his glibly delivered one-liners in British accent. Rocky circulated in the crowd for a while, addressing the invitees in his most polite manner before he could have a word with the Supremo in private and whisper that the task was completed. The normally inscrutable look on the Supremo’s face dissolved into a smile.

Those among the gathering who chanced to glance in their direction could only guess at the happiness. Some of them smelled the success of a political strategy to keep rising by doing things others wouldn’t dare. Others had different ideas. But all were unanimous on the fact that Rocky was not only the rising star in his party but that he would been soon be given a Cabinet rank portfolio. It was public knowledge that the Prime Minister did not much fancy Rocky but had been compelled to make him a minister and tolerate him. But he had worked hard to earn the PM’s respect and now the winds appeared to be blowing in his favour. Who could blame him if he were helping the winds along?

As he was driving back home, Rocky felt a dull pain in his scrotum. He now felt certain that something was amiss. As soon as he reached home, he went to the restroom and discovered to his horror that he was missing his testicles. As realization slowly crept in, a million thoughts went through his mind. How could he have slept through the procedure? And how come he did not feel much, except a dull pain? And what about the fact that he being a diabetic, could have just bled to death? Determined to find answers, he called up his personal physician Dr. Arvind Rajan in Chennai and requested him to fly over to Delhi immediately. The only thing he was certain was that the incident had happened during his orgy with the girls in Dubai.

# Where did a part of me go?

Monday

Arvind was a general practitioner (GP) who had been in school with Rocky. Both shared fond memories of growing up together in relative prosperity, chasing their dreams as each sought out the career they wanted to pursue. Rocky targeted Law, for which he enrolled in an Ivy League School, but when he failed to garner the minimum marks required, the Dean suggested that Rocky pursue Public Studies instead. It was a notch lower than Law, but it was relatively an easy curriculum. Besides, as Rocky realised soon, it allowed him time to do what he liked the most – chase skirts. Arvind, on the other hand, was focused on being a doctor and worked hard to get his MBBS and then an MD. In every other way too, he was the opposite of his friend - studious, meticulous, serious-minded in general and not given to wayward tendencies.

But Dr. Rajan’s most admirable trait was that he knew how to keep secrets. It was a quality that Rocky, with many secrets to hide, liked. There had never been an occasion when the good doctor had not respected his special patient’s privacy. The politician-fixer had used his services to be treated of a variety of sexually transmitted diseases. The two had developed a close friendship over the years, and this gave Dr. Arvind the freedom to often rebuke Rocky for his perilous lifestyle and advise him to mend his ways. So far, his opinions had been like water off a duck’s back. Rocky kept coming back and Dr. Arvind kept ridding him of the latest ailment. Someday, there would be a dead-end, the doctor had cautioned but Rocky was beyond caring. Not that he was a fool; he understood that he was hurtling towards doom but could not bring himself to reforming. In short, Rocky was addicted. To alcohol, to drugs, and to sex.

Dr. Rajan had a privileged clientele. He only saw patients with a prior appointment, and every single one of them was cleared by him beforehand. There were no walk-ins, no riffraff, so to say. The result was that a casual observer would be excused for believing, seeing the sparse flow of patients, that the doctor’s practice had not taken off. Dr. Rajan made up for the select approach by charging hefty fees to his carefully prepared list of persons. He knew, and rightly so, that they could afford the fees. On occasions when he was not occupied with work, he would wonder at the trajectory his career had taken. In his early days as a student of medicine, he harboured idealistic notions - hoping to work among the poor and in rural areas. The twist in his career came one ordinary morning when a portly industrialist walked into his chamber and confided about his sexual inadequacies. Dr. Rajan’s prescription worked, and the businessman discreetly passed the word around. Soon, other high-value patients began to contact him, and before he knew, Dr. Arvind Rajan had a dozen similarly high-profile patients seeking his medical opinion. It was then that he decided to create a niche for himself.

It was late in the evening almost two years ago, when Rocky first spoke to him. He politely asked the doctor if he could see him urgently, in an hour. He had known Rocky as a childhood friend and had keenly followed his rise and this call piqued Dr. Rajan’s interest, who immediately asked him to come over. Rocky walked in and acted like a long-lost friend and soon they were re-living their school days. It was as if they were picking up the conversation from where they left off. Both had been busy in their respective fields of work. This would their first meeting after Rocky had become a minister. After a half an hour of banter, over coffee, Rocky told him about a sexually transmitted disease he had been afflicted with. From then on, Rocky became a regular. He also referred other big clients to Dr. Rajan. The doctor’s local clinic — compact but homely, simple yet tastefully furnished, and manned by an efficient and discreet staff — was in an upscale locale in south Delhi, close to the airport.

Dr. Rajan understood soon enough, on seeing Rocky walk into his consulting room that Monday, that his friend had suffered yet another bout of the usual disease type. He prepared himself to deliver one more of his stern messages to his client-friend but contained the temptation on seeing the visitor’s unusually grim look. Rocky did not engage in small talk but dropped his pants. At first, Dr. Arvind did not notice anything – he was looking for signs of abnormality on his private part, but it appeared to be normal. It was after Rocky gently lifted his penis with his left hand that the reality dawned. The doctor was amazed with what he was seeing (or not seeing). As he examined the affected area closely, he understood that his friend had been castrated. The surgical strike of castration had been done by a professional. The closed blood vessels had been treated with a chemical that helps the blood clot quickly. Thus, whoever did it, knew that Rocky was a diabetic and acted to ensure that he would not bleed to death following the procedure.

“What are my options?” Rocky asked of his physician friend.

Arvind took off his glasses, wiped them carefully before putting them back on. “Well, you can have plastic surgery done to look normal,” he replied, but added, “I am not a plastic surgeon and you will need to consult with the specialists.”

It meant that Rocky would have to confide in other people, but that was not the real problem. Dr. Rajan had built a network of specialists who were as discreet as he was and, like him, dealt with high-profile personalities. The issue was something else.

Eventually, after some hesitation, Rocky asked the million-dollar question: “What happens now? Will I still be able to…?”

Arvind assumed a Buddha-like expression and waited for his friend to finish the question, though he knew where it was leading. Eventually, Arvind answered, “Well, if you are asking about sexual functionality, then the answer is that it depends. Some have the same libido, but others feel less of a drive. You will know the answer soon enough.”

There was reason for the doctor’s evasive reply. Castration, or orchiectomy, is a surgical or chemical action by which an individual loses the use of his testicles. While it causes sterilisation and greatly reduces the production of hormones such as testosterones, the extent of effect varies from person to person. Rocky had been subjected to surgical castration, with the excision of both his testes. That made the situation more potent — and Rocky more impotent. It was typical of the man that, instead of worrying about the possibility of medical complications, he was concerned more about losing his sex power.

Rocky had to be for the moment satisfied with the ambivalent reply. Dr. Rajan placed his medical instruments carefully into his bag and got up to leave (he had a flight to catch), asking his friend not to fret and wait for the expert advice. Rocky was lost in thoughts. A busy day awaited him in Parliament, which was in session. The question will be answered soon enough, he placated himself. He wanted to ask a question of his own government but did not want to do it himself – instead he asked a recent independent MP Joginder Parshad, an ex-Freedom Party member, who when not given a ticket, quit and won his seat as an independent, to find out “whether the government is considering changes in law to make castration a punishment for rapists?”

The answer of the minister concerned was recorded thus: “No sir, the government has no such proposal before it.” Both the Supremo and Maida were present in the Parliament when this question was asked.

Rocky shook his head in disappointment. The how and why of the tragedy that befell him needed an investigation. Rocky churned the thought in his mind but decided to tackle it later.

# The wager

Three months later…

The Kennington Oval ground in south London is known for having hosted a number of high-profile sporting events. England’s first international football match was played there in 1872. Rugby international tournaments too have been hosted there. But to the cricket playing nations, the Oval, holds a special place. Managed by the Surrey Cricket County Club, it is among the most loved cricket grounds. Never mind that the Oval had also been in the first quarter of the 20th century also the place where periodic courts (assizes) were held and executions of convicts ordered.

On one particular day, many decades later, the Oval was on fire.

Ronnie did not like Arif. For that matter, he did not like any batsman. The first thing he tried to do is to get under his skin, see if he can rile up the batsman. The Pakistan-India match had been see-sawing all day and was evenly poised.

Ronnie yelled at Arif, “Try hooking me” and delivered a fast yorker at his toes.

The crowd roared as Arif Masood blasted it into the outer space. The asking rate was climbing for Pakistan in a must-win One Day International (ODI) against its archenemy (on the cricket ground and outside) India, and their last hope, Masood, had to go for it.

“*Ye kaun sa bouncer hai bhai?”* Arif laughed at Ronnie. “Confused between yorker and bouncer?”

He was so far getting lucky, guessing what Ronnie would throw at him next. Even as the ball was reaching stratospheric heights, Ronnie was thinking about the bet he had made with Arif at breakfast time – Pragya Gupta would go to dinner with whoever was left standing at the end of the match. If Ronnie did not get Arif’s wicket, he loses, and vice versa. Arif had been flirting with Pragya, who was humouring him, and that irritated Ronnie. It wasn’t as if they were going steady – it was more like an open relationship but for some strange reason, Ronnie could not stomach Pragya entertaining Arif.

“Pragya, I don’t understand what it is that you see in him,” he had quipped. “Half the time, I can’t figure out if he is speaking Punjabi or English – more like Punglish.”

That evoked a chuckle from Pragya. “But he is such a charmer and has a dimple-smile that lights up his face.”

Ronnie fished out a penny from his pocket. “Here, the next time he smiles, see if you can fit this in the dimple.”

Pragya laughed, seeing the envy in Ronnie’s eyes. “I was kidding! Don’t you know opposites attract?”

“I must have missed school that day,” muttered Ronnie, getting up to leave for the Oval. “See you at the ground.”

Pragya got up and they kissed, and she whispered, “All the best!”

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Pakistan needed 46 from 30 balls and India two wickets. Arif was slugging it out with an unbeaten 68. About the only consolation Ronnie could draw was the fact that he had managed to keep Arif off the strike. Pakistan’s No. 10, Amjad Ali was no rabbit and could tonk a few of his own, given the size and heft of the bats these days. They crossed over for a leg bye off the first ball and Arif clobbered Ramesh Sait’s next two balls to the boundary before stealing a single of the fifth ball and letting Amjad play out the last ball. 36 to go from 24. A manageable 9 runs an over. Arif on strike. Ronnie had 2 overs left; 12 balls in which to show Arif his place (in the pavilion he hoped).

As he walked up to his bowling mark, Ronnie played back in his mind as to what he would bowl next. The field was set for a bouncer to catch Arif on the hook with a run-saving fine leg and a deep square leg for a mistimed hook. It was hot and Ronnie was summoning all his reserves to deliver the coup de grace (or so he thought). He knew that Arif was expecting a bouncer and would hang back in the crease. Ronnie unleashed a searing yorker at the toes of Arif, which he just about managed to keep out of his stumps. 36 off 23. No change in field placings.

Arif was confused – the hook shot was his Achilles Heel and he was sure Ronnie would try and bounce him out. Instead, he had almost yorked himself. He had practised long and hard at hooking balls even from outside the off stump and controlling the shot so it would hit the ground fast. It was becoming a bluffing game. Arif expected the short ball on or just outside his off stump next and decided to again hang back. Ronnie, read his mind and was debating whether to bowl another yorker at slower speed or an express bouncer, and decided that he would try and bounce him.

The bouncer landed exactly where he wanted and Arif was late into the shot and it expectedly ballooned up for the deep square leg to come in a few steps from the boundary and pouch the catch easily. As Arif was kicking himself for getting suckered, he saw from the corner of his eye that Ronnie had been no balled and also that the deep square leg fielder had not noticed it and was celebrating. Arif made full use of the situation and scampered back to strike. Three runs given away. 33 from 23 and Ronnie let out a curse under his breath. He thought that he had landed his foot inside the crease but clearly the umpire had thought otherwise. To add insult to injury, the umpire signalled that it was the first bouncer of the over.

Ronnie still had to bowl 5 deliveries. He pushed his marker back by an inch surreptitiously and mulled his next move. It had to be either a slower yorker or a good length ball outside the off stump, well wide of the batsman but still inside the rails. His captain ran up to him and mumbled something in his ear, to which he just nodded. Think, think, he told himself. What is Arif expecting? And what is he sure that Ronnie wouldn’t do?

Ronnie bowled another bouncer. Arif started moving forward, expecting a good length ball and was not in a position for the hook but still went through with it only for the ball to go up vertically for an easy catch by the wicket keeper. Ronnie bellowed in relief even as an irate but relieved captain (he wanted Ronnie to bowl a slower one outside the off stump) rushed to congratulate his ace pacer. As Arif started the long walk back to the pavilion, Ronnie ran the ball back in slow motion. If there was one ball Arif was not expecting, it was the bouncer. Just to be safe, he had moved the marker back by an inch so he would not overstep. When everything comes off, you look like a hero but if Arif had dispatched it over the boundary, India was staring at defeat. Finally, it came down to bluff and double bluff, and Ronnie won.

Pragya let out a roar in the stands as she saw Ronnie win the battle. She, of course, knew nothing of the wager. The umpire could not call two back to back deliveries as no-balls when in fact both were legal. The first one was under instructions from the Don, who had incriminating evidence of the umpire caught in the hay with a curvy actor of yesteryears. That the umpire had erred came out when the match referee observed in slow motion that the umpire was moving his hand even before the ball was delivered (it was a tight call but there was something of Ronnie’s boot behind the line). This would go in his match report.

The formalities were completed in the next over and India scampered home, victor by 26 runs. As the teams returned back to the hotel, two countries were busy discussing the various scenarios – firecrackers were bursting in one while the other blamed the umpires, the team selection, the venue and just about everything else that they could think of. And the Don had lost a lot of money.

# An evening to remember

Ronnie wanted it to be a special evening. He came to his room, showered, and shaved again, slapped his favourite perfume and put on a pair of Fiorucci jeans with Salvatore Ferragamo shoes topped off with a tight-fitting Armani T-Shirt. A Tommy Hilfiger Sports coat completed the attire. He carefully combed his freshly washed hair and blow dried it to make it just enough for it to be wavy. He was feeling upbeat and with good reason. He had got the better of the Pakistani team, and more importantly Arif who had almost succeeded in winning the wager on Pragya. But there was another reason for Ronnie to look his dashing best — he was about to meet her.

Pragya Gupta was an upcoming model, and like most of them, she had starry dreams. She wanted a break in Bollywood, and for that she had been assiduously working to enhance her profile and network. The Indian cricket industry, which enjoyed a near cult status among the people, was an ideal platform to exploit.

She came from a middle-class family from a small town in central India. Her father had retired as a mid-level government official and was now living off the pension and savings that he had managed in his forty-year long stint with the government. Believing in living within one’s means and not inclined to enhance those means through dubious methods, he had led a modest life and just about managed to make both ends meet.

Pragya had seen her father’s struggle, and while she had respect for his integrity, she had no intention to lead a similar life. She aimed for the stars and was determined to have them. While in college, as she nurtured those dreams, she had no idea of the compromises she would be called upon to make to achieve her goal. Nor was she clear on the redlines that she would set in the process. All that she knew is that she would succeed.

On completing her college education, she had fulfilled her parents’ desire. But she was not ready to accede to the second demand — that she get married. They had already launched a hunt for a suitable groom for her because she stopped them in their tracks and announced that she had no desire to get married just yet.

“*Beta!* It is time you got married and settled down.”

“I am just getting started. I am not ready to get married and settled down. I am going to Mumbai, to become a model.”

“Are you sure? There are so many stories we hear these days of girls getting their heart broken in the city of Mumba Devi.”

“Don’t worry Papa. I can take care of myself.”

Left with no option, they conceded to her wishes, and she landed in Mumbai one fine day.

Pragya had managed to get an introduction letter from one of her college mates who was related to the head of a Mumbai-based modelling agency. The first week in the city went into looking for a suitable paying guest accommodation. That done, she made her way to the modelling agency’s office located at Lokhandwala in the suburbs of Mumbai. She had made herself as presentable as she could, but she had no portfolio of her photographs to show. The agency head was a portly man with a cheerful demeanour. He read the letter addressed to him, turned his attention to her and said that he would have to get some photographs done of her. That took nearly two hours. She was called the following day.

There was good news for her when she returned to the office. A biscuit manufacturing client of the agency was on the lookout for a fresh face to promote his product and had okayed Pragya’s name after seeing the portfolio the agency had readied for him. The scene she had to enact went thus:

A cricket match was on between India and South Africa. When the Indian batsman launched the ball for a six to win the match, she was to rush to the pitch waving a packet of the biscuit, evading the security men. When she reaches the batsman, she unseals the wrapper with a flourish and presents it like a bouquet. In the background the words “*Mauka, mauka!”* were being sung by a chorus.She did the shot with aplomb, wearing a polka-dotted skirt and a matching loose shirt.

The advertisement clicked and Pragya received a clutch of fresh assignments through the agency, but none of them was of high-profile clients. She still a long struggle ahead to break into the big league. But the one advantage of her maiden assignment was that she got an opportunity to make acquaintances with Indian cricketers, who had liked the advertisement. It was not long before she began to circulate among the cricketers, one day being a regular with one cricketer, and another day with a different player. At least she had broken into the world of cricket.

Her mom would sigh and look at her Dad and say, “I hope she knows what she is doing.”

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Pleased with the way he looked, Ronnie had bought a bouquet of Red Roses at the florist in the lobby and headed for Pragya Gupta’s hotel. Ronnie went up to her room and knocked. What he saw took his breath away, as he gave her the bouquet of red roses, he could only gape at her.

“Wow! You look smashing!” Ronnie blurted out, as he picked himself up.

Pragya had on her a red gown that clung to all her curves, with matching red shoes, red earrings with tear drops made of red jasper stone and a Gucci watch with a red colour strap.

“You don’t look too bad yourself,” she replied.

From the way she looked at him, he knew that she too was impressed and had a hunch that he was going to get lucky. Models were harder to woo, Ronnie thought. Fans on the other hand, hung on every word of his and were much easier to take to bed. But since el Capitan was dating a hot Bollywood star, it had become necessary to keep up with the Vermas.

Hand in hand, they walked to dine at the high-end Indian restaurant Tamarindo that served *phoolkas* as thin as a handkerchief (calling them *rumaali roti*) with delicious butter chicken and kofta curry. As luck would have it, Arif too had come to the same restaurant with a girl who looked familiar, but Ronnie couldn’t place where he had seen her. Pragya got up as soon as she saw Arif and gave him a hug. Arif made the introductions and then the penny dropped. Arif was with Mona Malik, an up and coming badminton star born in Pakistan but who lived in Dubai and was in London to play a tournament.

As Ronnie and Mona were making small talk, Arif whispered something in Pragya’s ear that made her go red. From the corner of his eye, Ronnie saw the exchange and the mischievous smile on Arif’s face as he walked off with Mona. Ronnie could only guess what had transpired when Arif was biting her ear. He must have blurted out the wager that he had with Arif. Obviously, Ronnie had not told this to Pragya as it was made when both Arif and he were tipsy and not exactly making sense. But the damage was done. The dinner date went downhill from there on and he could see flashes of fire in Pragya’s eyes as she confronted him with the information.

“How dare you wager over me?” Pragya asked in a fierce but low voice so as to not attract the attention of diners at adjacent tables.

They were already the cynosure of all eyes in the restaurant and couldn’t afford a showdown. Nonetheless, they had to get the dinner over with because both were hungry and the night of the match was one rare meal that the players could eat whatever they wanted – other meals were carefully monitored for calories, balance and energy content.

“Am I a product that you could buy from a store shelf? Don’t you have any respect for a woman?” Pragya continued.

“I was tipsy and just joking,” Ronnie replied weakly.

Pragya’s eyes were flashing fire as she launched a verbal volley at him. Ronnie could hardly get a word in edgeways and when he could, kept repeating that he was tipsy and did not remember what he said. A better approach for him would have been to render an unconditional apology, but this was a match-day and the adrenaline was still pumping. And Ronnie was a stud.

Pragya haughtily told Ronnie that she would find her way back to the hotel and Ronnie, sore and sober, trudged back to his room. It was too late to look for fresh company and his knees hurt from the pounding they took. All he wanted was to go and lie down and hope that tomorrow would be a better day.

This had been Ronnie’s life philosophy — hope for and live in the hope of a better tomorrow. In school, he would often be pulled up and humiliated by his teachers for having failed to do his homework satisfactorily. His classmate would smirk at the discomfort. They nicknamed him ‘Dumb Ronnie’. It hurt and he would tell himself that, that tomorrow will come when he will silence his critics.

Somehow, he had managed to accomplish the great task of passing out of school. While in college, for want of anything better to do during recess, he began to hang around in the playground and join in cricket games. Soon he realised that he had an aptitude for the bat in addition to being a useful pacer. It wasn’t long before he came to the notice of the college coach who goaded him to take the sport seriously. He did, and in the first all-India college tournament that he played, he scored a century. His average throughout that tournament was 128. His coach discovered that Ronnie could generate disconcerting bounce at pace and worked diligently to ensure that Ronnie could be an effective pace bowler too, chipping in with the occasional wicket or two.

There was no looking back from then on. He attended the national selection trials for the Indian junior team and was chosen. He was the 12th man, but luckily for him, one of the batsmen developed a groin injury during net practice and he was included in the playing eleven. The team did not make it beyond the quarter-final stage but by then Ronnie had caught everyone’s attention with a swashbuckling 89 off 50 balls in one innings and a 112 not out in another. That was the steppingstone for him to enter the big league, and he was selected for the senior Indian team. His form did not desert him, and he became a permanent fixture in the team, contributing valuable runs for the men in blue. That he could break partnerships with his pace in short bursts helped him win some games that India had given up. *Ronnie, you da maan!* screamed the huge scoreboard screens when he would launch the ball into the outer space or bounce a well-set batsman out. In the process, Ronnie cultivated for himself a debonair image, and was often seen in the company of women. With cricket, came wine and women in his life.

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Pragya woke up with a weird feeling; her mouth had an awful taste. She remembered coming to her room and surfing the web in case someone snapped pictures of her with Ronnie (luckily there was none, as yet) and then drifting off to sleep. Her vaginal region felt sore and she couldn’t explain how she could have had intercourse when she had no one to share her bed. As she arranged the bedsheets, she noticed a few drops of blood and a slight scratch on her inner thigh. Her hands were manicured so it could not have been her scratching during sleep. Just to be sure, she checked her nails and they were perfectly rounded and groomed and clean. Someone had raped her, while she was sleeping or perhaps after she had been drugged.

She felt a burning sensation in her vagina as she urinated. Whoever did it, had forced himself on her. But her memory was blank, as if someone had erased it.

How could someone have entered her room and violated her? She thought of calling the front desk but hesitated. What would she ask? Whether someone entered her room when she had hung a Do Not Disturb sign on the door? She was on the pill so there was no danger of getting pregnant. But the violation of her privacy bothered her.

She thought of confronting Ronnie but hesitated; Ronnie was too much of a celebrity to risk forcing an entry into her room, especially in the middle of a tournament. Plus, they had been intimate in the past and this was not their first tiff. Pragya knew that Ronnie had a roving eye and put it down to his celebrity status from a rather young age. She realized the ways of the world – hanging on his arm gave her more visibility, photo-ops and piqued the curiosity of Page 3 columnists. For all of this, she thought it worth the dalliances with Ronnie. She figured that she could not be with Ronnie every waking minute, especially when he was on tours.

She ordered coffee and considered her next move. But no easy answer came to her mind. She had to get ready for her events for the day. She gulped the coffee, took a hot shower, dressed up suitably and put on a light makeup and left the hotel. There was a photo shoot for a fashion magazine based in the Gulf region and it used a Britain-based hot shot photographer to whose studio she was headed. She pulled out the sultry, disinterested looks, the staple of a photo shoot and went through the motions. She was done by early afternoon.

Returning to the hotel, she saw a single Red Rose with a letter in her room. Ronnie. Apologizing for his behaviour and wondering if he could talk to her. Almost as if by telepathy, her cell phone started ringing even as she was processing the message. It was Ronnie. She let it ring for a bit and after about nine rings, picked it up.

# Three women in Dubai

Pragya Gupta had to stop for a few days in Dubai, to get paid for the shoot and to see if any other offers were on tap. She knew the shelf life of heroines in Bollywood and felt that she had used Ronnie to get some heads turning but it was time to move on. Her public relations man had secured her a pass to attend the awards function of a famous Indian TV channel that was happening in Dubai. He convinced Pragya that with her consent, he could finalize several deals in Dubai. To prove his point, he mentioned that he could line up a couple of meetings with A-List producers – all she had to do was to “co-operate.”

“What do you mean, co-operate?” she asked.

“Co-operate means… co-operate,” came the reply.

“You mean…”

“Yes, do whatever it takes to land the part…”

Pragya fully understood the implications and wanted to know how to ensure that both would get what they want. The publicist just winked at her and said nothing. It left her confused but what choice did she have? Seeing and being seen with the right people was essential and she had picked a shiny clinging dress that she was sure would get a lot of tongues wagging. Pragya had packed a pink dress with a plunging neckline and a side split that showed her long legs and promised more than it revealed. When she tried it on, she knew that it would turn heads – even the store person was gawking at her open-mouthed.

Ronnie had tried to give her an awkward apology over the phone, which she rejected and let him know that as far as she was concerned, their relationship was over. Ronnie had mixed feelings, after the awkward conversation with Pragya. He was happy that they broke up but sad that he was not the one to break it. It was time to move on, he told himself, and went out to the gym to pump iron. He was not the type to brood over a lost woman; there were always others.

The star-studded event was to take place at Raajmahal Theatre – a state-of-the-art facility with room for up to a 1000 people including a private upper box area for the privileged. The theatre itself was part of Bollywood Parks, Dubai, that was loosely based on the theme park of Universal Studios. Pragya checked into the Burj, which is where most of the A-List of Bollywood were staying. The Television company had spared no expenses in ensuring that the movie glitterati were spoiled to the core.

As Pragya was walking across the lobby to the bank of elevators, she ran into Preeti Ahuja.

“Hi Preeti!”

“Oh hi, Pragya! Long time, no see.”

“Yes, it has been months. How are you? Are you here for the event?”

“Yes, I am. As a matter of fact, I am headed for a meeting, but I will be at Shimmers at 5 PM. Why don’t we catch up and have dinner there?”

It was 2 PM in the afternoon and Pragya had no plans for the evening and spending time with someone she knew from before sounded like fun. “I will be there,” she replied.

As Pragya started unpacking, she got a text from her publicist. Would she be able to meet the famous actor-turned-producer Vishaal Saxena at 3 PM? Pragya replied in the affirmative and wasted no time in getting ready. A quick shower, light make-up, and light iron over her not too revealing yet not too covering skirt and pumps, she was ready to kill, knocking at the doors of Vishaal’s suite at the Burj.

# An audition with a twist

Vishaal was on the phone when Pragya knocked. He let her in, and quickly ended the conversation, telling the person at the other end that he would call back later. Born Vishal Saxena, also called Vishal ‘Six Pack’ Saxena, he was immensely proud of his toned body. He was a one-time bodybuilder and aspiring hero-turned producer. The ‘six pack’ did not, however, refer to his abdomen muscles. Over time, it came to be attributed to his ability to down a six-pack can of beers in one shot, without being any worse for it. He was also a great believer in numerology, which explained the additional ‘a’ in his name. Vishal became Vishaal.

He had come to Mumbai from a small town in Haryana six years ago, hoping to make it big in Bollywood as a star. His chiselled looks impressed many producers and directors, but it was not easy to get a reputable break. Vishaal acted in a dozen B-grade films which utilised his muscular looks, but they did nothing to further his career. Vishaal came from a well-off family and he had arrived in Mumbai with enough cash to last him a decade. Realising that his dreams were not getting fulfilled, he turned producer in the hope that he could launch himself as a hero in a big budget film. Unfortunately for him, there were not enough takers in the film distribution industry for his idea.

Practical man that he was, Vishaal decided to rope in saleable actors. After a couple of moderately successful films, he hit the jackpot with ‘*Caravan Gujar Gaya*’. The film was a major box-office success and he came to be counted as a producer to go to. A-grade directors and actors suddenly made a beeline to work with him. His three other films also were major hits. Vishaal ‘six pack’ Saxena had arrived. It was not surprising, therefore, that Pragya’s publicist had asked her to meet him.

“Hi, I am Pragya,” she said, as she shook hands.

“Vishaal and you look ravishing!” he replied as he directed her towards a luxurious couch.

Just as she sank into it, Vishaal’s phone rang again and he excused himself and went into the other room to take the call.

She closed her eyes and before she knew it, had dozed off till when Vishaal gently shook her awake. She looked at her watch – 3:15 PM.

“I am sorry,” she blurted out, smoothening her dress. “I will be right back” as she ran to the bathroom.

Freshened up, she sipped the freshly squeezed lime juice with a hint of salt that he had ordered, and the two made polite talk before he came to business.

“This is a crime thriller,” started Vishaal, “and you would be auditioning for a lead role in this movie titled, ‘Mumbai Diaries’. The female protagonist is a prostitute with a heart of gold, and she helps the hero, an honest policeman.”

Even as Vishaal was waxing eloquent, Pragya couldn’t help but notice that the script appeared to have been inspired by the Hollywood blockbuster, L A Confidential. But she was smart enough to keep her thoughts to herself.

“Will you read a few lines with me?” Vishaal asked as he gave her a copy of the script and put on his glasses as he started reading his copy. “Go to page 44. This is where the boy meets the girl,” he said.

*Nisha, the heroine was getting ready to service her third customer of the evening and when she heard a knock at the door, she strategically undid the top 2 buttons of her blouse, checked her makeup and opened the door only to see Rahul, the cop stumble into her arms, bleeding profusely from his left side. He could only mumble a few words that sounded like Help before he collapsed on the floor.*

*Nisha was confused, surprised, and concerned about what she was seeing, and her first instinct was to call the police and as she started punching the numbers, Rahul called out, “No Police!” Rahul was coming to quickly and started barking out instructions, “Heat water. Get medicinal gauze. Do you have a pair of tongs? Can you get me a needle and thread?”*

*This was where Nisha worked, and it was on a per day basis. She sussed up the situation quickly – he appeared like a cop but in mufti; he was shot and seemed capable of fixing it himself. She ran out to the owner of the building and quickly requested the things she needed.*

*The owner did not bat an eyelid at her request, as if it was the norm and gave her what she asked for, with a warning, “Bring them back to me clean, before you leave for the day.”*

As they got deeper into the script, Pragya did not notice at first that Vishaal had put his hand on her knee and was gently rubbing it. Once she realized what he was doing, she stopped reading her lines and stared at him, gently pushing his hand away. He acted as if it was the most natural thing to do in the world. Just then his phone rang. Vishaal stood up and walked over to the other room and began talking in monosyllables. After a few minutes, he hung up and told her that he needed to freshen up. Like clockwork, her phone rang too. It was her publicist.

“I told you to co-operate! What are you trying to do, Pragya?” The heat in the voice seared her ears.

Before she could get in a word edgewise, the publicist went on. “Do you know Vishaal can make or break your career? Can’t you just co-operate? He confirmed to me that once he is satisfied, he would cast you in this sympathetic prostitute role. Just do what he says, and you can be a heroine! It is a role of a lifetime” The publicist hung up, without giving her a chance to respond.

Pragya sat, stunned as she tried to gather her thoughts. Vishaal ambled in and sat down beside her and whispered something in her ear. His request confused her – he wanted only a blow job, but he wanted her to undress completely. Vishaal gently told her (as if a soothing voice would make the experience better) that this was par for the course – you need to play by the unwritten rules to get to play the role written in the script.

Pragya pleased off her clothes and sat down in front of Vishaal as he unbuttoned.

The experience was humiliating and when it was done, he acted professional and told her, “You can expect an offer in a day or two. I will contact your publicist and work out the call-sheet details.”

Pragya nodded her head, went to the washroom, cleaned up and splashed cold water on her face. Mustering as much composure as she could, she stepped out. It was close to 4:30 PM and she would just about make it to Shimmers at 5.

It never occurred to her that Vishaal wore his reading glasses throughout the blow job experience. These were no ordinary glasses – they were Google Glasses which videotaped the entire saga without showing his face. And he kept his mouth shut throughout the fellatio. This was not the first time he had done this; nor would it be the last.

# An important meeting

Located on the beach in the Jumeira Mina A’Salam retreat area, Shimmers prided itself on being able to offer its clientele a rich option of foods ranging from Mexican to Mediterranean to Chinese. Its cocktails were famous for their creativity and taste – from Kumquat Quest, a rum-based sweet cocktail designed around Kumquat (a citrus fruit with a sweet skin and sour interior) to Passionate Goose (Vodka-based aperitif with a taste of passion fruit and lychee), its clientele was rumoured to check out a new drink on each visit and then rate them according to their own standards. While its food was excellent, its multi-page cocktail was the main draw. With outdoor tables and chairs, an early dinner spread over a few hours was something the glitterati of Dubai cherished.

Preeti and Sonya were already seated when Pragya arrived at their table. All three had visited Shimmers previously and were discussing which of the cocktails they have had in the past. After ordering Hors d'oeuvres and drinks, they were slowly circling around to the topic that was uppermost in their mind – their individual date-rape-drug induced rapes. Pragya was shocked to know that what happened to her in London had played out in Dubai too – different places, same script. As each poured their hearts out, they did not notice a handsome hulk who was eavesdropping from the next table.

The Castrator watched with rapt attention the three pretty women comingling their sorrows – that they could have chosen other, better careers. Eventually, they all arrived at the same question – Who wanted to do it and why?

He thought it was the right moment to intervene and turned his chair to face them and said, “Because you three are the chosen ones to be the future of Bollywood.” Holding each one’s gaze for a second or two before moving on, he expanded on what he had just said.

“IPL has brought together the people who run India,” he started, looking around to ensure no one was giving them any special attention. “The Politicians, who need to get their corrupt proceeds laundered and stashed away in tax havens use Dubai as the starting point. Over the years the Don has established a vast network of hawala agents spread around India who can accept any amount from any politician and exchange rupees for the venerable US Dollar. Rupees to be given in India. Dollars to be taken out in Dubai. All the *netas* have to do is arrive or send their representative (*Benami*) out here and miraculously the money will be stashed away in shell companies around the world, with a readymade slate of directors with official-sounding company names,” he continued watching their faces to see if they had any questions.

He added, “Some *netas*have located their *benamis* right here in Dubai. A legit looking company will be setup in Dubai with legally earned money and would appoint the *benami* as its Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The company would purchase real estate in Dubai, which enables the CEO to become eligible for residency. Then it is just a matter of a few phone calls to move money from Dubai to other tax havens.”

All three were watching him open-mouthed. All this was new to them. But it still did not explain why they were raped with a date-rape drug.

The Castrator caught the attention of the waiter and tapped on his glass, and gestured 1 more for all, as he warmed up to the subject. “You are probably wondering why I am saying all this… well I have been working in the hotel you are staying as part of the IT infrastructure and it is my responsibility to keep an eye on the cameras that are installed in the hotel. I happened to see who spiked your drinks,” he finished looking at Preeti and Sonya.

“Who?” both Preeti and Sonya burst out, causing a bit of a stir as the diners looked around to see what the commotion was.

He waited a bit for the tension to build. As the waves lapped the shores the cool breeze wafted over, cooling the temperatures just a shade, the weather helped cool tempers. The sun was setting, and he knew the beachside bistro would fill up fast, so he needed to get to the heart of the matter quickly.

The drinks arrived and he took a sip before proceeding further. “Even if I tell you the name of the person, it will not help you. What you really need to know is why this happened. And judging from the room numbers that you were staying at; I can tell you with near certainty that you were being filmed. The drug knocks out your memory, but the video would make it look like you are enjoying it. The camera angles are set in such a way that the perpetrator’s face would not be visible…” as he tailed off, Sonya was steaming.

“Why are you adding insult to injury by telling all this? Have we not been humiliated enough?” Preeti saw the hurt and anger in Sonya’s eyes and pressed her hand, to calm her down. For some reason, she felt that he had something in mind even as he was describing their experiences.

The Castrator waited for them to settle down before proceeding. “I have a plan that will fix this problem for good but before I proceed, I need to know from you – how badly do you want to teach these rascals a lesson?”

“What do you have in mind?” Pragya opened her mouth for the first time.

It is not often that a hulk of a guy with sharp looks would be comfortably seated in the company of three gorgeous women and talk about their problem. He nodded to Pragya, as if he was asking for permission to speak, and proceeded.

“I have been here for just eighteen months and I have seen far too many trysts of Indian politicians and their overbearing *chamchas* who stomp about and act as if they own the place. Understand why they are doing this – from here on all three of you will see good roles come your way but they will come at a price; you have to “please” someone or go to some businessman’s niece’s wedding and act nice. As long as you “co-operate,” - he used his fingers to gesture quote-unquote, you will do fine.

“At best you may last 5 – 7 years; and that too only if you bend to every fancy and whim of this cabal. Even after so many months, I have not been able to figure out the head of this Hydra,” he paused.

Talking was making him hungry and he figured it was time to eat. “Dinner?” he asked and a quick nod from all of them made him turn around to get the attention of the waiter. What he was about to discuss was serious and he wanted their undivided attention.

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All three were on the verge of tears. But they were also angry; at the system, at the objectification and the show-of-power of these libidinous lechers who used their power to hold people to ransom. Even as they were bristling, a second doubt emerged – what can they do? They don’t even know the perpetrators. With each one deep in thought, they attacked the food in front of them and before long, they were finished and settled down for a coffee. He suggested that they retreat for coffee to a secluded restaurant and they found a barista place with no one else. With practiced ease, the Castrator rattled off what each menu item meant, and they settled down for what he was about to suggest next.

“You are not the first ones I have seen being taken advantage of – I see a pattern of behaviour and unless it is put to a stop, this will continue; a lesson has to be taught and it should be such that they will think twice before trying it again,” he had taken over the conversation again. All three looked at him, asking him to continue with their eyes…

“Of the three – Bollywood, Politicians and Cricketers, the Politicians are the worst. The other two are completely controllable; the cabal fully knows it can make or break anyone’s career – be it a batsman or a hero; and keeps them on a tight leash. While not every match is rigged, many are and in sophisticated ways so as to not appear suspicious. The naked truth about movies is that today almost all the movies made in India are financed by various type of mafia. How did you get paid, Sonya?” he asked.

“It was in rupees. I did not make much in the first movie and it was all spent just finding a place to rent in Mumbai and getting setup with office and other stuff,” Sonya replied.

“So, who spiked our drinks?” Preeti cut in.

He took his time and then replied, “It was one of the Don’s goons. The planning was done meticulously and executed at a moment either when you were looking at some commotion on the dance floor or when you had stepped out to dance. The bartender would know when but what purpose would it serve? If we want retribution, act as if everything is normal and let our deeds speak.”

Sonya was using a spoon to scoop up foam from her espresso coffee and after drinking it, smacked her lips and asked, “So what is in it for you? What do you get out of it?”

He looked at each of them, holding their gaze for a second or two and then replied, “Call me an idealist. I saw how a superstar of yesteryears got horribly murdered and then they covered it all up. Her angelic smile and the way she used to flutter her eyebrows is still haunting me. Someone has to stop this madness and it might as well be me. These *netas* are full of hubris and go about acting as if nothing can touch them. They need to know that it takes just a few good men to fix their arrogance and show them the mirror so they can see what they are – two-bit thugs with uncontrollable libido. I not only know what to do, but I can also get away with it. It will not come back to me. As to what I want to do and who, you will come to know from the press. At this time, I need some help in getting some equipment.”

Preeti asked, “What kind of help? My ex-boyfriend is United States Special Forces and he is doing duty somewhere around here. I can get in touch with him in a secure way and get whatever you want.”

“What email program do you use? Protonmail?”

“Yes! How did you guess?”

“I am in the security business, and I should know this,” he smiled. It was a smile of acknowledgement, of being on the same wavelength, of a kinship.

“After I read the email, it vanishes from my inbox! Even if someone were to forensically examine my disk, they would not find anything,” Preeti was clearly showing off her knowledge of encryption technology to her friends, who were watching her without blinking their eyes.

Sonya jumped in, “OK Einstein, how does Protonmail delete an email that has come to your server and is sitting on your hard disk? Is that even possible?”

“Yes, it is. The mail has an expiry feature, which can set for how long the email must be on the receiver’s drive before being deleted. Both mine and his settings are 24 hours which means if I do not check my email every day, then I could receive and lose the email. But then we check our Smartphones all the time, so chances of that happening are near zero,” Preeti finished.

The Castrator wrote on the back of the napkin a list of items he wanted and on the last line, he wrote his Protonmail address and gave it to Preeti. She glanced down the list of items and asked with a puzzled look, “Why do you want all these things? Some of these seem to be medical in nature…” she tailed off.

“I used to be Special Forces too… When it is ready, have him contact me.”

All three asked in unison, “But what are you planning on doing?”

The Castrator smiled and looked at them and said, “I would rather you not know what I am up to. At the appropriate time, you will know,” he said.

Pragya interrupted “But, we don’t even know your name. Who are you and what will happen to us if you are caught?”

“We never met; this meeting never happened. I paid with cash at both places and you are welcome. One more thing, we have not been formally introduced – I know who you all are, and it is better if you know of me as The Castrator.”

# How Rocky was relieved of his family jewels

**Saturday night, early Sunday**

The Castrator got off at midnight and came down to the restaurant on the 84th floor. He found his usual table and parked himself facing the room – even if someone were to pass by, they would not be able to see what he had going on his iPad (CCTV camera feed of the 82nd floor). The restaurant was more crowded than usual – he ordered a club sandwich with a glass of Budweiser from the tap.

As he was watching the crowd go in and out, he was always keeping an eye on the goings on, on the 82nd floor. A suited man with files in his hand (must be his personal assistant, he figured) was walking briskly with two other burly men, who could only be part of the Minister’s security detail. While the PA waited at the door, the protective detail duo went in, carefully examined each and every room (or so he thought) and came out, five minutes later. Asking them to wait, the PA went in and came out two minutes later. Rocky would be arriving any moment.

Like clockwork, the security cameras switched off five minutes later. He left a half-eaten sandwich and walked at his normal pace towards the stairs. Staying in the dead spots of the corridor camera, he quickly descended to the 82nd floor. Something was bugging him about the visit of the PA – just to be sure, he decided to check if any video cameras had been switched on inside Rocky’s suite. These were not hotel supplied – rather, they would have to be set up specially for this occasion. There were a few local outfits which dealt in these.

But there was a catch – sometimes, a storage might malfunction, and the agency would have had a backup plan to still record and that would only be possible if they had a way to beam it to a web site; which meant that there would custom routers which would need to use satellites or cell towers to transmit the video.

He was right. As he stood in the landing and ran Angry IP scanner, a software program that scanned the internet and dumped the information on all the IP cameras in the vicinity, he could spot two new IP addresses inside the room. And they were transmitting – which meant that his entry could be recorded. That is if there was a camera in the office room and not the adjoining bedroom. He got lucky – the cameras were placed in the bedroom. He looked at the map of the suite to be absolutely sure that even his shadow would not be traced on the cameras. The cameras had been placed discreetly, along one wall of the bedroom, which meant that they viewing angle was only directed towards the bed.

He eased himself into the room using a staff access card that room service typically uses and quickly found the closet and to his relief, it was not stuffed full. He quietly locked himself inside the closet and realised that he had one more important thing to do – turn off the two video cameras in the bedroom, before he relieved Rocky of his family jewels.

The Angry IP Scanner software was amazing – it told him the model numbers of the video cameras and how they could be controlled from the web. The fact that the recording had already started told him that perhaps it was not the minister but someone else who might want the event taped – someone who could arm-twist the minister in the future. This someone was being extra careful with the timing and hence to be safe, had already started recording. Which was good in a way – these cameras typically stored 2 hours of video and could run out of storage and shut off on their own. Something to keep in mind before he moved – he would check to see if the cameras were still recording before he issued the Stop command.

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Before long, Rocky arrived. He could be heard pottering about, opening and closing bottles, drinking water. Then the door opened again, and he could hear three excited voices and Rocky’s exuberant welcome to them as he sloppily went about kissing them. They were from East Europe and Central Asia and before long, there were screams and squeals galore.

He waited patiently till about 4 AM. He could hear two voices near the door while the bathroom toilet flushed – they were waiting for the third companion. Presently they left the room and he decided to wait another minute or two, waiting for Rocky to settle into a deep sleep pattern.

He checked the status of the bedroom cameras – they were still active and recording. Some of the models would shut off automatically if they did not see any activity – the default setting was 5 minutes. He waited a few more moments and to his relief, the cameras went into pause mode. But they would come alive if they sensed any movement and therefore, he decided to issue the stop command. He saw two flower vases with an aperture for the video cameras and then thought what would happen if the central location decided to re-issue the record command? Thinking on his feet, he lifted the flower vases and laid them on their side, pointing the video camera towards the wall. “In case they restarted it, let them think that because of all the activity, the vases got overturned,” he told himself.

He worked quickly and efficiently and was done with the operation in 15 minutes. 5 minutes later Rocky was sown and re-dressed. The Castrator checked to see if the cameras on the corridor were still off (and they were) and he quickly climbed the stairs back to the 84th floor. Staying in the shadows of the cameras, he went to the lounge again and then retraced his path towards the elevator. Anyone looking at the footage may wonder why he spent over 4 hours in the restaurant but otherwise he would be safe. Unless called for, the restaurant waiters would not hover around as it was designed to give privacy for VIPs to conduct their business meetings.

# The Three Vs of Indian Cricket

Vikas Mehta grew up in the suburbs of Bengaluru. The middle child in a middle-class family, all his siblings, like he, had their names beginning with ‘V’. There was a poetic symmetry about their family. His father’s name was Vinay Mehta and mother’s Vimla. A studious child who got upset even if he scored one less than the perfect score, his almost demonic obsession for perfection made him into a rock-solid Number 3 batsman for India. Till well into his career, he never got out for a duck in Tests. Even when he was facing the second ball of a match, he managed to keep the tearaway fast bowlers from scalping him, and scored as well, punishing the loose delivery.

It wasn't in his nature to get angry, because he believed that anger robbed a person of his reason, leading him to take wrong and often rash decisions. But now Vikas was seething. In his 63rd test innings at the crease, he had been ruled caught behind in the first delivery he faced, which was the second ball of the test match. India was 0 for 2. He was certain that his bat had grazed his pads when he shaped up to play the out-swinger from Adam West, the feared pacer from West Indies. Yet the umpire believed that he had nicked the ball. It was a damp pitch and India had earlier been put into bat. Vikas sought a review, but to his horror the third umpire did not disagree with the on-field umpire’s call. It later transpired that the third umpire was looking at the footage from a previous Test match*,* which had been another close call gone against Vikas. This was the third and deciding Test and the series was locked 1-1. What he could not fathom was how the third umpire missed the obvious despite the technology at the latter’s disposal.

He had no way of knowing then that everything happens for a ‘reason’. In this case, the Don was that reason. With many agencies breathing down on match-fixing complaints, the gambling cabal was finding new ways to fix matches. The odds of two wickets falling off the first two balls of a Test match. The odds of a never-before-out-for-zero batsman walking back to the pavilion for a duck. The odds of a certain number of wickets suddenly crumbling in the post-lunch session. The odds of a team sweeping the T-20 series but days later getting washed out in One-Day internationals and Test series to that very rival. The odds of the first three batsmen getting out for one run each. The odds of a fielder dropping three catches of a star batsman. The odds of an opening batsman giving an easy enough catch to the fielder and the fielder dropping it.

Some of these incidents were actually bet upon and the players who had been suitably compromised, had performed according to the script. These novel methods had not been restricted to a couple of teams but had involved cricket playing countries across the globe. Some Indian players too were part of the racket. There were also those that had been approached by agents of the Don but were found uncooperative. They found themselves dropped from the playing squad of 11 at the last-minute despite having done well in the previous match and were replaced by more compliant ones.

Dilawar, after migrating to Dubai was not convinced that cricket matches could be “fixed.” He had played gully cricket growing up and knew the rules but could not fathom how a player could deliberately do something that goes against his training/ conditioning. In one of his conversations with a cricketer-turned-fixer, Anees Birbal, he had posed a series of questions:

“*Anees-bhai****,*** howcan a bowler deliberately bowl a no-ball on a particular delivery of the over?”

“The easiest way is to condition your mind well in advance. The player will be reminded using some sort of sign, either by another player or by something happening on the ground, that it is time to do his part. After all, the bowler has the ability and control to do whatever he wants to do with the ball – overstepping is also within his control. As long as it looks natural, it will be accepted as being part and parcel of the game.”

“But how does he know how to concede a boundary?”

“At a professional level, the batsman is ingrained to make a certain stroke for a certain delivery. Again, it is a matter of remembering what kind of field has been set, what is the strong area of the batsman i. e. is he an offside player or an onside player and then bowl to the field, except in a way that it can be exploited by the batter. It is simpler than you think.”

“If you have to choose one player in the team that would rank higher to be part of match fixing, who would that be?”

“The captain of the team.”

“Why?”

“Typically, the captain is a batsman and is usually standing either in the slips or at mid-off or mid-on. In other words, close to the bowler. In a normal match, there will be constant conversation going on between the skipper and his bowler and therefore, won’t be construed as being unusual. If the captain were to remind the bowler that his third ball has to be a wide, it is easy to do so as part of his conversation.”

Anees closed off by saying, “It is difficult to fix a match with just one player – sometimes it would be the umpires that help out and other times, it is the players from the opposite team, who help by dropping catches or accidentally kicking the ball over the ropes and so on. It takes two hands to clap. But it is doable and done in every sport. As long as it is made to look natural, it would be fine, and no one would know.”

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The Don had his say in the selection of not just players but also coaches too. In his later days after having retired from the game, Vikas Mehta had been chosen by the Indian cricket board as the batting coach. But the team’s chief coach vetoed the selection and persuaded the board to replace the one-time star batsman with someone who had played a dozen games of first cricket and only half a dozen test matches for the team.

The cabal, consisting of high net worth individuals, former players, politicians, film stars and those who were the Don’s protectorates, were a disciplined lot. The Omerta Code could have been drafted by them. There would be minor skirmishes here and there, but the Don ruled the roost with an iron fist. All disagreements were miraculously settled, and the world always saw one big happy family. The world, of course, did not know who the family was; it could only guess.

While fixing in Test matches did happen, it really gained ground in the shorter versions. It became an epidemic after the Indian Cricket Board launched its T-20 league tournament to take on Harshvardhan Agarwal’s Bharat Cricket League. Like the BCL, this one too was ensnared in spot-fixing scandals. The fire singed big teams owned by high-profile names that came from business and entertainment. The Board had to, reluctantly, move against some of them in the wake of public pressure and the intervention of the Supreme Court of India. A couple of the teams were barred from playing for two years, and the court appointed a Panel of Administrators (PoA) to oversee the functioning of the Indian Cricket Board for a few years. Not just that, the apex court also set up a commission of inquiry headed by one of its retired judges to probe into the scandal and submit its report.

Apparently, the findings of the report given to the court in a sealed cover were explosive, because they were never made public. This prepared the ground for speculations, fuelled by media reports that gave various versions of the secret report.

The India International Centre, especially the restaurant was the watering hole of the Lutyens journalists and socialites. In fact, many considered it their duty to show up in the evening there for a peg or two; get into the spirit of things and push someone they liked a peg up or a peg down for the unlucky ones. Some of the stories even made it to the Page 3 news. A typical conversation at a table for four went thus:

Bearded socialite wearing a kurta started with, “So I hear that except one player the whole Indian team is on the list.”

Bobbed hair wearing a sleeveless blouse and saree chuckled, “Impossible! My information is that there were only two.”

The other Bobbed hair wearing sleeveless *Kurti* top chimed, “No, according my reliable source there were ten names in the list.”

The fourth member of the quartet, wearing a buttoned-down collar shirt with fashionable denims felt compelled to weigh in, with a dialogue delivered in Amitabh Bachchan style, “*Bechara Viru!*” He was hinting at the one who was not on the list.

“No, it is not him – I think it is Vinay.”

“How do you know?”

“Look at him – he looks like he is the boy scout captain of his high school – walking down the long and narrow path. Always serious, consumed with the game. I think it is him.”

Number four was still in *Sholay-land*. “*Kitne aadmi the?”*

BS (Bobbed sleeveless) entering *Sholay-land,* “*Do sarkaar!”*

BK (Bobbed Kurti) replied, “*Aur hum chaar. Phir be pata nahi laga sake.”*

All laughed heartily as they looked around to catch the attention of the waiter for their next peg.

The next day’s newspapers were full of news about the “list.” A couple of sports journalists whose credentials were respected across the board, reported that half a dozen high-profile Indian cricketers who had an iconic image, had been named in the findings for their complicity in match-and-spot-fixing. This included a former Indian captain who had led the team to several famous wins and was considered as the most successful captain the team had ever had, a specialist batsman whose image as a man of integrity was as rock solid as his batting, and an all-rounder who had on many occasions rescued the team from the precipice of disaster. There was disbelief among the public, a sense of dismay and anger. These were players whom the cricket-loving people had elevated to a god-like status, and they had betrayed the trust reposed in them.

People wondered why these A-grade players had succumbed to the temptation of illegally gained money. They were earning well legitimately in the form of match fees and endorsements through advertisements. Former Indian President APJ Abdul Kalam had once remarked: “Where do the evils like corruption arise from? It comes from the never-ending greed.”

That desire for greed, according to the report, was not limited to the players; cricket administrators and team owners too were named. The Don had cleverly tapped into this old human fallibility and had laughed all the way to the bank.

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Vijay Surya walked out to replace Vikas. Surya was a flamboyant cricketer, but he was also completely dedicated to his game. He was arguably the most reliable Number 4 batsman India had produced. As he walked past Vikas, he could notice the anger oozing out of his unfairly dismissed colleague. But there was little that he could do except to pat outgoing batsman’s back and move ahead. He looked at the sun to adjust his vision and did a quick walk up to the crease. This was his first time he was coming to bat on the third ball of a Test match.

The bowler Adam West was at the top of his mark, tail up, raring to have a go at someone who was considered not just the best Indian batsman but also among the world’s top three batsmen. This was West’s best opportunity to get a hat-trick. What should he bowl, he wondered… Bouncer at Vijay’s throat or a toe-crunching yorker to try and get him either bowled or leg-before-wicket? He had set up a deep square leg and a fine leg and wanted Surya to think that he was going to bounce him. Surya was one of those supremely balanced batsmen, who could wait till the last fraction of a second before playing a shot. And he had two shots for every ball.

West steamed in and… bowled a yorker. In a game of double bluff, Vijay had correctly guessed that West was going to try that on him, so he was ready. With minimum fuss, he kept the ball out, tapping it towards the unmanned extra cover and crossing over for a single. Relief.

One of the biggest fears of any batsman is that of getting out for a duck. The bright sun quickly dried up the surface but there was help for the bowler all morning. And yet, despite a fighting unbeaten 85 by Vijay Surya, India had been bundled out for 223. The only other batsman to make a fight of it was the third ‘V’, Viraj Verma, who scored a feisty 48. Once he fell, the rest of the batting line-up faded away, giving West the dream figures of 7 for 63. On that pitch, he was almost unplayable.

There were still 12 overs left to be bowled and the Windies knew that the Indians would give back as good as they got. Lucky for them, they scrapped it out till the end of the day, losing just one of their openers, in what turned out to the be the last over of the day before the heavens opened.

The second day was a repeat of the first one, with the Caribbean team finding the going just as hard as India. That they managed to come within 15 runs of the Indian score was largely due to some lusty hitting by their tail-enders. When India began their second innings, the sun was out, and the going was better. The openers put on 51 before one of them got dismissed. Adam West was again the slayer.

Vikas was aware that he was on a King pair when he took guard. Even as a million thoughts crossed his mind, he told himself to stay calm, blank everything out and let his subconscious respond to what he was about to receive. Adam West wanted to bounce Vikas this time around, thinking that the batsman would be anticipating the famous out-swinger; plus, the ball was relatively old and the swing, if there, would be late.

Vikas had studied West’s film after the first innings’ dismissal and thought that he had sorted him out. He knew that bowlers had to put a lot of effort into their bouncers, and each has his own way of betraying it to the outside world. In West’s case, he would run in faster. As soon as Vikas saw West sprinting, he knew he was getting a bouncer. And he was ready. In almost a magical fashion, the ball connected with the middle of the bat, and the controlled hook sent the ball screaming to the boundary. The fielders could only watch.

A well-executed hook shot early in the innings boosts a batsman’s confidence no end. In almost telepathic fashion, Mehta could read West like a book and was ready to counter anything that the bowler threw at him. After being taken for a few boundaries, West was removed from the attack; he needed rest anyway. The wicket had eased out a bit and the bowling attack was not posing any searching questions of Vikas. He shored up one end and stroked away to a fifty in just 65 balls, a rarity for him since he generally took his time.

But wickets kept falling at the other end. India was planning to set a target of at least 350. That they managed to get close to it was largely due to Vikas’s magnificent 186 as he shepherded the tail. He was the last to go while trying one shot too many. It was a satisfying performance overall and India bundled its rivals for 187 to take the Test and the series. There was celebration in the Indian side.

There was someone who was most upset. Even furious. The Don. The result was not what he had envisaged. Things had gone terribly wrong despite careful planning that had gone before the match. How it happened and why was something he intended to get to the bottom of.

# What the Don wants, the Don gets

A few decades ago…

Dilawar Mustafa was born in a lower middle-class family, to Sultana and Ashraf in a crowded one-bedroom apartment, in Byculla in Mumbai. The tenement came with common bathrooms and toilets (one for six tenants). An only child on whom both the parents doted, Dilawar grew up to be a studious kid, who could quickly grasp even difficult subjects. A keen ear for music and languages got him speaking almost eight languages effortlessly. It amazed people no end that a boy who did not have access to the facilities that other more privileged children did — such as tuitions or educated parents who could guide their children in studies at home — had turned out to be brilliant and bright. It seemed that Dilawar, driven by the ordeals that his family had to face on a daily basis, was determined to excel in studies in the hope that it would open the doors for a better life for him and his parents.

Even as a child, Dilawar had excellent communication skills and would converse with his neighbours in their mother-tongue. His knack of remembering even small issues that his neighbours faced and enquiring about them invariably brought a smile on their faces. Many of them had migrated from their villages to Mumbai in search of a better life, only to find themselves stuck in an orbit — perhaps higher than the one in their village, but an orbit, nevertheless. To be able to truly break out of the socialist rut in India of the 70s and 80s needed courage, the ability to know whom to ‘take care’ of, for transgressions, and a keen eye for opportunities that don’t knock the doors twice. Dilawar appeared to have a bright future ahead of him until that fateful day, when his father, Ashraf Mustafa, was picked up by the police.

It was a case of mistaken identity. The police had got hold of the wrong person, while the gangster with the same name roamed freely, wreaking havoc. Dilawar’s father was rounded up and tortured in police custody. Those were the days when Mumbai was in the grip of gangsters, with the more important of them heading their own groups which employed shooters, kidnappers, and extortionists. The gangs controlled nearly every illegal activity in the Maximum City. They made huge piles of money in the real estate too, coercing people to sell property to selected buyers at rates that were vastly below the market price and taking a commission for the ‘service’. They controlled trade unions, and this gave them a handle to arm-twist industrialists.

But some people did not heed the diktat of the gangs. These obstinate ones were taught a lesson — they were physically assaulted; their loved ones were abducted. In a few cases, the uncooperative ones were simply shot or knifed to death either in the privacy of their homes or office, or in broad daylight on the streets to send across a message to the rest who entertained thoughts of ignoring the power of the gangsters. The police appeared to be helpless, largely because of political interference. On the few occasions it was asked to crack down, pressure on its personnel showed. They would at times pick the wrong ones and submit them to torture.

Ashraf Mustafa happened to be one such unfortunate victim, who the police believed was the man the force was on the lookout for. The Ashraf Mustafa the police was on the lookout for, had been spreading fear and panic in society. When the heat increased and it became difficult for his patrons in high public office to protect him, the gangster went underground. The general public was furious, and it poured venom on the political system for harbouring the man. Orders had thus gone out: “Get Ashraf Mustafa.”

The police had figured out the ‘signature’ of gangster Ashraf. Every time he killed, he carved with his knife on the chest of his victim a number (e. g. 24). He would always cross the number 7 as ‘~~7’~~. The police kept pounding the innocent Mustafa in its custody on the type of knife he used to do the killings. It was a serrated knife, perhaps strong enough to kill and have a tip sharp enough to carve on the dead body. The Director General of Police wanted conclusive evidence of Ashraf’s crime and the interrogators could not give him that. As public pressure increased (the local councillor of Byculla started ratcheting up the pressure and justifiably so), the police tried harder. After some time, innocent Ashraf’s spirit broke and his body gave in. He died in prison.

Meanwhile, the police recovered another body, with a number carved on his chest, matching the signature of gangster Ashraf. Once the news leaked in the media, all hell broke loose. The police found itself at the receiving end for having caught an innocent person and causing his death. A section of the critics accused Mumbai police of religious bias too, claiming that it had been systematically targeting members of one particular community.

Dilawar was then 16 years old. With his father gone, his family’s financial condition worsened, and he found himself out of school and on the road. He had to become the family’s breadwinner, somehow or the other.

With the meagre savings the family had, Dilawar bought everyday-useful items such as umbrellas, caps etc. and hawked them on the road, at traffic-light signals. The bright kid that he was, he started noticing several things — a local gangster Matka Dada would drive around in a noisy Plymouth which would belch smoke.

“*Dada, kuch lo na! (*Boss buy something),” Dilawar would badger.

“*Chal foot!* (Get Lost!),” Dada would shoo him away.

But Dilawar noticed that Matka would be extremely nice if his girlfriend Saroja was with him. With Saroja in the car, Dilawar could sell cheap items for outrageous prices and still have Matka Dada buy them. On one occasion, out of curiosity, he followed the car to see where Saroja lived, and it turned out to be just a block away.

His ability to grasp things quickly came to his help one day. It was one of those torrential rains that afflict Mumbai. The skies had opened. Such days were bad for the business of selling goods standing on a road divider; you got splashed a lot, merchandise was damaged, and everyone was in an extra hurry to get to their destinations. In search of shelter, Dilawar moved away from his usual spot and walked ahead. Now he could see the portico of Saroja’s house. As he stood gazing, he spotted Matka Dada walk in, lugging what was evidently a heavy bag. After about 30 minutes, he left the house, without the bag. What happened next was even more interesting.

The Sub-Inspector (SI) of the local police station, Subhash Shinde, drove up in a police jeep and got down a few yards away from where Dilawar was standing. He was alone. Shinde then made a pretence of looking around to see if all was well and proceeded towards Saroja’s house. He emerged 30 minutes later, with the bag that Matka Dada had just deposited. Obviously, Saroja’s house was a transfer point, among other things. And this was the way the SI was getting his cut of the *hafta* (weekly protection money) from Matka Dada. Possibly, the amount was large enough for not just him but others in the police force, including his seniors. Dilawar watched the happenings with interest and filed the information in his mind for possible later use. He realised something was fishy, though he was unclear on what exactly the game was that was being played.

One of the persons who frequently drew the young Dilawar into a conversation while he waited at the traffic signal selling his wares, was a journalist named Anmol Rane. Rane had the Press ID card hanging around his neck. Rane was young, eager, and keen to make a mark for himself.

“Dilawar, what is happening?” Rane asked.

Dilawar weighted for Rane to buy something from him. He realized that information was money but for starters, he opened his mouth only when Rane bought something.

“What do you want to know?”

“This is Matka’s girlfriend’s place, right?”

“It could be. It could not be.”

Rane laughed and bought an umbrella. After pocketing the money Dilawar nodded his head in the affirmative.

“I heard that the local SI, Shinde also comes here…” Rane stuffed a 20-rupee note in Dilawar’s shirt pocket. Another nod.

Another transfer of 20 rupees from Rane’s wallet to Dilawar’s pocket.

“Every Friday Matka comes at 5 PM and will leave around 5:45 PM. Shinde will come around 6:15 PM and leave around 7 PM.”

“What happens there?”

“How do I know?”

“This happens every week?” another 20 rupees gone. Dilawar nodded in the affirmative.

“What are you holding back on?”

“Depends upon what you want to know.”

“If it happens every week, there must be a reason.”

Dilawar was not swayed by the 20-rupee note. Rane scrounged around his pockets and accumulated 50, which gave him the answer he was looking for.

“Matka Dad will come with a heavy bag. Shinde will leave with the heavy bag.”

Rane perked up when he heard this. He returned the following Friday to see for himself. He was over the moon. Here was a scoop that no one else had latched on to. He had told his Editor and milked him 500 rupees for “buying information.” He thrust a 100-rupee note in Dilawar’s hand, saying, “*Shabash* (Well done)!”

A few days later, Rane organized an elaborate video setup to shoot the sting operation. Using four cameras from various angles, he captured the date and time of the incident that showed Matka coming with a heavy bag and returning with a different, lighter one. Sub-Inspector Shinde came with an empty bag and returned with the exact heavy bag that Dada had left at Saroja’s house. When the news broke on television, it looked like a slick movie with Rane providing the voice-overs. It kicked up a public storm and renewed the allegations of a police-gangster nexus. The video segment was signed off with a flourish, hinting that this connection was not possible without the involvement of the bureaucracy and the political system.

Matka Dada had to go underground, and SI Shinde was suspended (and later transferred). Saroja, who was living the life of luxury as the Matka Dada’s moll, suddenly found herself abandoned, as her patron got for himself a new girlfriend in the form of an upcoming starlet. Her earlier customers were reluctant to visit, fearful of Matka’s ire. In the underworld, there is the unwritten law; you don’t mess with anyone connected to the boss. Her savings ran out quickly and she began scrambling to land her next big fish.

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It was a chance encounter that changed Dilawar’s life. As he was walking home from a dull sales day, Saroja accosted him and asked about his whereabouts.

“Dilawar, *kaise ho* (how are you)*?”* She recognised him easily because he had often sold goods to her at the traffic signal. She had noticed also that Dilawar was different from the run-of-the-mill boys who peddled their wares on roads. He had a personality, was polite and polished, and clearly meant for bigger things in life.

“*Bas theek thaak, chal rahi hai* (I am alright, life goes on) …” Dilawar was neither pessimistic nor optimistic. But he was happy that Saroja noticed him. It was not often that people considered him worthy of even a passing attention, let alone of engaging in a conversation with.

“Matka Dada is not seen these days…” Dilawar asked.

“*Lambi kahani hai* (it’s a long story),” she sighed. They were walking and talking.

Before long, Saroja reached her dwelling and invited Dilawar in for a tea. Up close, he noticed that she was very young, perhaps in her early 20s. Over tea and Osmania Biscuits, Saroja said she came from Hyderabad, that her real name was Meherunnisa Begum, and because of her light brown eyes and sharp features, her father had sold her to a wandering Arab. Her family needed the money. The Arab, after spending a few nights with her, abandoned her in Mumbai and disappeared. Suddenly she found herself on the footpath, after living a five-star lifestyle for a couple of weeks — and, dangerously getting addicted to it. Barely 18, she had to think on her feet.

Help came from an unexpected quarter. A hotel employee, Manoj Pandey, who lived close by, noticed her plight, and took her to his home, where she stayed for a few days to get her thoughts together. Pandey worked at one of the city’s iconic five-star hotels in the Concierge section and had seen events like the one Saroja had narrated, play out on many occasions. A vulnerable good-looking young woman gets ensnared to a wealthy but middle-aged Arab; the Arab man has a few weeks of good time with her, lavishing all luxuries on the unsuspecting woman; and then walks away. Saroja’s story came as no surprise to Pandey.

He lived in a one-room tenement with his family of two daughters and wife, who did odd jobs like sewing, mending etc. to add to his small income. Pandey and his wife convinced Meherunnisa to return to her hometown Hyderabad. He dropped her off at the railway station with enough money to get home. But fate had other things in store for her. It was late in the evening, around 10 PM. The station was not very crowded, and she was waiting at a relatively secluded spot on the platform. Two men who had been silently stalking her, suddenly converged on her, put a handkerchief dabbed with chloroform on her face. And before she could react, she was bundled into a waiting auto which sped off in the direction of Grant Road, to the infamous red-light area of Mumbai. The ever hungry *dalals* (middlemen) of the flesh trade had spotted her as she was looking around and decided that this was a great opportunity to make a few valuable bucks, selling her off to a brothel keeper.

# Meher becomes Saroja

The flesh market conducted periodic auctions, away from the glare of the public but under the very nose of the police which had learned to look the other way. As soon as there were enough people, the middlemen (Lieutenants in Western speak, used in a derogatory sense) put out an auction notice and the top dozen-or-so brothel owners would get together to bid over the new *maal* (stock, in crude language). Durga Bai and Champa Bai ran one of the best-known brothels in town. Their clientele tended to be upper middle class or higher, and demanded clean, *gori-chikni* types (fair and fine skinned) who had regular medical check-ups. While prostitution is illegal in India, red light regions flourish all over the country, and Mumbai is no exception.

Durga Bai always made a grand entrance. Even in an auction, there were protocols – the highest payers got to sit in the sofas and got a grand view of the girls lined up.

“The sixth from left is Meher,” whispered the *Dalal*, in Durga Bai’s ears. She nodded imperceptibly and waited for her to be auctioned, keeping her money, and letting others bid.

The bidding for Meher started at 1 lakh. Arfa-begum, Durga Bai’s rival bid 1.1 lakhs.

Durga Bai waved her paddle. 1.2 lakhs.

The bidding battle went back and forth until Durga Bai clinched the deal at 2 lakhs.

She smiled gently at Meher, on whose hand the *mehndi* (myrtle) was still fresh. A consummate businesswoman, she had seen and personally experienced enough ups and downs in life that had hardened her. She had learnt the hard way that sentimentality had no place in her world. Tears and heart-rending stories of new arrivals no longer affected her.

Durga Bai had been initiated into the flesh trade by her stepfather when she was just seventeen years of age. Thereafter he and her mother — who had reconciled to the new life with her new husband — lived off her income. In the years that followed, Durga understood the machinations of the business, built contacts with the influential and saved money. One day, she threw out her parents from the house, with some help from the local goons, and took charge of her life. By the time she turned 35, she graduated to owning a brothel which catered to the better off in life.

Durga Bai led Meher out of the auction room and into an auto. Although she was rich enough to own a car, she used public transport, realizing that flaunting wealth could be counterproductive in her business. Soon, the two arrived at a brothel house and Meher was led to a room that would now be her home. Completely exhausted, she crashed into bed and slept. Four hours later, when she woke, she took stock of her surroundings. The room was small, cramped with four other girls of her age, all looking frightened. A menacing looking man with a flowing beard, wearing a Pathan-like dress, entered the room and announced that they would be fed and clothed. He pointed to where the toilets where. All of them were asked to clean up and given new clothes to wear for the next round of the auction. A few hours later, they were presented for business. In the flesh trade, one never hung on to a commodity for too long — the police could be searching for the girl and the raids the authorities conducted caused major disruptions.

Durga Bai did not need to know the details of Meher’s past – one look at her innocent face said it all.

Sitting at her feet, Meher bawled her heart out. “All I wanted to do was study and I got married off to this Arab who ditched me in a five-star hotel. How is this my fault?”

With watery eyes she looked up and said, “I was hoping to become a fashion designer, and this is now my fate?” Durga Bai pulled her up and hugged her tight.

After a few minutes, she sobered up. Durga Bai gently took her to her quarters and told her to spend the next few days resting and getting new clothes. She also told Meher that the clientele was mostly Hindu and that Meher should change her name to Saroja (meaning born in a lake, a Lotus). Meher did not have any papers to prove either her name or her age.

While most brothel houses asked their employees to sleep with up to 30-40 people a day, Durga Bai was more selective and allowed no more than half a dozen customers per employee per day. What she lost in quantity, she made up in quality. Most paid between 500 to 1000 rupees per visit.

As she would enter, Durga Bai told herself, “Hmm. This kid has style and knows how to carry herself.”

A new arrival was always a hot item till the next new one came along. It was no different with Saroja. Her slim shape, fair skin and light brown eyes teased and tormented the frequenters, and it was not long before she became the ‘go-to’ person at the brothel. It seemed that she was destined to spend her most productive years there. But fate had different plans.

# Saroja meets Matka Dada

It took Meher some time to adjust to her new life. However much she disliked it, it was the reality, and the sooner she grasped it the better. There were times when she wistfully thought of the old days, of her playful childhood, of her dreams of a happy future with a doting husband and loveable kids. She would never forgive her father for having sold her to the Arab, for that was where her life turned into hell. At times when she was alone in the brothel house, which was her new home, she would cry her heart out. The other sex workers would console her, speak about their miserable past and say philosophically that time was a great healer.

Durga Bai had her own initiation training class, consisting of all of 15 minutes.

“Every bedroom has a box full of condoms, of all varieties. Make sure your customer wears it.”

The ten or so interns giggled.

“*Mazaak nahi hai!* (It is not funny) I want you all to stay healthy. No matter what, do not break this rule. If the customer is being difficult, press this button,” she said, showing a surreptitiously hidden button bell that looked like a miniature doorbell. Usman or Mansur will immediately come and take care of you.”

The group quietened down to digest what Durga Bai had just said.

“All rooms have video cameras,” she said. “And these are for your protection. I don’t want anyone doing anything unusual to you. Someone is watching to make sure that you are safe. *Zamana kharab hai* (It is a bad place out there).”

The final part of her pep talk was delivered with precision and care.

“You will undergo medical examination every two weeks. You need to keep yourself hydrated and fresh.”

It wasn’t too long before Meher slipped into a routine. She was Saroja for all practical purposes, having picked up Hindu customs—even chanting a few prayers, applying *Bindi* (which she used to do surreptitiously even as Meher but now could do it openly), and learning to tie a saree that showed her in the best light. A perceptive person, Saroja could judge the profession of her client by his mannerisms. It could be a betel nut chewing businessman, a bureaucrat, or the scion of a wealthy family. She adapted her approach accordingly, and it was no wonder that Durga Bai received glowing feedback on her new possession.

The most interesting clients were those who played in the stock market. They were attached to their cell phone like they were born with it. They were on it even more when the exchange was closed! Saroja used to wonder why these *Satta Bazaar wale* (stock market people) even wanted sex; they seemed to get more pleasure from the tips they received on the phone from insiders. During the day, there was free time and it became something of a hobby for Saroja to see which of her high-profile clients was showing up on television. She also developed an interest in the stock market and began to do her own analysis of the rise and fall in prices of shares. She had started reading the newspapers, thanking her stars for the elementary education that she had managed to have, which equipped her to read and write. Saroja encouraged her clients to talk about their areas of expertise, which added to her understanding. She could now put two and two together on why a client of hers was pitching a certain stock.

She had her regular clients who came on a particular day of the week at around the same time. There were also the traveling types wanting a one-time experience. Elements from the underworld too visited her. She was polite and cooperative with all of them, only demanding that they exercise basic hygiene discipline. Luckily for her, her clients were the type who were ‘clean’. Her conduct generated a great amount of word-of-mouth publicity for her. One day, as she was waiting for her business to begin at around 8 PM, she noticed a great deal of nervous activity at the brothel house. Three cars screeched to a halt and Durga Bai’s business premises had a new customer — Matka Dada.

First timers were usually shown a line-up of available personnel — a catwalk of sorts. Durga Bai knew that a high-profile candidate held the potential of repeat business with a high rate of return, so she usually picked six of her best workers and paraded them before the customer. This was done for Dada too. She watched Matka’s expression shrewdly as the girls wiggled their hips and smiled suggestively at him. A trained face reader, she kept Saroja for last. Sure enough, like a guided missile, Matka zeroed in on Saroja.

Matka Dada was almost twice the age of Saroja when he met her, but that did not stop them from establishing an instant chemistry. Matka liked Saroja’s impish enthusiasm. In the coming weeks, he would ask to spend an entire night with Saroja. Durga Bai was only too happy to oblige — an underworld leader gave her security from other pests who came to demand *hafta*. After the session, he would tell Saroja about his other conquests, territories, his lieutenants, and talk on just about everything under the sun.

A few months later, Matka Dada decided to go exclusive with Saroja.

“Durga Bai, *apun Saroja ko rakhela* (I want to keep Saroja). *Bol, kitne paise chahiye?* (How much money do you want?”

“*Char lakh* (4 lakhs).”

“*Lekin maine to suna hai ke tu ise 2 lakh mein khareedi?* (I heard you bought her for 2 lakhs).”

Durga hemmed and hawed and they finally settled halfway, at 3 lakhs. A 50% return on investment for a 2-year investment was not bad, she told herself. Matka put her up in a nice 2 Bedroom Hall Kitchen (BHK) apartment, which was a benami property of a local politician. He ensured that she had a comfortable lifestyle.

# Dilawar and Saroja form a partnership

As Saroja dwelt on her past, Dilawar was absorbing her story like a sponge. He realized that here was an opportunity that he could exploit. He was tired of peddling useless trinkets on the road and getting drenched with slush in the process. Even as thoughts were running through his mind at breakneck speed, he wondered as to why she was telling him so much about herself. He decided to ask her another day. For now, a hot tea with butter biscuits was fine with him.

As he started to leave, Saroja grabbed his hand and pulled him back and looked into his eyes closely and said, “Will you come tomorrow again? I have an idea that I want to discuss with you.”

Dilawar nodded his head and left.

As he walked home, he dwelt on the harsh realities of life. Saroja had been used to a life of relative comfort but now she had to scramble to find alternatives to maintain her lifestyle. The connection with Rane had given him a ringside seat of how *Chor-Police* (Thief-Police) games were played in Mumbai and the centrifugal forces that dictated the rules with which everyone had to abide by. The more he thought about it, the more he felt excited. If what Saroja had said was true, then he knew how Matka Dada operated and who were his confidants. With him in hiding, the time was ripe to try and take control of his territory. Is this what she had in mind?

“So, what did you have in mind?” Dilawar started, as he sipped Lamsa tea with Karachi Bakery biscuits, both Hyderabadi specialties. “Umm, I like this *namkeen* (salty) biscuits…”

“You know that Matka Dada is in hiding, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I heard. So, it is true!”

“I have a lot of information about his gang and his rival Bittu’s gang. If information is leaked correctly, you can set off one against the other till they wipe each other out.”

Dilawar was all ears. “How would I be able to do that?”

“But you have to be careful. Extremely careful. There will be times when you must pull back and other occasions when you have to blindly forge ahead. I know how they think, and I can tell you exactly how they will react. Are you ready to look danger in the eye?”

Dilawar was silent for a moment as he weighed what Saroja had said. He then got up and said, “Can I give you my answer tomorrow?”

The night was spent thinking about what the future held for him. He had stopped his education and it felt weird to go back to that. He had suddenly grown up in the last few years. At 19, he was already making decisions like a mature man. Something in his gut told him that partnering with Saroja was the way to go.

And a trusting, mutually beneficial friendship was formed. A friendship that was platonic - she was the master and he the pupil. Together, they would shake up the system and have a pie of the underworld cake.

The gangster world operated by certain rules. One of them was that each gang would have a territory of its own and no rival would conduct its business there. This was in keeping with the ‘live and let live’ motto. It also averted avoidable clashes between two gangs, which could then concentrate on enhancing their businesses rather than eliminating one another. The rule made sense, but it was also one that was readily flouted. Gang leaders were ever eager to expand their area of operation and extend their influence. This involved weakening the rival’s position, and one of the methods of doing so was to leak critical information about the other, to the police.

But this was also tricky. Sections of the police force were compromised with loyalties to one gang or the other. They acted on tips based on such loyalty. It was possible that the gang which was leaking the information itself could be targeted. The Mumbai underworld had witnessed several police encounters based on tip-offs from within the gangs operating, and many of them were called into question later by activists and other experts. But the biggest threat came from those gangsters who loyalties were as shifty as sand. Often, the information was spot on and when that happened, maximum damage was inflicted on the criminals. The police high command was happy as long as gangsters were killing one another since it made their job easy. Besides, a new regime often meant a new source of income for the rank and file.

Saroja helped Dilawar plan the internecine warfare carefully, like moving pieces on a chess board. And they got lucky. The neighbouring gangster Bittu Bhaiyya had been eyeing Matka Dada’s territory for a while and felt that a few kills in Matka’s camp would set the cat among the pigeons. On a day when it was raining cats and dogs (Mumbai’s rainy season lasts from mid-June to mid-September), Bittu knifed a prominent member of Matka’s gang and disappeared into the rain. Those who accompanied the member, who bled to death because a vein in the neck was slashed, did not even notice him as they were busy trying to shake down the shopkeepers for their *hafta*. It was a few minutes before they turned back to see that their colleague had bled to death. Dilawar happened to be at the spot and saw the entire incident.

Dilawar stopped by Saroja’s place to tell her what he saw. “I saw in front of my eyes a man bleed to death! The way his throat was slashed, blood spurted out like a fountain. In minutes, he bled out. The blood just washed away in the heavy rain!”

“Describe him to me. This could be a gang war that you saw. Only one man was targeted?”

“Yes. Three people jumped out of a car and two caught him and held him while the third knifed him. They stood covering the victim for like a minute after which they let him slowly fall and die. Before I could look up, they had vanished in the car.”

“Describe the victim to me.”

“He had long hair that he tied it like a ponytail. Medium build, had a tattoo of a *bichoo* (scorpion) on his forearm.”

“That was Munawar, of Matka’s gang. What about the three killers?”

“Two were well-built, at least six feet tall. One of them had a gash on his left cheek that ran from his mouth to his eye. From what I could see, they used a flat knife that I think they thrust into his neck. When they stood covering him, the victim was not visible.”

“Those are from Bittu’s gang. Matka is surely going to seek revenge.”

Saroja knew that Matka, although he had abandoned her and gone underground, would resurface and come straight to her for information.

“Listen, sooner or later, Matka will come looking for you. I don’t think you can hide from him the truth. Before he acts, you leave for your native village with your mother. Here is a Blackberry Secure Phone. I will message you every two days. If you see **#**, wait. When you see **\*** return.

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Matka was furious. He needed to know which gang had killed his lieutenant. The two who were with the deceased were given a sound thrashing but that did not get him any actionable information. No one in the vicinity of the incident could remember what happened. On a hunch, he decided to pay Saroja a visit. Saroja was proved right. There was more security than usual as his minions came knocking at her door. They went through each room, making sure there was no one else. They also closed all windows and turned on the bedroom air-conditioner and left the place. Matka would be here soon.

Saroja decided to seduce him — not that he needed any encouragement. She had to act difficult, coy, and hurt all at the same time, while also being suggestive. She wore the push-up Wonderbra that she recently had bought at a mall, and a black chiffon saree that accentuated her cleavage and showed her navel button. She wanted him to stay for some time and not slink away. She could gather a lot more information from the phone calls he got and made.

Matka arrived in a rush and closed the door. He had something in his hand that he was hiding behind his back. Saroja acted surprised, hurt, and angry­­. Matka was forming a sentence in his mouth but the words wouldn’t come as he gawked at Saroja. Gathering his jaw from the floor, he sheepishly grinned and gave her the gift. It was a piece of jewellery that would have cost him the world. Even Saroja was impressed. But she was not going to give in so quickly.

“Did you pay for it or did you swipe it?” she asked.

Matka was offended but he knew he was on the back foot, so he promptly fished out the receipt and showed it to her. “Use this, in case you want to change it,” he said.

He knew she would never dream of going to the store. So did she. But Dada was trying to make an honest conversation and failing. Even as he was speaking, his eyes were undressing her. It was as if the flow of blood has stopped to his brain and was being directed elsewhere.

He dragged her to the bedroom and as usual dispensed with foreplay and was thrusting deeply without a care for whether Saroja was ready or not. In five minutes, he was spent. But Saroja needed him to stay longer so that she could extract information. She knew that if he stayed for a bit, phone calls would keep coming and she could place what he was thinking. Just as he was finishing up, his cell phone rang.

“*Kuch pata chala?* (Did you find anything?)”

“No. We asked around. No one seems to know who did it.”

“Munawar is knifed in broad daylight and no one has seen anything? *Benchod, nalayak, kamine!* (Expletives) Ask again.”

“*Theek hai Dada.* (OK boss).”

Saroja dressed quickly and set about fixing a quick meal for Matka, just the way he liked, a *Pav Bhaji* with an extra topping of chopped onions. Thank god, the close-ups were done, unless Matka wanted an encore. But that was fine with her. The longer he stayed, the more he shared. Matka had not brought up the matter yet.

After the meal, Matka was relaxed. He clicked the channels aimlessly as he was bringing himself up to ask the question… Eventually, he queried, “Have you heard anything about the killing that happened a few days back? I was hoping to find who knifed Munawar…,” he trailed off.

Saroja took her time to answer. She did not know all his minions by their name and wanted him to expand a bit on who it was that got knifed.

“Word on the street is that it was Munna of Bittu’s gang who slashed your guy. But I could be wrong… don’t go by my word. These days no one can be trusted,” Saroja tailed off, watching Matka for a reaction.

Matka thought for a few minutes and did the inevitable thing. Call his trusted minion.

“At the junction opposite JJ Hospital in Byculla, there will be a street seller running out to sell items at the signal. I think his name is Dilawar. Ask around and get him here,” he barked and hung up the phone.

Saroja was pleased though she did not show it. Matka was taking the bait. He would be here for a while. Every minute would reveal a new nugget of information that would come handy.

“I missed you, Saroja – you know how it is. I had to change my *adda* (region of operation) after that incident. Wait till I get that reporter; I will squeeze the truth out of him as to who told on me,” Matka thundered as Saroja shuddered inwardly.

She had wisely kept Dilawar out of the reach of Matka; or so she hoped. Saroja walked up to her dresser and turned and looked at Matka – she wanted him to clasp her new necklace. Matka, for once got the hint and obeyed. The heat was rising in the room when Matka’s phone rang.

“Dilawar is not here. We checked his house, it has a lock and the neighbours do not know when he and his mother left,” conveyed Matka’s lieutenant.

“Do you know where they went?”

“Nobody seems to know.”

“*Madarchod, kutte ki aulad, besharam* (Expletives). You can’t even do a simple thing like find out where the rascal went.”

There was silence on the line. Matka realized after a few moments of venting that he was taking his frustration out on his underling.

After mulling for a few moments, Matka made up his mind. He called back Manzoor, his faithful assistant and barked, “Eliminate Bittu’s second-in-command, Munna. Make it look like an accident.”

Saroja held his arm and asked innocently, “So you take out some from Bittu’s gang. Then what happens?”

Matka gave her a baleful look and replied, “That dog needs to be put in his place. He needs to know what his *aukat* (place in the pecking order) is.”

In less than 24 hours, the Byculla police station received an anonymous call that a person was lying on a pool of blood on the main road barely two kilometres away. Eyewitnesses told a team of police personnel which reached the spot that the driver seemed to have lost control of the wheels and the vehicle had crashed head-on into a tree, leading to the driver’s death on the spot. The police identified the dead man as Munna, the sharpshooter of Bittu’s gang, and gleefully closed the case as one of a natural accident. The investigating officer added in his report that Munna was drunk while driving.

Matka Dada’s man Manzoor conveyed the news to his boss that the job had been done. His people had tampered with the brakes of Munna’s vehicle.

# The shootout – Matka and Bittu gangs eliminated

A fortnight later, the issue faded from the media and life resumed its normal state — on the streets of Mumbai, in the police department, and for Matka Dada. Having had his revenge, he had abandoned the thought of tracking down Dilawar.

“**\***,” Saroja texted Dilawar, indicating in coded language that the coast was clear for him to return.

Two days after receiving the go-ahead, Dilawar came back along with his mother, to begin a new chapter of his life. The tough phase was to come now.

Dilawar had not even turned 20. For someone so young, he had absorbed a lot.

“There are two categories of businessmen. The first are those that build their empire from scratch. They start with virtually nothing, including little money, and carve out a successful business brick by brick, inch by inch. Sometimes it took them years, even decades, but in the end all the hard work they had put in would yield fruit. The second category is of those who acquire running businesses, either flourishing or floundering. They are acquisition experts, evaluating their targets on financial and demand considerations and then taking a final call. These businessmen then either run the acquired business themselves or leave the nitty-gritty to experts. I want to be in the second category,” Dilawar explained to Saroja, when they met.

“Wow, you spent the time in your village well,” Saroja was impressed.

“I took with me a few books that I could read as I knew there was not much to do,” replied Dilawar. “These and my experiences trying to sell cheap merchandise. When there is not much to do, the mind starts thinking and leads you to places that you never knew existed!”

Saroja was looking at him, non-plussed. “What are you? Sant Kabir?”

“No. Hardly. I have got some ideas… tell me what you think of them.”

“Go ahead, *Mian* Dilawar…”

“Mumbai is already saturated with gangs and gangsters who have carved out every inch of the city’s territory among themselves, and they would respond ferociously towards a new entrant, especially one from the outside.”

“True.”

“Instead, if we acquire an operating gang or two and merge them for scalability and profitably, then it can be a viable business. But money is needed to do this, and I have none...” he tailed off.

Saroja thought for a few moments and replied, “Having observed Matka Dada closely, I know how these gangs operate. If there is a way you can make do with information instead of money…”

He had identified the most profitable areas of operation in those days, which was to deal in goods smuggled from across the country’s borders, either by road or air. That is how most gangs made their money. They imported the goods — gold biscuits, transistors and clothes were in great demand in the days when the Indian economy had not opened up — without having to pay the hefty import duties, and then make a neat killing by selling them off in the Indian grey market. The gangs of both Matka Dada and Bittu, besides running illegal betting and extortion rackets, flourished through the sale of smuggled goods.

The operation needed a wide network of people, right from the roadside checkpoints to the airport. Both the gang leaders had over the years built that network. Dilawar had no desire to reinvent the wheel. But he had only a vague idea of how the business worked, and this is where Saroja came to be useful. She was a mine of information, which had been gathered over the years of her association with Matka.

The other important bit of information was how to strike partnerships with competing gangs — and if that was not possible, how to eliminate or subsume them. He had learned the dangers of entering into needless confrontations that could be avoided, through the example of the rivalry between Dada and Bittu, which had caused harm to both.

As Dilawar mulled these thoughts, he reflected on another chain of thinking. Saroja was eager to restore to herself the privileged lifestyle she been used to. And he was scheming to enter the big money league. But it was so ironic, he said to himself, that while money was the end goal, he would get nowhere with money power alone. There was something else which was as important, perhaps more important. And that was friendship. It went beyond the tactical partnership so common in the underworld, and it was friendship which came to one’s rescue in times of crisis. Friendship with the right people.

When Dilawar laid out his plan, Saroja was taken aback by the audacity.

“This is easier said than done,” she said. “Bittu may have received a setback with the killing of his right-hand man, but he is not finished yet. And Dada is as strong as before. We need to handle the situation with finesse,” she completed.

But Dilawar was resolute and she soon understood that he was not going to be dissuaded.

“There are about half a dozen key persons in Dada’s group who secretly maintain links with me and could be persuaded to back you if things come to a head. Once they were won over, Matka would have to pack his bags.”

But Dilawar was not convinced. “I believe that the gang leader has to be eliminated for the problem to be settled; else, he would remain a constant threat to us and our new venture.”

“Take it one step at a time,” she advised. “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it,” she said.

Over the next three months, Saroja and Dilawar met the individuals identified at a safe house on the outskirts of the city. It had been gifted by Dada to Saroja, but she had never used it before, and thus was not on the radar of the gangster. In the beginning, the gangsters were sceptical of Dilawar’s ability to deliver. He was not part of the underworld and did not have powerful patrons whose protection was essential. But, slowly, they were impressed by his sharp intellect and knowledge of the world they inhabited and, most importantly, his clear vision on how to implement the plan. A list of key people from Bittu and Matka groups was drawn up — people who needed to be eliminated. A timeframe to implement the plan was agreed upon. The new lieutenants, handpicked by Saroja, would take care of the details; they would engage mercenaries so that the blowback, if any, would not come back to them.

It was a humid Wednesday afternoon and the Mahim traffic junction near St Michael’s Church was bustling with activity. Hordes of people were loitering on the footpath, hoping to catch a glimpse of their favourite film stars driving past in their vehicles on work. Others were going about their task, walking busily in one direction or the other. Close by, in one of the many narrow lanes, Matka dada’s gambling den was doing brisk business. A bright red fiat car was at the signal which had gone red, and the driver had used the break to light a cigarette. Two motorcycle-borne men stopped at the car driver’s side, drew pistols and pumped in several bullets into the driver. There was chaos on the road as people fled in various directions in fright. The motorcyclists then sped off. The police were to later identify the dead man as Matka’s chief sharpshooter and also his brother-in-law.

Over the next two weeks, the police had its hands full, as one important Matka aide after the other was gunned down. A few were knifed to death. Dada was rattled by the spate of eliminations of his men who formed the backbone of his gang. He suspected Bittu and in retaliation ordered executions of the latter’s men. The following month, Mumbai saw a bloodbath on the streets between the two gangs. Both Bittu and Matka went underground, fearing for their lives and their gangs were on their own, leaderless.

It was now time for Dilawar to step in out of the shadows. His new men, recruited by Saroja, organised a meeting of the remaining important members of the Dada group with him. It was unanimously decided that Dilawar would be their new *Bhai* (leader). The next step was to win over key members of Bittu gang. This proved to be easy; Bittu’s men were a scared lot and quickly agreed to shift their allegiance to Dilawar.

What no one knew was that Bittu and Matka had a one-on-one showdown and shot at each other. Bittu died instantly but his bullet hit Matka in the gut and he slowly bled to death. It was poetic justice that what was meant to be a peace meeting ended up in both getting killed. The road was clear for Dilawar to ascend the throne.

Within six months of Operation Takeover, Dilawar Mustafa, the small-time roadside peddler of goods, the bright school student who had hoped to lead the life of a law-abiding and well-off citizen of India, had emerged on the Mumbai underworld horizon as the new Don.

# Dilawar Mustafa ascends the throne

Anmol Rane, the journalist, was feeling pleased. He had been called for tea by the new Chief Minister Madhav Mantri. This was an honour. Rane had been a small-time reporter with a Mumbai-based Marathi daily. Like in the case of other rookies, he was given the police department as his regular beat to cover. The assistant editor, to whom he reported, had told him that reporting on the police administration offered tremendous scope for inside scoops that had the potential to shake up the state administration. Besides, it gave a reporter the chance to build contacts that could be useful in the long run. Rane had gone about his task with dedication. In the initial months he was content with covering routine Press briefings the police conducted, giving out information about the crimes of the day. He took the safe way out by diligently writing everything that the police would say, without questioning any of it. Slowly, he began to develop contacts within the force and realized that various factions worked fervently in the police, and they were often trying to run one another down.

The resultant friction ensured a steady stream of inside information which the disgruntled police officers and those down the order shared with Rane. Within six months of his reporting career, Rane broke his first major story. It was how a team of policemen had siphoned off contraband goods seized from a lorry. The value of the goods had been placed at Rs.4 lakhs. The information had been given to him by an insider who had been left out of the raid. The story, when it appeared in print, created a massive furore, and led to the suspension of the officer who had led the operation. It also catapulted Rane into the big league of crime reporters in the city.

His other major success was the exposure of planned encounters that certain police officers had conducted of gangsters at the behest of the latter’s rivals. The policemen involved in the act had been naturally suitably rewarded, and twice over — once by the police department for their valour, and again by the gang leaders who had passed on critical information about rivals — such as their whereabouts. Rane was able to piece together the entire episode with circumstantial evidence.

Rane was, however, careful to not just expose misdeeds but also report on the good work the police did. That got him access to the topmost officers, including the Commissioner of Police, who were only too grateful for the kind words written about them at a time when the force was facing flak for failing to contain the gang wars.

The reporter’s rising graph attracted the attention of the political establishment too. The state’s politics, like that of the police and the underworld, was ridden with factions, and leaders of these were constantly working to outsmart the other and surge ahead. One such leader was Madhav Mantri. Highly ambitious and shrewd in promoting his interests, Mantri was also soft-spoken which belied his ruthless nature. He also had the knack of building a network of influential people within the political setup (cutting across ideologies), the business community and the sports arena. He was a good administrator too; as the agriculture minister in the state government, Mantri had presided over the expansion of the agricultural sector, including a manifold increase in the irrigation network. He controlled many of the powerful cooperatives in the sugarcane industry, which was a big source of income for him. Although still young as compared to his peers in politics, Mantri had established a firm foothold. He was fondly called Mama-ji by supporters and rivals alike.

Mama-ji was not content with being a mere minister. He believed that he had the ability to govern the state as chief minister. But to achieve that purpose, he had to first put his rivals out of reckoning, primary among them being the incumbent chief minister and veteran leader Suhas Patil. He launched a propaganda war against the chief minister for his government’s failure to contain the underworld. Killings were happening every second day on the streets of Mumbai, and high-profile public personalities were being targeted.

Mama-ji called up Rane and praised him effusively. “I have heard many good things about you, Anmol Rane-ji. Your brand of intrepid journalism is what this country requires.”

Rane was astonished that a Minister had taken notice of his work. “Thank you for your kind words, Mantri-ji,” he replied.

“Can you drop in for a tea? At my place? 5 PM?”

“Yes sir. Most certainly.”

Mama-ji was all charm as he welcomed Rane into his government allotted bungalow. After tea with biscuits, he came to the point. In his sweet, persuasive manner, Mama-ji expressed concern over the law and order problem and wondered how things have come to this state.

“Yes, sir. The *Bhais* (goons) have taken over the city.”

Mama-ji replied in a conspiratorial tone, “I am hearing of some suspicious happenings with Matka Dada and some questionable activity at the residence of the underworld leader’s moll.”

What he left unsaid was, “you are a journalist… you know what to do…”

Always on the lookout for sensational stories, Rane took the bait. The series of stories that emerged from him had the impact Mama-ji desired.

Suhas Patil’s government reputation lays in tatters. But he was an old warhorse and not prepared to give in easily. Mama-ji understood that more needed to be done. He continued to work on Rane, who ran stories on how the Bittu, and Dada gangs were planning to eliminate one another. This further unsettled the two gangsters who were already feeling insecure. They then launched a no-holds barred violent attacks on each other’s groups, scaling up an already critical situation. The media, the intellectuals and various other groups began to bay for Patil’s blood, calling him incompetent. Some newspapers suggested that it was time for a firm leader like Mama-ji to take charge.

Seeing the writing on the wall, Suhas Patil stepped down. He had grasped the conspiracy that Mama-ji had hatched, but this was not the time to retaliate. He would hit when the occasion came his way. For now, he would retreat, lick his wounds, and live to fight another day.

Once Mama-ji took over, the underworld killings miraculously stopped — at least for the moment. This was credited to the supposed fear psychosis that had gripped the underworld with Mantri’s elevation as chief minister. He was given a free hand in selecting his ministers. He chose his people with care, with loyalty to him being the major criterion. Merit and experience were secondary.

But Mama-ji was not done. He had his sights set on the top chair in New Delhi, and he looked at his current stint as a means to that end. He realized that more than charm and cunning were needed to achieve that goal — money was essential, especially when it came to win over people to his side when the battle reached the decisive phase. There were far too many experienced claimants to the high post, all of them already situated in New Delhi. He was at best a regional satrap and he had to outdo them at their own game.

Thus, he had carefully picked only those for his ministry who could deliver on their monthly quotas. The pretext given was that it was needed for the ruling party at the Centre. In reality, a huge part of the money collected was carefully routed to Mama-ji’s benami accounts. A small portion was dutifully sent to the ruling party at the Centre to keep the high command happy. It also served as an incentive for the high command to keep away from the state’s affairs managed by him.

Everyone knew that Mama-ji skimmed off the top before sending it to the Centre, but no one knew what percentage it was. His nephew did the mule’s work of lugging the money, and he was a tight-lipped person. The nephew, Somnath Mantri (also called *Soma* or liquor in Sanskrit, behind his back) managed to keep the Centre happy. After a few weeks, the asking rate went up. Mama-ji was politely told that, while the high command was not bothered by how much he kept, it needed more. Elections were around the corner, he was reminded, and the Centre said that the quota had to increase by 25% for Mama-ji. The chief minister needed the media on his side at this moment, which is why he had asked star reporter Rane to meet him for dinner.

After a couple of rounds of drinks of Black Label whisky with a side dish of butter chicken, Mama-ji opened up. “Rane, I need you to talk to your informant that helped nail Matka. Can you bring him to me?”

Rane, inebriated both by the liquor and the honour bestowed on him, said, “He is a *bacha* (kid). Why do you want to meet him?”

Mantri smiled and gently replied, “Tomorrow evening. Same time. Come with him.” The meeting was over.

For hours after Rane left, Mama-ji sat nursing his drink and turning over the situation in his head. The two most dreaded gangsters of the city had been eliminated and there was peace. Now, the time had come to manage a one-time informant of Rane and currently the new leader of the underworld, Dilawar Mustafa. With the two gangs gone, the city’s money-making illegal enterprises had slipped into Dilawar’s control. But the new leader had escaped intense media attention largely because he had gone about his job, thanks to Saroja’s advice, in a low-key manner. He had also instructed his new lieutenants to avoid speaking much about him among the gang. Dilawar had no desire to come on the police’s radar at so early a stage in his new career.

It was not as if the police did not know of the coup he had executed, as a result of which he had become the new don. But it had nothing concrete against him that could hold in a court of law, and that is how Dilawar wanted the situation to remain. However, that was not how Mama-ji wanted the situation to remain. His mind was working furiously. He wanted a pie — a large slice of it — of the earnings, and he wanted to cut the police out of it. There was just one way for him to do that. Build a larger-than-life image of the new Don, expose him to the dangers of falling in the police net, and then appear before him as his patron who could protect him. That would leave Dilawar indebted to the Chief Minister and make him do his bidding.

He had instructed Rane to unleash a series of stories on Dilawar’s rise to the top. With that happening, Dilawar Mustafa, *Bhai* to the underworld, came into public prominence. Dilawar did not like it one bit and he pulled up Rane for the indiscretion. But the reporter convinced him of the need for such exposure. He told the Don that, to put fear in the minds of those who were his potential enemies, it was necessary to build up his persona. Besides, once people — film personalities, industrialists, and other prominent persons — knew how he had successfully finished off two of the most dreaded gangs and summed leadership, they would have a newfound respect for him and abide by his directives.

Mama-ji’s plan was working.

# Mama-ji meets Dilawar

Rane made his way to Dilawar’s house. The Don had shifted from his old residence to a more spacious but still modest two-floor home. It had five rooms in all, with one converted into a meeting hall where he held consultations with his key people. He lived there with his mother and a couple of domestic helps. There were few signs of ostentation, probably because Dilawar was still finding it difficult to transit to his new life of plenty from one of penury. The only indication of his importance was to be seen at the main gate, which was manned by half a dozen security people from within the ranks. These men were adept in various skills, from shooting to stabbing to martial arts. Armed to the teeth, their loyalty to the Don was beyond question. In time to come, Dilawar would shift residence yet again, this time to a palatial house with a dozen rooms and equipped with the latest gadgetry for home entertainment and security, which he would name ‘D Mansion’.

The Don had a soft corner for Rane. He had not forgotten the reporter’s financial help in those times of crisis. Besides, over the months, Dilawar had been impressed by Rane’s diligence to ensure that the Don’s interests had been protected. Rane had never misused his proximity to Dilawar. But the two met only rarely since the time Dilawar became the Mumbai underworld’s new chief, though they kept in touch over the phone. It was, thus, with some curiosity that Dilawar received Rane’s request for an urgent meeting. Since it had to be that very day, the Don quickly dispensed with his other tasks, including issuing a directive to his chief of security to soften up a particular textile mill owner who was proving difficult to convince.

The Don was asking the business magnate for a simple favour; pay Dilawar a one-time amount of Rs.10 lakhs to extinguish the trade union troubles the industrialist was facing. His mill was shut, and the labour was on strike. The militant union leaders owed allegiance to the Don and were prepared to scale up their agitation on getting the green signal. The businessman’s factory could be set on fire, or one of his family members could be abducted, or he himself could be grievously assaulted. Since none of those threats had worked, it was time to get the foolish textile owner to the ‘den’ and hope that once he walked out after about half an hour, he would have changed his mind.

Dilawar welcomed Rane with warmth. As the domestic help hustled to get the drinks ready, the journalist declined the hospitality and instead settled for tea with cream biscuits. The two were meeting after nearly three months and there was a lot to talk on the personal front. Rane enquired about the Don’s mother, who now lived in her village in a huge new house. The Don asked him on the progress of his journalistic career; Rane told him proudly that he had been promoted as chief reporter (crime) and given a steep hike in pay since a rival newspaper was threatening to poach him. The tea dispensed with and the plates removed, Rane came to the point.

“The chief minister wants to meet you tomorrow.”

Dilawar was surprised. “Mama-ji wants to meet me! Why?”

“I have no idea. I met him yesterday and he asked me to bring you along at the appointed hour.”

The Don thought it over. While there was no harm per se in meeting the state’s chief minister, his sixth sense cautioned him to be careful about the purpose. He was not keen on being too close to the political setup, since he had seen how politicians used and discarded gangsters. At the same time, politicians were useful in times of need. Dilawar had developed a deep hatred for the police ever since his father had been picked up and lost his life, but the Don had still done business with the police force after taking over the underworld. Perhaps some compromise with the politicians would not be that bad an idea.

“Tell me Rane saheb, from your experience, what could Mama-ji possibly want from me?”

“I wish I could tell. But the chief minister is a manipulative person. It may be that he wants to leverage your power to further his interests.”

“Hmm… I suppose it would not do to decline the offer of the meeting.”

“You are right. Let’s listen to him. You can then take a call.”

The following evening, both Rane and Dilawar proceeded to the chief minister’s residence. The security at the gate had been directed to let them in. They were taken to a spacious conference room and left alone. In fifteen minutes, Mama-ji walked in, clad in crisp white shirt and loose trousers. His hair had begun to grey a bit in places. Shooing his aides out, he walked up to the visitors and shook their hands warmly. It was the first time Dilawar was face to face with Mama-ji and was discreetly observing his body language.

“So, how is business?” The chief minister asked.

For the record, Dilawar owned a garments export business in the name of Al Mustafa Traders. It was in partnership with Saroja. The firm had tied up with the country’s leading garment manufacturers and sold their products worldwide. The business was especially good in the Middle East, where the Don’s network was substantial. He had inherited the infrastructure and expanded it multi-fold, particularly into more lucrative areas such as real estate and betting on international sports. Not many buyers of garments in the region would decline to do business with Al Mustafa.

Dilawar said it was doing good. Of course, he knew that the chief minister wasn’t enquiring about garments. He wanted Mama-ji to take the next step. The chief minister, who had many other pressing matters to deal with, had no wish to beat around the bush. Coming to the point, he said, “I am glad that the killings have stopped. There is peace in the city, and I thank you for that.”

“It’s all due to your able administration, sir,” Dilawar replied.

“Oh, but you have played a big role too. The way you have handled issues has contributed to the peace. I have read the articles Rane has written. I compliment you.”

“Thank you.”

“Since you are doing well, I have a small request. My party has been pressuring me for funds. It seems that they cannot have enough of it.”

“Sir.”

“I have a proposal. I need you to give me 10% of the income you make on a regular basis, plus another 5% on the exclusive hits.”

Rane could not believe his ears. The chief minister was asking for a cut from the underworld. But he kept a straight face. Dilawar asked, “Sir, what is my gain here?”

“You shall always remain protected. You will have a free rein. Neither the police nor the government will interfere. Of course, you will have to function in a discreet manner so that I am not under pressure from my rivals to act against you.”

“That’s all?”

“There is more. There are new windows that I can open for you to increase your income.”

The Don sat silent for five minutes. Tea had been served. The Don then spoke.

“Sir, what are those new windows?”

Mama-ji smiled. “Don’t be in such a hurry. Everything will happen for your good in due course of time. First we need to reach a broad agreement.”

Dilawar quickly made up his mind. After a quick glance at Rane, he said, “I’m willing.”

“Good,” Mama-ji said, getting up. “You will hear from me soon, through Rane.”

The meeting was over.

# Mama-ji enters National Politics

Mama-ji was a stalwart of the Freedom Party, albeit at the regional level. Over the years, he had skilfully managed to fill the coffers of the party at the national level. It was not that he did not love the high command for giving him a free hand in the State. But he loved the prospect of graduating to national politics more. He considered himself prime ministerial material, no less. The problem was that the high command, and especially Dipika Sharma, who was yet to assume any official position in the party organisation but still commanded respect for being a member of the party’s first family, held him in suspicion. Dipika, though not anointed into any position or even a member of the parliament could smell competition, a mile away.

There was good reason for that caution. Mama-ji had proved over the months as chief minister that he really did not need the high command’s blessings to maintain his hold in the State. He had become a power-centre himself. He placed his key people at all levels in the government and administration, right from the clerk to the chief secretary. Senior police officers had been handpicked by him. Not a leaf moved without his approval.

In addition, his deal with Dilawar Bhai had ensured that he not only got a hefty cut from the underworld business but also indirectly controlled the many illegal trades. The new Don and the chief minister had struck a good working rapport and their mutual interests were being taken care of. The flow of extra money from this source also meant that Mama-ji was pumping in more funds to the party’s central account — part of which, needless to say, was siphoned off by the first family. So, the high command was happy too. But it was also wary of his rising clout among the central leaders. Dipika was well aware of Mama-ji’s national ambitions and had begun discussing with her close associates means to sabotage the plan.

One other reason for her circumspection was his track record. He had some years ago split with the Freedom Party and formed his own outfit which proved to be a major irritant for the ruling organization in the State. Mama-ji had managed to wean over a bunch of key people to his side, and there always loomed the threat of more Freedom Party leaders walking over to him. Eventually, the party made peace with him, took him back into the fold and left him untroubled as he prepared the ground for his chief ministership. Mama-ji had grandly declared after his ‘home-coming’ that his primary task was to check the rise of the Divine Army, a political outfit that had occupied considerable space on the claim of representing the interests of the local people and opposing “outsiders” who were taking away jobs that ought to have gone to the people of the State. It was a different matter, though, that Mama-ji enjoyed a wonderful relationship with the Divine Army chief. In fact, both the Army as well as Mama-ji benefited from the political slugfest because it helped them consolidate their respective voter base.

Mama-ji was not a greenhorn. He realised that he needed to do more to prepare the ground for his national ambitions to fructify. He had to acquire allies across the political spectrum. He set his sights on a powerful regional politician from the country’s most populous State. This man had dreams of becoming the chief minister, but he needed money to win over support and dislodge the incumbent chief minister. In a secret meeting that had been arranged at his behest at a plush farmhouse on the outskirts of that State, the regional satrap said, “Mama-ji, the chief ministership is close to my grip. The MLAs and MPs that are ready to switch loyalties to me, have been identified. All that I need is money to swing the deal.”

Mama-ji said, “How much do you need?”

“At least Rs.10 crores.”

“You will have it. What do I get in return?”

“You will not find me and my people wanting when the time comes for you in New Delhi.”

“Hmm. Look, I can give Rs.7 crores.”

“I will manage the deficit.”

“Okay then. You will have it in three days.”

The meeting over, Mama-ji dialled a few numbers and got access to his secret overseas accounts. He then used the services of a hawala operator, arranged by Dilawar, and sent across the money, all in hard cash, to the regional leader. The incumbent government fell in that State and it had a new Chief Minister.

Mama-ji played a similar game in another State. Interestingly, both these chief ministers did not belong to the Freedom Party but to different regional parties. Among the parties that were split to provide the numbers was the Freedom Party!

Dipika Sharma had watched these developments with alarm. She knew where the money had come from Mama-ji for the coups but did not have any concrete evidence. Meanwhile, Mama-ji was busy targeting other groups within the Freedom Party. The party was riven by deep factionalism and Dipika was grappling with the crisis. Mama-ji generously jumped in to resolve the issue, playing the arbiter. He was not concerned with the interests of the party; his game plan was different. By his actions, he was also winning friends within the party who would later play a crucial role in getting him on to the national stage.

Mama-ji had managed to counter the influence of Divine Party to the extent that the Freedom Party was not only in power but had also expanded its reach to regions where the Divine Party had strong grassroots support. Meanwhile, he used Dilawar Mustafa’s underground network to maintain a ready flow of funds; in return, the Don had a free run, though with the explicit condition that he would refrain from violence on the streets. But exceptions were made — once in a while, some inconvenient leaders of the Divine Party or its financiers or key supporters were given grim warnings either through grave physical assaults or even elimination.

Meanwhile, Rane was playing his game with vigour too. At regular intervals, he spun out news reports of how Mama-ji was effectively administering the State, how the underworld had been contained, and how Dilawar Mustafa, contrary to the negative image created of him, was helping to build the State’s economic profile through his legal businesses — employing hundreds of people directly or indirectly. He also wrote against the Divine Party and its “communal” agenda, saying that it was working against the minorities. These stories created a certain environment by which the sizeable minority population veered towards Mama-ji.

Dilawar, meanwhile, was progressing by leaps and bounds. Inter-gang killing had stopped, simply because no major gang other than his existed anymore. That gave the Don time to concentrate his energies in expanding the scope of his business. His tentacles had now spread to the United Arab Emirates, particularly Dubai, which became a hot spot for various dubious activities, including the export of illegal firearms to elements across the globe, who were waging a war against their governments.

He had tied up with arms brokers, chief among them being Salman Suleiman. Salman was a bearded giant of a man with contacts with not just arms dealers but also governments. He managed to balance the conflicting interests with aplomb, making unimaginable profits for himself. Dilawar’s outreach was driven by two reasons. One, of course, was the need for further profits for himself. The other was to satiate the increasing demand from Mama-ji for funding.

But the Don was no longer in a one-way relationship, that had Mama-ji dominating. Dilawar had grown in stature too and had begun to constantly remind his political patron that he was no longer a fringe player. Indications had begun to emerge that the Frankenstein monster Mama-ji had created could get out of hand, but the uncanny politician was too occupied with his ‘March to Delhi’ mission to give it much thought. Besides, he was secure in the belief that all he had to do was to pull the plug and Dilawar would be reduced to nothing. He was underestimating the Don.

Also, he had no way of knowing that unforeseen developments in quick succession were to soon shake up the political system in New Delhi. It would assist in Mama-ji’s arrival on the national platform, though not in the fashion he had designed; tarnish his image, and directly impact Dilawar’s business.

# A few years later…

An assassination and a power struggle

The first monumental development was the assassination of the incumbent Prime Minister. A suicide bomber blew himself away while shaking hands with him. The Prime Minister was blown to bits. He had disregarded various precautions suggested by his security staff, including the need to cut short his direct interactions with the public or keep at a distance unless they were first sanitized by the security personnel. The Prime Minister was nearing the end of his term and he was already on an overdrive to win over the affection of the public for a second term, and he did not consider it politically prudent to keep a distance from the voters.

The sudden turn of events threweveryone off guard.Freedom Party was plunged in grief and its leaders were finding it difficult to come to grips with the tragic reality. Another reality demanded their attention: The party needed a face to lead them in the election**s** and veterans tried to convince Dipika Sharma to take charge. But there were some challenges - to face the people, the image of a happy family was needed, and this was not the time. There was a sympathy wave no doubt, but it was not clear if Freedom Party would come back to power. As some rounds of polling for the elections had already happened, the Freedom Party decided to fight the remaining rounds without announcing a Prime Ministerial face. The assassination helped the Freedom Party come close to the majority mark and be in a position to form the next government. The decision that had been deferred earlier could no longer be postponed.

Dipika Sharma could not become the Prime Minister till her citizenship issue was resolved. Being the granddaughter of the first Prime Minister gave her a brand image but more had to be done amongst the party rank and file to get them to accept her. But she certainly hoped that in a year or two, she could head the government, assuming she could get a puppet to ascend to the throne and get her papers sorted out.

She had been busy re-organizing her personal life, after parting company with Richard Bancroft. While living in the US, she had become a citizen of that country. Gulab Sharma was born there. But she wanted to move back to India. On one of her trips to attend a relative’s wedding, she decided, on a whim, to visit her native village. She was floored by the love and warmth that the local populace showered on her. She decided to relocate to India, but what would she do there? Politics was her true calling, she said to herself. Once word went around that she had returned to India and could plunge into politics, seasoned politicians began to drop in to have a cup of tea and ‘reminisce’ about how good the things were when her grandfather was the Prime Minister. Richard Bancroft saw the writing on the wall. Dipika was not going to return to the US. He tried visiting every three months or so, but the two slowly but surely drifted apart. Finally, they parted company.

While living in the ancestral bungalow that her grandfather had occupied, Dipika would visit her native place often. On every trip some local or the other would drop the hint that she should contest from their constituency — the place that elected the first Prime Minister of the country.

In ‘deference’ to the wishes of her constituents, Dipika gave up her US citizenship and re-applied for Indian citizenship. The then Prime Minister knew that Dipika would be trouble for him and ensured that her application for citizenship moved as slowly as possible through the byzantine maze of offices spanning two countries. Dipika understood the delay tactics but there was nothing she could do. She spent a lot of time traveling the length and breadth of the country, calling her campaign “Back to the roots.” An ever-obliging coterie of media was only too happy to gush about the prodigal daughter’s return to her roots, and various publications began writing about her poise, dignity, and ability to lead the Freedom Party.

The party was faction-ridden and needed an adhesive to remain intact. None of the senior leaders was in a position to provide the service because they themselves were embroiled in the factional wars. These leaders began to individually cultivate Dipika in a bid to convince her to throw her hat into the leadership ring. Each of these leaders was willing to sacrifice his chances if that ensured the other lost out too. Dipika Sharma understood the game and played it superbly, encouraging all groups to fight it out amongst themselves while pretending to remain aloof and neutral.

Her plan worked and the party’s senior leadership, cutting across factions, passed a resolution asking her to assume the prime ministership. They did not know that she had still not got her Indian citizenship back. And she wanted more time to entrench herself. Besides, there was no need to take the responsibility when she could control the shots from outside. Power without accountability is what she aimed for — at least for the moment.

Till the time she became ready, a pliable person was needed to play the role of a placeholder. Dipika called her political secretary — who had no grassroots connect but was cunning as a fox and had served her well over the years and discussed the issue for close to half an hour.

She said, “We need a person whose loyalty is beyond suspicion.” He nodded in agreement.

She added, “The person must not be a people’s politician; you know what I mean.”

“Of course, madam, you are right.”

She proceeded, “He should be flexible, and willing to quit the post at a moment’s notice.”

His eyebrows went up. He was face to face with a woman who matched his shrewdness. It was clear that she was preparing to ascend the throne at an appropriate time. He, therefore, added his bit. “Madam, I have just that person in mind.”

“Who is it?”

“Raja Rao.”

Raja Rao, also called the Inscrutable Scholar, was a party veteran with decade**s** of experience in governance. He had been a minister in the slain prime minister’s government, and a senior minister in earlier governments headed by the Freedom Party. He had been a loyal worker and had the reputation of never betraying any personal ambitions, even if he had one. Most importantly, he was devoted to the family and would not hesitate to make way for Dipika in case she demanded it.She readily consented to the name.

While this conversation was on, Raja Rao was busy packing his most valuable possession, a collection of books — numbering some 2,000. His other household goods had been carefully packed in cartons. He was looking forward to a life of retirement in his home state of Andhra Pradesh. He had done enough of politics. While he was fondly dusting one of his books on philosophy, the call came from Dipika’s man Friday. Madam wanted him to meet her immediately.

Wondering what the urgency was, he quickly changed into a crisp dhoti-kurta and drove down to her residence. She greeted him with respect and came straight to the point. “Raja Rao ji, the party has decided that you should take charge as the new Prime Minister.”

He was shocked. To the best of his knowledge, the party’s highest decision-making body, the party parliamentary board, had not met yet. So, this was clearly Dipika’s decision, and she was confident of getting the board’s stamp of approval. Raja Rao could speak more than a dozen languages with ease, and that included three foreign languages as well. He was an erudite person and his style of governance had been such that it was difficult to know, from his stoic looks, what he was thinking. And he was thoroughly non-controversial. There was no reason why his name would be rejected.

“Are you ready, Raja Rao ji?”

“Madam, this has come as a surprise to me. You know I had begun to plan a life of anonymity.”

“Keep that for some other day. The party and the country need you today.” Raja Rao hemmed and hawed but finally relented.

As he drove back to his residence, he could not believe the sudden turn fortune had taken. He had stepped into his mid-seventies and the constraints of age had begun to tell on him lately. But suddenly, he began to feel fit as a fiddle, and there was a spring in his steps.

On reaching home, Raja Rao began unpacking his collection of books. At around the same time, the phone rang in senior party leader Bhim Singh’s residence. Bhim Singh came from an erstwhile minor royal family from central India and had served as chief minister of his State before taking on ministerial responsibilities at the Centre. He headed a strong lobby within the party which wanted to see him as the new Prime Minister, and it was working overtime in that direction. People close to Dipika Sharma had been contacted by this group, and quite a few members of her kitchen cabinet were favourably inclined. Besides, Bhim Singh had the backing of nearly all the newly elected members of Parliament from north India. Bhim Singh was confident that, if it came to a showdown, he would win hands down.

Bhim Singh took the phone and heard the soft voice of Madam’s secretary. He was anticipating a call from Dipika, and when he was told that she had summoned him to her residence immediately, he put on his best attire — which was a grey safari suit — and rushed out. The good news was not too far away, he said to himself.

Dipika Sharma told him point-blank that she had decided to make Raja Rao the Prime Minister, while Bhim Singh would be given an important portfolio. Bhim Singh was shattered. “But, madam…” was all that he could manage to say. He was already deflated. Dipika Sharma moved to assuage his hurt.

“I know that you are disappointed, Bhim ji. But there is a reason. Raja Rao is old and sick. He will not last long. I might then just step in. Would you not want that?”

Bhim Singh had no answer except to meekly say, “Of course, madam, if that is your plan...”

“Your interests will always remain protected. You will report to him only in name. You are going be my man in the Cabinet. It’s not a small responsibility.”

“It’s an honour. I am at your call.”

“That’s settled then. In the parliamentary board meeting, you will propose Raja Rao’s name and it will be seconded by two others.”

The meeting was over. Bhim Singh’s dreams lay shattered. Yet another person who would lose out was Mama-ji. He too had a one-on-one meeting with Dipika. She placated him too by promising him an important ministry. “You are still young and have time on your side. Be patient.”

In a couple of days thereafter, Raja Rao was sworn in as Prime Minister along with half a dozen ministers. Bhim Singh got the Home portfolio while Mama-ji wa**s** given industries. A temporary truce came into effect. And both the ministers lost no time in seeking to undermine the Prime Minister’s position. But Mama-ji also had other things to occupy his mind. Having come this far, he had to go further. He reached out to the Don and gave him the responsibility of managing his funds parked in Dubai and tax havens abroad. Word quickly spread that Dilawar was the man to tap to manage illegal money. A few other politicians got in touch with Mama-ji and through him gained access to the Don.

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Meanwhile, everybody waited for Raja Rao to kick the bucket or at least fall sick seriously enough to abdicate the throne. But Rao was in no mood to oblige. His fitness improved by leaps and bounds. Vitamin P (Power) was working wonders for him. Worse, from Dipika’s point of view, he began to not just take an active interest in governance but also adopted revolutionary measures to reform the economic sector. Many of these steps went against the core of the Freedom Party’s socialist ideology. Over time, Rao also skilfully won over a few other parties to his side, and soon his minority government became a majority one. And he too did not move on her citizenship papers; in fact, from the day he became the PM, he refused to go see her. To add insult to injury, he also appointed himself as the President of the Congress Party. The baton of the Presidentship of the party moved from the assassinated Prime Minister to Rao. All the carefully laid plans of Dipika had been blown to smithereens.

Bhim Singh was growing restless. He had already suffered two heart attacks – one was publicised while the other was suppressed. As Home Minister, he took a decision that was not agreed to by the cabinet.

“Bhim Singh-ji, how did you take this action without the consent of the cabinet?” Rao confronted. The normally suave and soft Rao was in an angry mood.

“It was Madam’s wish,” replied Bhim Singh, meekly. He was surprised at the reaction of his PM.

“I am the Prime Minister not she. The cabinet is collectively responsible for all decisions. You did this deliberately to undermine me. You should have informed the cabinet about your state of health. For god’s sake, you are the Home Minister and it is the most difficult ministry. You get woken up in the middle of the night for taking hard decisions…”

After waiting for that to sink in, Rao set Bhim Singh down, gently. “Take care of your health, get your strength back. Till then I will keep Home with myself.”

Bhim Singh knew that this was the end of the road for him. He rushed straight to Dipika’s house, but she was “otherwise occupied” and could not be disturbed.

One down, one to go.

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Mama-ji, sensing the changed direction in which the wind had begun to blow, quickly aligned himself with the Prime Minister. Elsewhere, the Don, after being entrusted the important task by Mama-ji, had begun to believe that he could call the shots. He had turned down the minister’s directive to transfer a large sum of money from Dubai. Mama-ji needed the money to position himself in a strong bargaining power with elections barely a couple of years away. Realizing that the man was getting too big for his boots, Mama-ji moved the levers of power and convinced Rao to take stringent action against Dilawar.

The Don’s senior operatives were, one fine day, arrested. Dilawar was livid. It was time, he decided, to display his prowess. He used his contacts and got the arrested aides killed inside the prison, since he had come to know that they had sung likes canaries. The elimination was more to demonstrate Dilawar Bhai’s influence, since the damage through the leak of critical information had already been done. The Don’s next step to show off his muscles was far more sinister. He had established links with a vast global network of arms suppliers. In the process, he came in touch with various shady operatives from Pakistan who reminded him of his religious affiliation and the desirability of putting it to good use for the large**r** good of Islam and its believers. They told him that the only language that India would understand is the language of holy war — Jihad. Put the fear in the hearts of the infidels, they exhorted. That marked the beginning of a plot to conduct near simultaneous bomb attacks in various parts of Mumbai.

Even as senior political leaders in New Delhi were making the initial preparations for the elections that were due in a couple of years’ time, a series of bomb blasts rocked Mumbai. At the end of the day, more than 150 persons had lost their lives. Intelligence agencies were in no doubt that the terror strike had been executed by Dilawar Mustafa’s gang. Days prior to the D-day, Dilawar had his key men relocated to Dubai. Mama-ji woke up the realization that Dilawar had now become truly dangerous. But it was not easy to get rid of the association with him. The Don knew far too many of Mama-ji’s secrets. Had they to become public, Mama-ji’s political career would be finished.

The terror strike had turned media attention on the rise and rise of Dilawar Mustafa, the key people who played a role in that journey, and the political-criminal nexus which enables a gangster to assume a large enough profile to conduct terror attacks on a country. The reporter Rane was caught in a bind. He felt squeezed between two conflicting loyalties — that to Mama-ji and Dilawar. He knew far more than he wrote, but there were other media people who were not as circumspect.

Faced with a barrage of media criticism, the chief minister set up a commission of inquiry headed by a retired high court chief justice to probe into the politician-criminal nexus, with special emphasis on the Mumbai bomb blast incidents. The chief minister knew of Mama-ji’s relationship with the Don and was aware that a probe by the inquiry commission would lay bare the truth with irrefutable evidence. But he was not deterred; Raja Rao’s government had been defeated in the elections and Mama-ji’s influence had greatly diminished as a consequence of the political upheaval.

The inquiry commission submitted its report to the state government in six months’ time. Its findings were explosive — so explosive that they were never made public. The report, according to parts leaked by the media, had laid bare Mama-ji’s links with Dilawar. It said that, although Mama-ji, as chief minister, had been aware of the Don’s foray into arms deals and connections with Pakistani operatives, he ignored the fact and allowed Dilawar a free run. The financial arrangement between the Don and Mama-ji was also reported by the media.

It was a good time for the chief minister, who had occupied the post after Mama-ji moved to New Delhi, to box the latter into a corner by making the report public. The problem, however, was that the findings were equally disastrous for members of the party’s high command. The probe had laid bare the flow of money to the party’s central coffer**s** from doubtful sources, including those with connections to the world of crime. It was thus decided to keep the report under lock and key on the pretext that making it public could endanger national security.

As the dust settled down, both Mama-ji and Dilawar understood that they would be finished if they remained at daggers drawn. To protect themselves they had to protect each other. The don made the first call to Mama-ji’s secure phone. It was time to patch up.

# Rise of the Supremo

Raja Rao had in his long and largely uneventful political career guided innumerable youngsters in public life who went on to occupy prestigious positions. Some made names in the bureaucracy, others in politics. Among the ones who had gained from his wisdom was Supremo. He came in touch with Raja Rao quite by chance, many years before Rao became Prime Minister. The Supremo was an IITian and, in those days, had been employed at a Gurgaon-based multinational IT firm. The pay was good and the job, stimulating and challenging. Around that time, Rao, who was a senior minister in the Union Cabinet, developed an interest in computers — computers were a novelty and Rao was always curious and willing to try out new things. He needed a guide. Rao’s secretary suggested the name of a young man who worked in a private sector firm which had been doing some contractual work for the government.

The strange part was that no-one really knew the man’s actual name (It was Mahadev Shastri). He went by the name of Supremo (Maha + dev meant Supreme God), had a track record of brilliance in software computing, and was a scholar of Sanskrit and Indic studies as well. Rao was instantly drawn to this combination, and that is how Supremo came into Raja Rao’s fold. Rao respected him for his skills while Supremo admired Rao for his scholarship and calm nature. When Rao became Prime Minister, the Supremo was part of the inner group, advising him on technical issues. In truth, as the Prime Minister’s officer on special duty (OSD), Supremo had the brief to guide the Prime Minister on a range of matters, including political. Raja Rao noted with some surprise that Supremo had an uncanny understanding of politics and often suggested courses of action that initially took even his seasoned political master off guard but later proved to be wise.

Raja Rao particularly liked his OSD’s ability to dip into ancient texts such as the Vedas and the Puranas, and also quote on statecraft from the likes of Chanakya, to buttress his arguments. Being well versed with such literature, Raja Rao loved the fact that a young man like Supremo too had a level of mastery over these texts.

In one gruelling conversation, when Supremo was drafting a speech for Rao, he was wrestling with the verse

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| सर्वनाशे समुत्पन्ने ह्यर्धं त्यजति पण्डितः । अर्धेन कुरुते कार्यं सर्वनाशः सदुःसहः ॥ | Sarvanaashe samutpanne hi ardham tyajati panditah ।  Ardhena kurute kaaryam sarvanaasha saduh sahah ॥ |
| *- सुभाषितरत्नसमुच्चय* | - Subhaashitaratnasamuchchaya |

When wise men are faced with total destruction then they give up half of their belongings - instead of trying to protect all. They will work with only half and get their work done. It is very difficult to protect your entire wealth in the face of destruction.

The PM was defending some of his decisions in the Parliament. He printed out the speech, left it on Rao’s desk and left for home.

No sooner had he arrived at home; he received a call from Rao.

“The phrase is brilliant! I wish I could use all of it…”

“Why sir? Do you feel it is too long?”

“Not really, but in the whole of Lok Sabha, there are less than half a dozen members who can understand Sanskrit. Maybe they will tune in if I just use the first line.”

“But the meaning is incomplete…”

“I realise that. I have a lot of ground to cover, and I will ensure that they understand what I mean.”

“I understand, sir. There is another quote that comes to mind, sir and that is from Mahaprasthanika parva…”

“Oh, book 17 of Mahabharata! Do you want to quote one of the conversations Lord Yamadharmaraja, in the form of a dog, has with Yudhisthir?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That is interesting. Write a paragraph and email it to me. I will try and include it in my speech. I am the last speaker, and most will be looking at the clock as I talk, so I need to keep it crisp.”

The Rao-Supremo combination soon became the talk of town and those who wished to gain access to the reticent Prime Minister began to cultivate Supremo. Although born in the southern sacred town of Madurai, Supremo had his upbringing in the northern city of Prayag — later named Allahabad and now Prayagraj. He had the fortune of striking acquaintance with a couple of spiritually minded gurus who were based at the holy confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, and the now invisible Sarasvati. He honed his knowledge of ancient literature from them. He had enrolled at the Benares Hindu University in the holiest of holy cities, Kashi, now Varanasi, where he did his engineering course from BHU-IT, majoring in Computer Science.

Even after Rao’s government was defeated in the general elections, Supremo continued to be in touch with the former Prime Minister. In fact, Rao had persuaded him to contest from Prayag. He won hands down, though, ironically his guru Rao lost the elections from his home state of Andhra Pradesh. Two short-lived coalition governments came to power, in which Supremo was the Minister for Science and Technology.

Supremo started his political career with a clean slate. He was considered smart but upright, clever but ethical in his conduct. Now that he had become an insider, he began to take greater interest in matters of governance in general. It took him no time to direct his attention at the wily Mama-ji. He managed to lay his hands on the inquiry commission report and read the findings with alarm. But he was also fascinated by the web of deceit and the piles of easy money that could be made from such dubious deals. Money had so far not been his driving force, but that would change. Supremo saw an opportunity and decided to cash in on it, literally.

Supremo watched these developments from the side-lines with great interest. He came to the conclusion that the people to watch out for were Mama-ji and Boom Boom Banerjee. He maintained links with both without giving the impression that be belonged to either camp. In his opinion, Bhim Singh was a spent force. Supremo spent hours wondering how and where he would fit in the new scenario. But he had guessed correctly that Dipika Sharma would be the power centre.

Meanwhile, with the fall of the second coalition regime, the country was plunged into another election. Dipika Sharma had got her citizenship as that of her son Gulab Sharma within months of the formation of the second coalition government. It was a quid pro quo in exchange for support. But when the coalition collapsed, the Freedom Party was defeated, and the People’s Party led by a charismatic poet-politician came to power. Dipika Sharma entered the parliament, from the same seat that her grandfather held. Her star was rising fast. She unseated a Dalit leader Ram Chandra Pal in a diabolical move to get named as the new president of Freedom Party.

The People’s Party-led coalition was a convenient cauldron of feuding parties and it was only a matter of time before it would collapse. But it managed to stay in power and as it gained in confidence, it brought in some changes, like creating a golden quadrilateral – connecting the four major cities of India with four-lane highways. But some reforms it ushered in would take time to permeate to all sections of the society. Based on a false sense of confidence, the poet-politician called for early elections only to lose at the polls. Dipika had campaigned tirelessly and had caught the imagination of the public, something the People’s Party did not realize until it was too late.

Now that the Freedom Party was back in power, the question on everyone’s lips was who would be in the cabinet of the presumptive Prime Minister, Dipika Sharma. But Dipika had other ideas. She did not have the monetary muscle to deal with the machinations of Bhim Singh and Madhav Mantri. And there was the suave Boom Boom too. She needed some more time to fortify herself with more cash before taking on the established politicians.

After Raja Rao’s exit, Supremo had lost no time in aligning with the Dipika Sharma group. Using his skills as an IT professional, he totally revamped the Freedom Party’s media cell, equipping it with the latest technological and communication gadgets. The party then began to bombard the media with statements issued in the name of its senior leadership, particularly Dipika Sharma, and these statements reflected a deep understanding of issues that concerned the common man. People naturally wondered as to how someone like Dipika, whose understanding of India was both shallow and flawed despite her efforts to recast herself as having returned to her roots, was suddenly exhibiting sensible thoughts. That the script writer was Supremo, came to be known in course of time.

Having established a stature in the party and come close to Dipika Sharma, Supremo began to see himself as a credible contender for prime ministership. He was relatively young, intelligent, learned, had an understanding of people and issues, and, most importantly, part of Dipika’s inner circle. But he was absolutely unacceptable to veterans like Bhim Singh, who viewed him as an outsider. They cautioned Dipika— what if he turned out to be obstinate and free-minded like his mentor Raja Rao?

Dipika Sharma gave the advice considerable thought and decided she could not take another chance. Either she took over the mantle herself or choose someone safe, someone like the meek Jagat Dhillon who had no mass base but enjoyed a clean image. Her “inner voice” preventing her from taking charge, she decided on Dhillon. But she could not altogether ignore Supremo — he would be useful in executing certain plans she had in mind. That is how Supremo came to occupy a prominent portfolio is the new Prime Minister Jagat Dhillon’s ministry.

# Yours is next

When the Parliament is in session, the canteen is a place that all the members would visit – attendance in the hall was optional but at the canteen, it was mandatory. A place where the best gossip was shared, and trial balloons floated and punctured. The chilly January weather added to the fright the four members were experiencing – all of them had got the same email from a person who called himself The Castrator. The email had the subject titled Yours is Next. The body of the email was a picture of a pair of freshly severed testicles, still oozing blood. The email was signed off with an animation of a Skull and then a bony finger pointing at them for effect. There was something surreal about the email and what was even more strange was that the email disappeared from their inbox in a few hours.

All four were from the Alliance for Progress, of which Freedom Party was a member – Maker Funtoosh Wirewala, Maida, Girgut and Dalda. Each was deeply gazing into the teacup that was in front of them. All wanted to say something, but the words were not forming.

Finally, Maker started off in his usual fluffy English… “Did you get an ephemeral email with a rather vulgar attachment of one’s princely delicates?”

Maida knew what Maker meant but wanted to see how the other two would react. Predictably, Girgut uttered an expletive in Hindi and then replied, “Could it be spam? These days there are so many…” he tailed off.

Dalda’s eyes were firmly planted on his feet as he avoided eye contact with the others. His personal assistant had seen the email and by the time he had Dalda’s attention, the email had disappeared. Perhaps Dalda got a more graphic description of what he saw thanks to the embellishments by his assistant.

Eventually, Dalda lifted his head and said, “Damodaran-ji, you are the Home Minister. Can you please have the Intelligence Bureau (IB) look into this matter?”

Maida had thought about it and replied, “But you are saying that the emails have vanished. I need something tangible to give to IB to process. I have a hunch that this will happen again. In the event it does, take a snapshot of the email on your smartphone before it disappears and email that to me.” Even as he was saying that, Maida made a note to himself to call Mike Srinivasan, the head of IB and talk about this.

Maker was looking around and spotted a comely journalist who was trying to catch his eye. After flashing her a brilliant “Colgate smile,” he turned around to look at Maida, who penned articles frequently and said loudly, “I just finished re-reading John Milton’s Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained. On similar lines, I have been thinking of publishing a couple of humorous poems – no, not limericks, titled, “Weight Lost” and “Weight Regained.” There will be clever play of words like *weight and watch* instead of *wait and watch* and *in it to lose it* instead of *in it to win it*. I am sure my audiences will lap it up,” he finished even as he turned around to see if the lady journo had caught the gist of what he was saying.

She had undergone a crash weight loss program and he wanted her to know that he had noticed and approved of it. To his bad luck she had turned her back to him and was on the phone.

Maker cursed inwardly and looked at his colleagues for their reaction. Girgut and Dalda were stoic and only Maida smiled fleetingly and replied, “*Can’t weight to read it!*” gesturing a weighing scale using his hands. For once, Maker was caught speechless.

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Mike brought his computer savvy associates Priya Menon and Karan Dixit with him to the meeting. Maida was struck by her beauty but wisely chose to not flirt with an Indian Police Service (IPS) officer. Seeing a lady officer, Maida was reluctant to share what he wanted to with Mike. The first few minutes were spent in banal conversation and then Maida slowly came to the point.

“I have received complaints from a few Ministers and MPs (he was careful to exclude himself) that they got an obscene email which after a few minutes vanished. Can you please look into this?”

Priya was crisp with her answer - “Sir, this could be a serious matter. Only one software that I know of, has the capability to self-destruct after a set time. Whoever sent it to you wants to hide his/ her tracks but is probably giving a warning. What was so obscene in the email?”

Maida took off his glasses, polished it with his handkerchief and then replied carefully, “There was just one picture of freshly severed testicles and an animation of a skull morphing into a finger pointing toward the recipient,” Maida used his index finger to gesture.

Karan, who was watching all this, knew instinctively that Maida too had got the same email but was reluctant to admit to it. If a Home Minister of India was being warned, that could be serious.

“We will look into it sir. If you could perhaps share the names of the people who received such an email, we can follow it up with them,” Karan added, making eye contact with Maida.

Maida thought for a few moments before answering, “Let me check with them to see if they would like to help or if we should just ignore this as a prank.”

Even as he was finishing the sentence, his secretary knocked discreetly on the door and Maida rose to indicate that the meeting was over. Priya and Karan gave their business cards to Maida and left.

They drove back to Mike’s office and over coffee, (Mike was a stickler for filter coffee, which he had taught his assistant and the coffee was very good) Karan and Priya went over the strange request. Since they were all in the business of gathering intelligence, they knew the libido and the resulting sexcapades of the politicians and as they were playing back the conversation, they were all amused. But this was a matter of national security and their job was to get to the bottom of it.

Priya steered everyone back to the issue. “We can put a sniffer device in front of the email server that receives all the emails to the Ministers and MPs and can have it look for special signatures such as time-bound emails that would vanish after a short while. As soon as it sees a match or a pattern, it will make a copy of the email and we can then look back at the IP (Internet Protocol) address and trace where the email was sent from.”

Seeing no comprehension on the face of Mike, Priya expanded “IP address is like your phone number. It is unique and can be pinpointed exactly on a map. All we need is an email and we can find a lot about the sender. A sniffer is a device that watches all the internet traffic coming into the email servers where the members have their account. It can be programmed to look for a specific pattern, e. g. a vanishing email and when it finds a match, it will make an exact copy and save it for forensic analysis.”

Even as Priya was completing her sentence, Mike was calling the Director of National Informatics Centre (NIC), the nodal agency that assigned email addresses to all the members and government bodies.

After listening to Mike, the NIC Director agreed to install a “sniffer” on its email servers that handled the emails to members of the parliament. But the Director cautioned that some members prefer to use general email accounts such as Gmail or Hotmail and, in such cases, it would not be possible.

Priya wrote a memo to Mike for forwarding to Maida the following:  
“In order to get to the bottom of the “Obscene Email Gate (OEG)” we hereby request you to share the email addresses of those who have received such an email. Once we have this, we will be able to get to the bottom of it,” blah blah… An email with decorative language around this core was sent the same day to the Home Minister.

# Maida sleuths

Maida was intrigued by the question just asked by an ex-Freedom Party member. He put two and two together and thought maybe this person knows more about the Obscene email. Maybe he was the victim? In the absence of any other evidence, Maida decided to do some sleuthing of his own.

He accosted him in the hallway and asked jokingly, “What made you ask that question about castration, Mr. Jogi?”

Jogi knew that it was Maida who had cut his name off the ticket and was not going to play friendly. With a mischievous smile, he replied, “Why do you want to know, Mr. Maida?”

“Well it was an unusual question and coming from you, I wanted to know if there is something more than meets the eye…”

“This suggestion has been going around for some years now and your party should enact it,” Jogi replied, stressing the word “your.”

“All in good time! Thanks for reminding me. I will discuss it with the PM,” Maida said, realising that he wasn’t getting a straight answer. He needed to know if Jogi was the victim of castration. And there was an easy way to find out.

Maida had a set of female journalists with whom he was “transactionally” friendly. They could get a scoop, but they had to pay for it, by sleeping with him. Those who did not want to, were kept at a distance. He also had a small coterie of “go-to” male journalists too, who he used for other purposes, such as being messengers for talks with someone across the aisle. Some were his *benamis* in various deals where he would encourage even politicians from other parties to invest in, promising handsome returns because of the way he would draft the legislation. If one got into the good books of Maida, one got taken care of.

Back at his office, he called Reetu Chopra, a Political reporter from an up and coming TV channel and let it hang that he had something for her, if she was interested. Reetu took the bait and replied that she could meet him at their usual rendezvous point. It was usually late in the night, touching midnight when she would drop in. This visit was no different.

Maida was in his silk pyjamas when she arrived at his love nest. After a few drinks, Maida loosened up and slowly warmed up to the subject. He liked to leak it bit by bit, teasing the information while listening to the gossip that Reetu dished out about Delhi and its movers and shakers. Eventually, he came to the point. “I will show you something, but you cannot take a picture of it,” he whispered in her ear as they got into the act.

As Reetu got ready to leave, Maida got dressed and showed her a printout of the severed testicles, oozing blood. “You cannot print this, but I need you to do me a favour,” he started. “Someone in this government has suffered this fate and it is my belief that Joginder Parshad knows who that is. If you can meet him one-on-one…,” he tailed off. “Find the person, and you will have the scoop of the century,” his eyes twinkled as he kissed her goodbye.

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Reetu Chopra had met Jogi maybe a couple of times and beyond hi-hi, how-are-you, bye-bye *gupshup* she did not know much about him. Joginder lacked the charisma of the Supremo, despite being from the same state and his earthy sense of humour, delivered with telling effect using a dead pan face was lost on the YUPPJs of the world – Young and Upcoming Professional Primetime Journalists, who only considered ministers as people worth talking to. She needed to build a back story to get him to take the bait.

“Hello Jogi-ji,” Reetu spotted Jogi getting out of this car on his way to the Parliament and to say he was surprised would be an understatement.

Jogi was street smart and knew that Reetu is looking for something from him. On countless occasions when he had tried to make eye contact with her, she would look past him. This bubbly expression of camaraderie unsettled him momentarily, but he was back on his axis and kept walking as Reetu struggled to keep up. “We are trying to make a series on the heroes of the last Lok Sabha elections and you were one of the people mentioned and I wanted to know if we could perhaps get together for a coffee and plan a script around your victory, Jogi ji!” Reetu effused.

“We can meet in the canteen at 3 PM, after the session ends next Friday,” Jogi offered.

Reetu did not want to wait that long and hinted that perhaps they could do dinner tonight? Her offer betrayed her interest in him and then the penny dropped. Reetu was considered close to Maida and this was a fishing expedition! But Jogi’s interest was piqued and he wanted to play along but not accede to a dinner date right away – he made a pretence of looking up his calendar on his Smartphone and agreed to meet her the following night, at Mehndi, an upcoming diner in Hotel Kailash, a five-star hotel.

The venue was his suggestion – it made her think that perhaps he would play along and barter a deal (the usual). But the unasked question was if he was staying the night there. She would have to play it by the ear – but more importantly, she needed to talk to her producer about the series idea that she pitched to Jogi, in case Jogi checked with her bosses.

Jogi had already checked with Reetu’s boss who owned the channel via a *benami*and knew that Reetu was on a fishing expedition, most likely for Maida. Sharp cookie that he was, he also suspected that it had to do with the question he raised in Lok Sabha. Which meant that someone high up was indeedmissing a critical part of his anatomy.

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The elegant Mehndi restaurant was designed by someone who knew how to blend cream and mango shades with that of *mehndi* (a shade of brown). Reetu had worked on giving a plausible reason on how this series was being conceived and was wondering how to segue to the question that he had asked in the Parliament. She had dressed carefully – sleeveless dark blue blouse with cleavage showing and a blue-black semi-transparent sari, which was turning heads. Jogi was fashionably late (30 minutes, which is early by Delhi standards) and waltzed into the corner table that Reetu had requisitioned.

“Jogi-ji, this is a get-to-know-you session so I can ask you questions that will show you in the best light,” Reetu started, as she gestured to the maître d.

Two elaborate menus appeared out of thin air and they spent some time looking at the various offerings. The restaurant boasted of an *Imli*-Ginger-*ras* (Tamarind juice with Ginger extract) which supposedly aided in digestion and came highly recommended. Eventually they settled for the juice and *Masala Papad* (Spicy Lentil-based Wafers with chopped tomatoes, boiled potatoes, cilantro, and vinegarised-onion spread on top).

Jogi had been to this restaurant before and knew what he wanted. He closed the menu and looked at Reetu, indicating that he was ready.

“Where were you born?”

“Saharanpur.”

“How many brothers and sisters were you?”

“Two and two. My father was a schoolteacher. Mother stayed at home.”

“Where are they now?”

“All of us got college education. My brother lives with my parents and takes care of our agricultural lands. His wife is a schoolteacher. My elder sister is married and lives in Gurgaon and my younger sister is studying Law in Lucknow.”

Reetu was impressed with Jogi’s command of the English language and the measured flow. She knew him to be a fiery orator in Hindi but his erudition in English surprised her.

“What did you study at College?”

“Law. After getting my bachelor’s in law from Lucknow, I got a partial scholarship of about 50% of my fees and living expenses to go to Kings College London. I specialized in International Law and returned to practice in the Supreme Court under a Freedom Party lawyer-politician.”

“That’s impressive! How did you manage to get into the prestigious Kings College, that too with a scholarship?”

Jogi let the question stand for a few minutes as the Hors d'oeuvres were served before answering, “I was the University topper. Always stood first in my class.”

Reetu was open-mouthed… here is genuine talent and yet the Freedom Party chose to ignore him. There is a story here that she could unearth…

“How did you enter politics?”

“My senior died suddenly, leaving a few critical cases in limbo. One such case was that of a Mumbai-based industrialist who was elbowed out of a multi-billion-dollar contract because of graft and nepotism. Despite an impressive track record of execution and being the lowest price, the company did not get a prestigious deal and they sued the Government for an opaque and biased tender process to favour a politically connected company. The winning bid was twice the price of the Mumbai-based company and would not stand in a court of law, regardless of how much the judge would look the other way. I solved this case out of court and ensured that everyone went home happy. A Lok Sabha seat was my prize. But that was six years ago…” Jogi tailed off.

Reetu remembered this case and had been surprised that it had suddenly fallen off the news cycle. She could easily see that the talent Jogi possessed (he was barely in his early forties) could be a threat to the more entrenched lawyer-politicians of the Freedom Party.

She was in two minds – should she continue this charade or try and write a compelling story.

Jogi interrupted her thoughts, saying, “the last stuff about the case is off the record. You can just say that I happened to be at the right place at the right time.” If there ever was a time to fess up, it was now. But Reetu ploughed on.

# Reetu’s fishing expedition

Reetu was not the kind to give up easily. Here is a genuine talent, a serious politician from UP, the biggest state in India and by inference, a future PM material, assuming he conquered his state first. She soldiered on.

“Are there any topics that are close to your heart, things that you are passionate about?” By now she had switched to English completely.

“Everything and everyone are important to me.”

“I am regular at the Parliament but have not seen you being very active.”

“That is because independents do not get much time. I keep submitting questions, but they rarely get taken up. I do contribute to various Parliamentary committees…”

Reetu had done her homework on this one. He was a member of the subcommittee on Railways under the Public Accounts Committee, and on the Committee on Law and Justice.

“So how many committees are you a member of?”

“Two.”

Reetu was intrigued that Jogi was being extremely politically correct and was very brief and to the point in his answers. It felt like she was pulling a tooth, except the dentist was feeling the pain.

“Of the two, which one do you like more?”

“Both are equally important.” He smiled as he said this, as if to indicate that he can play the game just as well as her.

Having come to matters of parliament, Reetu zeroed in.

“I noticed that you had asked a question about castration recently. What prompted you to ask that?”

Jogi knew that she has finally come to the point. Here we go.

“This is something I have been following for several years, from my previous term. I represent a constituency that is communally sensitive and recently several incidents of rape have been reported but because of political clout at the state level, the perps get away. I believe that it is time for India to enact this legislation.”

Reetu was flabbergasted. There was no elbow room in his answers to ask if the question was really his or was he put up to it?

Dinner arrived and both ate their food in silence. Jogi was unflappable as he waved to acquaintances and kept eating. They finished in silence and it was time to say goodbye. Reetu was not getting her scoop.

Reetu shook his hand and signed off, “When we have the time slot set, I will get in touch with you.”

Jogi nodded as he waited for her to leave. He knew she wouldn’t call. She knew she wouldn’t call. Both were playing the protocol of Politics – one never made an enemy and one never called one’s bluff (at least on one’s face).

# Reetu spreads the word in Lutyens circles

Reetu had a story that, if published, would do wonders for the low-profile politician, Joginder. She was genuinely impressed by his credentials, and her readers would have loved reading the unknown bits about him. But this was not the time. The disappointment of having failed to dig up the information Maida had asked her for, lingered. And yet, she was certain that his hunch was right. Jogi had apparently played his cards shrewdly, saying nothing and confirming nothing. She was confident of her abilities, and perhaps sooner rather than later would be able to get Joginder to speak up. Meanwhile, Maida would have to be patient.

Reetu Chopra was one of those who fitted in well with the so-called Lutyens’ Club. The term would gain currency in later years as a pejorative one, but for now it was a sign of ‘having arrived’. Reetu had a privileged childhood — her father was an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer and mother the principal of a reputed public school which boasted of an elite alumnus; many of its students had gone on to occupy important positions in public life. She passed out from one of the best schools in Delhi and later went on to graduate from Delhi University in mass communications. Thereafter, she was sent abroad for further studies. She returned after two years with a post-graduation and a job offer from a new television channel that looked promising.

Reetu’s contacts, as a result of her lineage, were already formidable when she joined the channel. She was an outgoing person, making friends easily. She was also ruthless in the pursuit of her interests, having no qualms about breaking stories that destroyed the lives of many politicians she despised while protecting those she liked. The head of the news channel had realized her potential and use early on, and he promoted her vigorously. Within six months of joining, Reetu was hosting prime time talk shows featuring prominent politicians from various parties and inclinations. She sported a big *bindi* on her forehead and wore all sorts of accessories that clanged and jangled as she spoke.

Since she could not go on air with the material Maida had provided her because she had no evidence, she had to find other ways to use it. This would also embellish her credentials. She, therefore, began to release bits and pieces to other members of the Lutyens’ lobby as “gossip” she had picked. These who were informed rushed in their own ways to collaborate the leak. Within no time, the media in Delhi had begun to circulate — they called it “unconfirmed and unverified” to cover their backs — the story. Soon, even the regional Press in remote corners of India began to report it.

One national daily ran a speculative story headlined, ‘Private lives of politicians: Have they been hit where it hurts the most?’ Another wondered, ‘Sex lives of high-profile netas nipped in the bud?’ Reetu herself wrote nothing on the subject, but she took pleasure in being the trigger for the coverage. Journalists began to speculate on names of those they believed may have become victims, but they were careful to not name them; they offered enough hints, though, for the reader to come to his or her own conclusions.

News has a habit of going stale after a while. This one too would have died a natural death but for Reetu’s persistent efforts. She goaded the Lutyens’ Club to probe further. Who could be the next victim? Who was behind the castration campaign? Has the government been informed of it? Are the intelligence agencies looking into the matter? Understandably, there was complete silence at the government’s end.

Government spokespersons who appeared on news channels refused to comment on the “malicious gossip.” The opposition parties began to take pot-shots at the ruling party and demanding a probe by an independent authority — a court-monitored investigation. The scandal had become too big to brush user the carpet.

Although Reetu was happy with the media glare, she also came under attack for circulating the ‘unsubstantiated’ news. It was having a bad impact on the ruling combine, which was something she had not planned for. After all, she was one of the main beneficiaries of the government’s various largesse and had access to its senior ministers and the bureaucracy. Something had to be done to distance the government and the ruling party’s high command from the negative publicity. But she was also beholden to Maida, in whose list of priorities the party’s image did not figure very high. What mattered was the means which furthered his interests.

The media reports had begun to have a rather unexpected desirable effect on a clutch of certain public figures whose unsavoury sexual exploits were off and on talked about. They immediately called a halt to such activities, terrified that they could be the next target of whoever it was that had unleashed the unique form of punishment. By no means were they reformed or even on the road to positive change, but all that they had done was to temporarily discontinue their extracurricular activities. They were in no doubt that the punishment-giver was in the know of every little detail of their dark side. After all, if media gossip was to be believed, the Castrator, or whatever name one wanted to give, had access to the most secret material of his victims.

The public, in the meantime, was wondering in the absence of concrete evidence, if the salacious news had been deliberately circulated to settle political scores. And, whether the gossip was just that — gossip. Maida, who knew better, had begun to mull over his next moves.

# Rocky caught watching porn

Rocky had never in his adult life faced such a strange dilemma. A voluptuous socialite was texting him for a rendezvous, but he had been avoiding the meeting under one pretext or the other. In normal circumstances, he would have jumped at the opportunity because he knew about the ‘favours’ she would grant him. After all, this was not the first time they would meet. The socialite was in her mid-thirties, had a network of high-profile contacts, and was a mine of information — both credible and gossipy — which often came in useful to Rocky. Until now, he had fobbed off her recent attempts on the excuse of being busy or travelling, but now he could not avoid.

There were two reasons for that. One, delaying the meeting any further could anger the socialite and even make her desperate enough to begin ratting on him. There is nothing more dangerous than a woman scorned, Rocky muttered to himself. But the second reason was more important. He had avoided the meeting until now because he was not sure if he was ‘capable’ anymore, after the mysterious surgery. But how else could he be certain, until he tried? The worst-case scenario would be that he would fail to rise to the occasion. In that case, he could always offer some excuse and slink away. The best-case outcome would be that his libido is found intact. He will then leave the socialite and himself satisfied and be assured of the capability for similar such conquests in the future.

The appointment being sought was for the weekend, and until then there was official work to do. Parliament was in session and Rocky would have to be present. The party leadership had recently issued a stern directive to its MPs to attend Parliament for at least five hours every day. Rocky had given a miss to the first half of the session and had to be present post-lunch until the House sat for the day. Most of the MPs, like him, had heartily consumed a sumptuous lunch — subsidised by the ordinary tax-payer — at the Parliament canteen, and were feeling sleepy. Some routine Bills were under discussion and speaker after speaker said their bit, though nobody was really listening.

Rocky was resisting the temptation to doze off. While fiddling with his smartphone, a brainwave hit him. This was the time to check out if the ‘damage’ done to him was grave. He put his phone on mute and after ensuring that the members seated close to him had their attention elsewhere, began to surf a bunch of pornographic sites. His attention was seized by one video clip, and as the action in the clip reached its climax, he felt a sensation in his body. Yes, he had it still! Overjoyed, he texted the confirmation code to the socialite. It was a text to the socialite in coded language only the two understood. #A meant confirmation (‘looking forward to’) of the meeting, and #Z was a polite refusal (‘regret not possible due to urgent work’).

So deeply involved was he in the secret venture that he failed to notice his colleague Supremo eyeing him with great concentration. Supremo had had a fleeting glance at Rocky’s smartphone screen, and what he saw in that passing instant was enough. He was not unaware of Rocky’s reputation and, therefore, what he had just seen had not shocked him. Just then, the Speaker announced the end of the day’s sitting of the House. Supremo thought of pulling his colleague’s leg, out of the earshot of the others. He winked at a pro-Freedom Party journalist hanging out in the media gallery, asking him to meet him in the Central Hall of Parliament. Supremo had no intention to humiliate Rocky just then, but he wanted the journalist to be in the know — it could be leveraged in the future. Unfortunately for Rocky, someone else had caught him watching porn. It was an opposition party MP who sat a row behind him and one aisle across. Although Rocky had taken great care to keep the phone screen hidden from people round him, he had apparently not factored in the determination of someone who had nothing better to do than to surreptitiously keep a tab on other people’s affairs.

As the journalist made his way to meet Supremo, he was waylaid by the opposition MP, who took him to a remote corner and narrated the entire incident. The MP had done his homework; he had photographed the screenshot from Rocky’s phone, along with a sideward profile of the phone’s user. This he now shared with the journalist’s mobile phone. The scribe rushed to his (news channel’s) office and proudly showed his scoop to the editor-in-chief. The media office was in a tizzy. It had just two hours to break the story on prime time (nine in the evening). The most important of the several questions that were tossed about, was: Should Rocky be identified by name?

The editor-in-chief was all for exposing Rocky, but his second-in-command advised caution, arguing that the action more than the identity of the man was important. The action of using tax-payers’ money to watch porn, and that too inside the temple of democracy, was in itself so sacrilegious that it ought to take Centre stage. The editor-in-chief was assured by his team that there would be no dearth of opportunities to fix Rocky. Besides, the man wasn’t being given immunity from identification forever. At the right time, the channel would strike.

At 9 PM, the channel’s editor-in-chief came live on air, and, in a stentorian voice, announced that a ruling party MP had been caught watching a porn clip in Parliament. “We have the name of this lecherous MP but have decided to withhold his identity for now. Let the man be warned, though, that soon we shall expose him. For now, we will debate on the punishment that ought to be given to our elected representatives who indulge in such despicable behaviour.” Thereafter, over the next forty-five minutes, the subjected was animatedly discussed by the guests who had been called to debate. Throughout the discussion, most of the time, it was the editor-in-chief’s voice that managed to drown out the rest.

Among those who were invited as panellists was a so-called political analyst, who began his intervention with the following words: “It is not illegal for an adult to watch porn in India…,” but was instantly cut off by the anchor’s biting sarcasm, “So it was right for the MP to see porn clips while attending Parliament?”

“I did not mean that…”

“You meant exactly that. Am I wrong?” The anchor directed the question to one of the opponents of the government. He was pleased with the response, which he had anticipated.

“You are absolutely right. And the nation wants to know…”

At the end, some of the suggestions that managed to be heard in the din, were as follows: One, such elected representatives should be immediately disqualified if a House inquiry panel finds them guilty. Two, these representatives can be let off with a stern warning and naming and shaming on record. Three, they should be probed thoroughly for sexual misconduct, including instances of rape. Four, people who are convicted of rape should be castrated, besides being jailed.

The following day’s newspapers too had a merry time, with screaming headlines about lecherous MPs and MLAs. One paper dug out figures of the number of elected representatives in Parliament and State Assemblies who stood accused on record of rape or rape-and-murder, and said it stood at 30%, and headlined its story, ‘One in three of the people’s representative is a rape accused’. Another newspaper speculated, ‘Who is the rogue MP who watched porn in House?’ The political correspondent of a third newspaper, known to be a Freedom Party sympathizer, wrote that the entire incident reeked of political conspiracy to defame the ruling party. “The role of some disgruntled insiders cannot be ruled out,” the correspondent added.

The media may not have given out his identity, but Rocky was aware that every journalist worth his salt in the national capital city knew it had been him. Moreover, the MP who had leaked the information to the media would have also shared it with his colleagues in the House… and god knows with whom else in his circle of acquaintance. This could pose a major challenge for him in the coming weeks and months. But for now, his mind was on that weekend meeting. He was now looking forward to it with relish.

# A tryst that turns into an examination

Ever since his return from Dubai, Rocky had not been his usual cocky self, though he had managed to carefully hide the change. He felt diffident from inside and the bright smile which came to him naturally, was now forced. But he continued to use those rare words which floored listeners and employed his American accent to impress people. There was no way he could allow even a whiff of suspicion to escape that something was no longer right with him. If the impression went around that he was insecure for some reason, his followers would desert him, and his critics would pounce on the opportunity. His political career would be over, and his dream of an early financial security too would go down the drain.

And now was certainly not the occasion for Rocky to appear disoriented. He was meeting the socialite-friend — a sharp woman who would spot even the smallest deviation in his demeanour. She would then go to town, and everyone from the street cleaner to the governor would know that he was facing a challenge that could end his career. He was fully aware that the socialite slept with some of his bitterest critics and constantly played them against one another. A woman without scruples, Rocky muttered distastefully, for a moment forgetting his own record in the matter. That said, he had to behave normal. And he *was* normal, Rocky told himself with determination. That little experiment in Parliament had, after all, confirmed his ‘ability’. All the same, certain precautions had to be taken, given the present status of his anatomy.

On reaching the rendezvous spot — which was his farmhouse — Rocky found the socialite waiting. She was dressed stunningly in an outfit that revealed more than it hid. The two embraced each other, whispering sweet nothings. Dinner had been ordered just a while ago and it was ready to be served. There was just the two of them and they slowly and lovingly relished the Amritsari fish curry and nan, but not before downing the expensive drinks which Rocky had brought along. He made sure, without arousing suspicion, that she had more than her usual quota and he, less than his normal consumption. The last thing he wanted was to end up drunk and not be in charge of the situation. He had a secret to hide, and a point to prove to himself.

Some harmless gossip was exchanged between the two as they drank and ate. She taunted him for trying to avoid her all these days and he graciously admitted to the error, adding that his preoccupations had been an obstacle.

“But see, I have come rushing the first opportunity I got!”

She smiled coyly, all the time knowing that he was lying with his excuses. She had no respect for him, but there were many benefits she had managed to get from her amorous association with the man. He was lecherous and completely bereft of values, and she had played on these drawbacks to self-advantage.

Coming closer to him and running her fingers across his chest, she asked, “Who was that MP?”

He looked up, startled. He had been busy looking down the cleavage below her neck. “What MP?”

“The one who was caught surfing a porn site on his smart phone in Parliament?”

“Oh, that! I have no idea. I know only what has appeared in the media. Of course, I can find out more and let you know.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I promise. I will find out and inform you.”

“I refuse to believe that you don’t already know.”

Rocky squirmed in discomfort. From the corner of his eye he looked sharply at her. Did she already know, or at least suspect? Was she playing games with him? He had to be careful.

“Look dear, you know I can never deceive you. I really don’t know.”

“Hmm… if you say so. But keep me informed,” she murmured as she closed in on him, her hands now moving in different regions of his body. “I heard that you had been to Dubai recently?”

Rocky cursed under his breath. Can nothing remain a secret in this damned town? “Who told you?”

“Just heard from here and there.”

Rocky knew that the socialite’s ‘here and there’ network was expansive. If he denied the news, she would not accept the denial and would proceed to dig further. It was better to adopt a middle path.

He said, “I won’t deny or confirm it. There are issues of national sensitivity that cannot be revealed. When the time comes, I will let you know. After all, nothing is ever hidden from you.” She smiled and let his hands explore her breasts.

Usually Rocky believed in Lights, Camera and Action. Tonight, was different, though. Rocky wanted to listen to her speak. He wanted to know what the city was talking about, particularly about the PornGate. He was taking his own time and extending the foreplay. The socialite was no fool and she noticed this new tactic. But she played along, giving him some names who were considered suspects in the Lutyens’ circle. His name did not feature in that list. This was no relief; it was possible that she had deliberately not named him.

When all talk was exhausted, the two did what they had primarily come for. It took barely 10 minutes. In most previous such meetings, the socialite would stay back for the night for an encore, but Rocky was insistent that they leave immediately since he had an early morning flight to catch for Chennai. Since he would be out for the weekend, he wanted the farmhouse cleaned and fumigated. He waved the air tickets at her. She was upset at being hustled in such an unceremonious manner but said nothing. Rocky had no work in Chennai, but he still went there and stayed for a couple of days. He did not want the cunning socialite checking up on his story and finding it to be false. Rocky’s reluctance to spend an entire night with her was understandable. The chances of his physical state being revealed to her was greater with the amount of time he was exposed to her.

Over the next few days, the socialite’s mind kept going back to the meeting. Somehow, she could not reconcile with his strange behaviour, especially that of cutting short their encounter, despite the fact that they had met after several weeks and despite the high levels of lust that Rocky had. She was part of a WhatsApp group which primarily specialised in vicious gossip about influential people — their personal lives, their professional conduct, in fact anything that concerned these celebrities. Nothing was taboo in this chat group. The group members never discussed people by their names; code words had been devised. The socialite slipped in her observations about Rocky in the chat — his strange behaviour, his denial of details on PornGate, his sudden trip to Chennai.

Many group members agreed that Rocky had been behaving in a funny manner of late. But there was no unanimity on the reason(s). Some believed that he had been ticked off by his party head and that his political future was not looking bright anymore. A few others thought that he had burnt his hands in some underhanded financial deal and lost a huge sum of money; he could not report to the authorities because the entire deal was illegal in the first place. At least five WhatsApp group members pointed out that, in recent weeks Rocky had largely kept away from sexual encounters.

This last bit of gossip greatly interested the socialite, who filed away the information in her head for future use. She had made a successful living out of such material, in the use of which she was adept at. But first, she needed more stuff on Rocky. Why had he suddenly been downplaying himself?

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Meanwhile, things were far from cheerful on another front. Reetu Chopra was not in a good mood. Her fishing expedition with Jogi had failed miserably. She had no doubt in her mind, looking back, that the sharp but low-profile politician would have cross-checked her story (about interviewing him for a life profile) and found it to be untrue. But she was not too bothered about her credibility being smashed. She would have occasions to redeem her reputation. Besides, it was common for journalists to camouflage their real purpose while tackling tricky subjects. There was still a chance to dig out the information Maida had wanted. What she was more worried about was that another journalist had scooped the PornGate story.

The best that she could now do was a follow-up. There was a silver lining here. Her gut belief was that there was a connection between the PornGate and the Obscene-Email-Gate incidents. She had been tipped off by Maida about the latter, though he had carefully kept out the names that had been targeted. Needless to add, he had no desire to tell her that he was one of the recipients of the offensive mail. Not having got any lead from Jogi, she reached out to her formidable contacts in the Lutyens’ lobby, especially the female journalists. None had any additional information about either PornGate or OEG. Nor did they have any idea on what really had prompted Jogi to ask that question about castration. Reetu refused to believe the explanation that the MP had given her during their last meeting. There was more to it than meets the eye, she said to herself. The problem was how to uncover the truth.

Jogi had proved to be a tough customer, and he would be immediately suspicious if she were to contact him again, so soon after that first, supposedly accidental, meeting. Moreover, he was sure to ask about that interview, she told herself now that her bluff had been called. She had contacted Maida and told him that nothing substantial had been achieved for the moment; he would have to wait for some more time.

Maida hadn’t been sitting idle either. Worried over the direction the mysterious mails could lead to, and its impact on the careers of those at the receiving end, he had asked Maker, Dalda and Girgut to meet the IB officer Priya Menon and share with her the devices on which they had received the mail. None of them was enthusiastic about the idea but they had no option. Maida himself had misgivings; he had realised quickly enough that Priya Menon was a sharp, no-nonsense and uncompromising investigator. And that once she dug deeper into the issue a lot of muck about him and the others could surface. But he would cross the bridge when he came to it. For now, it was important to the get to the bottom of the mail and fix the perpetrator.

# Priya and Karan grill Maker

“To what do I owe the honour of this visit?” greeted Maker warmly as he shook hands with Priya and Karan, pointing them to a comfortable sofa into which they sank even as Maker switched off his phone and sat down opposite them.

His light brown eyes and flashing hair usually did the trick of making a woman swoon but Priya was a professional and had seen a *neta* or two and was unfazed.

“We are here to ask you a few questions about the email you received, with a picture of a severed private part,” Priya began crisply.

Karan got busy setting up the duplicating equipment that would make an exact copy of the Minister’s phone contents in a matter of minutes. The Duplikator, a state-of-the-art equipment from a Silicon Valley firm, could deal with every flavour of iOS and Android Operating Systems and neatly took an image of the entire phone. It had a sleek software interface that could crack every encryption known to mankind and whoever was operating this software would be privy to all of Maker’s secrets.

“Ah, the family jewels! OEG!” chuckled Maker, as he gestured to be served hot beverages. “Coffee, Tea, anything else?” Maker inquired of Priya and Karan who politely declined.

“Sir, we would need your phone on which you received the OEG,” Priya asked.

Maker hesitated for a moment before reaching for his iPhone and gave it to her. He was a bit of a techie himself and was curious as to what data they would need from it. There was a lot of stuff on the phone that he did not want shared. “What do you plan to get out of it?” he inquired.

“Since the email disappeared after you read it, there is some malware installed on your phone that automatically deleted the email after you opened it and read it. This could be in any form, even something as harmless as a genuine government circular with an attachment. Once you click the attachment, the virus springs to life and in this case, starts watching all your incoming emails. There is a certain pattern that it is trained to look for and once there is a match, it will remove that email. You would not know its presence and in order to ferret it out, we need to take an entire dump of your contents and go over it in our forensic labs.”

Watching the alarm on Maker’s face, Karan quipped “It will be kept confidential and once we find the culprit, we will erase it on our end.”

Priya finished by saying, “We will come back and remove that virus, which is on your phone now, undetected. Please do not click on any attachment if it appears suspicious…”

The conversation changed to a weightier subject.

“You have been traveling to Dubai a lot lately… Any specific reason?” Karan queried.

Maker was thrown off guard and did not quite know how to handle this question. He tried belligerence.

“As a Minister, I have a lot of responsibilities and I am required to travel all over the world. It is part of my job. To catechize me this way, to impugn motives to my trips, is preposterous! How dare you?”

“We are trying to find out an incident that could involve the nation’s security,” Karan answered calmly. “The fact that even the Home Minister received this email demands that we get to the bottom of it as quickly as possible.”

Karan let it slip that Maida too had received the email and wanted to see Maker’s reaction. What he saw only confirmed his suspicions. Maida had indeed got the email.

“In the past six months, you have been to Dubai four times,” Karan continued. “We looked at your appointments diary during these trips and we don’t see you meeting anyone of significance from the political world…” he trailed off. It was a cue for Priya to take over.

“Who is Sheila Kaul and what is your relationship with her?” Priya asked.

Maker’s eyes were flashing with anger as he retorted in a piqued tone, “That is none of your business. As a Minister, I meet many people from many walks of life. She is a friend of mine and that is all there is to it!” Maker’s voice was rising, and he is going to give Maida a piece of his mind, he promised himself.

He stood up abruptly and mentioned, “This meeting is over” and walked out of the room. He then remembered that his iPhone was still with Karan and he came back and waited till Karan got done and handed him his phone. No words were spoken. The heat in the room was palpable.

“What a character!” Priya commented, as they were driving back to the office.

Karan replied, “The arrogance, the conceit! I am tempted to leak all the salacious stuff from his phone just for the way he behaved with us. Despicable! Who does he think he is, God?”

“Dubai seems to be a common factor emerging. Both Maida and Maker were there. We should find out what the other two have to say,” concluded Priya. The rest of the trip was made in silence.

# Girgut undergoes intense questioning

The following day, Priya and Karan showed up at Girgut’s office. Karan came straight to the point.

“You made three trips to Dubai in the last six months. Can you tell us what you did there?”

“Do you know who you are talking to? I am the External Affairs Minister! I don’t have to tell a Babu where I went and for what purpose!”

Karan was unflustered. He did not want to point out that Girgut was a Minister of State, not the Minister of External Affairs. No sense in ruffling feathers. “This is a matter of National Security sir. The only common thing that we can find between the people who received the email is the fact that they have been in Dubai. It would help us to get to the bottom of the matter if you could tell us who you met in Dubai, where you stayed and for how long.”

It was Priya’s turn to diffuse the tension. “Could you please tell us how you get your email?”

Girgut pointed her to his clunker of a desktop. The email account he used was the government supplied NIC account. They could get this from the NIC server. No need to take an image backup. Just then Girgut’s phone rang. It was Maida. Girgut launched on a tirade and in an expletive ridden conversation caused a ruckus. Maida was sympathetic but unruffled.

“Co-operate with them. This is a serious matter. We will talk later.”

Within a few seconds, Karan’s phone rang. Maida. He told them to wrap it up and come back. He did not want the news to spread far and wide. Containment was key. Girgut could be unpredictable, especially after downing a drink or two.

Karan drew Priya aside and updated her of what he heard from Maida. They quickly concluded that irking the ire of Girgut would not help matters. At any rate, they did not think they would gain any more information than what they already had. Nodding towards Girgut, they quietly left his office. Girgut was still fuming and smoke was coming out of his ears. He wanted to punch someone – anyone.

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Dalda flat out refused to meet. Perhaps Maker and Girgut had warned him. With data from just two people, there was not much to go with. Dalda too had travelled to Dubai, ostensibly to watch a couple of IPL games. A picture was emerging. It has something to do with Dubai.

Mike was hopping mad to hear about the non-cooperation of Girgut and Dalda.

“I need a list of the names of all the VIPs that had travelled to Dubai in the last six months. Do you have it?” fumed Mike.

Karan replied, “There were five names – Maida, Dalda, Girgut, Maker, and the President of the Indian Cricket Board.”

“Can you go back twelve months and see if more names surfaced?” Even as he was saying it, he realized something else.

“Another thing… Indian nationals do not need a passport to travel to destinations like Macau, Mauritius, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangkok etc. – they can go there, switch passports and could fly to Dubai without the government knowing about it. For instance, one could drive up to Nepal or Bhutan and cross into those countries without producing one’s passport. Someone needs to go to Dubai and spend serious time looking at who came in rather than trying to track who left from India.”

He needed to check something with the Research and Analytical Wing (RAW) to find out if there were unscheduled flights from an airport near Meerut to Dubai, which sometimes did not put down the names of all passengers. That matches were being played in Dubai did not help. On the drop of a hat, the glitterati of India wanted to go to Dubai. As the three spies thought it through, they realized the spaghetti they had to unravel. Dubai was the Disneyland of the Middle East, he told himself. For a price, one could get anything.

There were additional wrinkles. Many high-net-worth-individuals in India had multiple passports, even though it was against the law. So, they could leave from India to Bangkok or Singapore for a two-week vacation and then switch passports there and fly into Dubai on a different country’s passport and return to India doing the same in reverse. Looking at their passport dates, one would assume that they spent a week or two in their destination whereas nothing could be further from the truth.

“Karan, Priya, what we are up against here requires one of you to take a trip to Dubai and do some sleuthing. I will talk to RAW and coordinate it. Priya, you are the computer whiz and I would like you to get to the bottom of this email, working from here. Karan, let us get you out to Dubai as a Liaison officer in the Indian Consular section. RAW will create an office with a secure channel for you to communicate with Priya. I will start the ball rolling today. Once the paperwork is in place, you will need to leave for Dubai.”

Priya had a request - “I need to establish one data point that confirms that the castration happened in Dubai and not say Abu Dhabi or Bangkok. I am not there yet. Please give me a few more days and I will confirm this.”

Mike nodded his head and replied, “Good point. It will take me a few days to get this in place. My hunch is Dubai and I have a good instinct about this. RAW keeps track of all Indian citizens that go in and out of Dubai and other Middle East cities. I will get a list of all Bollywood stars, politicians and cricketers who were in Dubai for the past six months. Using computers and the brain power in this room, I am sure we can triage on a half a dozen to a dozen prospects.”

Karan who was quiet till now, chimed in. “I better brush up on my Arabic and Urdu. I need to be able to pick up not just the various accents but the body language.”

Mike rose to indicate that the meeting was over by saying, “You do that, Karan. Priya, no pressure but I want confirmation about Dubai. I want it yesterday.” He said that with a smile but Priya knew that he meant it.

# Priya strikes gold

As Priya walked back to her cubicle, she was thinking that perhaps, Girgut’s email was the best place to start. She got access to all the emails Girgut received a week prior to that fateful email and started looking them over.

The Email header provides useful information about the sender, the IP address from where the email originated, the account details of the sender etc. She entered a website, MediaTemple.net that she had used in the past to get instructions on how the decode the email headers from various Email client software like Gmail, Hotmail etc. The OEG email header looked as follows:

From: The Castrator (TheCastrator@protonmail.com)  
Subject: Yours is Next  
Date: January 25, 20xx 11:30:58 PM GMT  
To: giridhargulati@sansad.nic.in   
Return-Path: <TheCastrator@protonmail.com>  
Envelope-To: giridhargulati@sansad.nic.in  
Delivery-Date: Tue, 25 Jan 20xx 23:31:01 +0400  
Received: from po-out-1718.google.com ([72.14.252.155]:54907) by cl35.gs01.gridserver.com with esmtp (Exim 4.63) (envelope-from <TheCastrator@protonmail.com>) id 1KDoNH-0000f0-RL for giridhargulati@sansad.nic.in; Tue, 25 Jan 20xx 23:31:01 +0400  
Received: by po-out-1718.google.com with SMTP id y22so795146pof.4 for <giridhargulati@sansad.nic.in>; Tue, 25 Jan 20xx 23:31:01 +0400   
Received: by 10.141.116.17 with SMTP id t17mr3929916rvm.251.1214951458741; Tue, 25 Jan 20xx 23:31:01 +0400  
Received: by 10.140.188.3 with HTTP; Tue, 25 Jan 20xx 23:31:01 +0400  
Dkim-Signature: v=1; a=rsa-sha256; c=relaxed/relaxed; d=protonmail.com; s=gamma; h=domainkey-signature:received:received:message-id:date:from:to :subject:mime-version:content-type; bh=+JqkmVt+sHDFIGX5jKp3oP18LQf10VQjAmZAKl1lspY=; b=F87jySDZnMayyitVxLdHcQNL073DytKRyrRh84GNsI24IRNakn0oOfrC2luliNvdea LGTk3adIrzt+N96GyMseWz8T9xE6O/sAI16db48q4Iqkd7uOiDvFsvS3CUQlNhybNw8m CH/o8eELTN0zbSbn5Trp0dkRYXhMX8FTAwrH0=  
Domainkey-Signature: a=rsa-sha1; c=nofws; d=protonmail.com; s=gamma; h=message-id:date:from:to:subject:mime-version:content-type; b=wkbBj0M8NCUlboI6idKooejg0sL2ms7fDPe1tHUkR9Ht0qr5lAJX4q9PMVJeyjWalH 36n4qGLtC2euBJY070bVra8IBB9FeDEW9C35BC1vuPT5XyucCm0hulbE86+uiUTXCkaB 6ykquzQGCer7xPAcMJqVfXDkHo3H61HM9oCQM=  
Message-Id: <c8f49cec0807011530k11196ad4p7cb4b9420f2ae752@mail.protonmail.com>  
Mime-Version: 1.0  
Content-Type: multipart/alternative; boundary="----=\_Part\_3927\_12044027.1214951458678"  
X-Spam-Status: score=3.7 tests=DNS\_FROM\_RFC\_POST, HTML\_00\_10, HTML\_MESSAGE, HTML\_SHORT\_LENGTH version=3.1.7  
X-Spam-Level: \*\*\*

Priya started looking down the header, concentrating on the **Received** tags. She knew that Received tags are the most important part of the email header and are usually the most reliable. They form a list of all the servers/ computers through which the message travelled to reach Girgut.

Starting from the bottom of the header, she walked up the Received tags, noting down the IP addresses of the servers that the mail passed through before ending up on the desktop of Girgut. The first Received tag would be the one which would reveal the IP address of the sender, which she was sure would be somehow masked so as to not reveal the true source. The IP address 72.14.252.155 was for Google.com which meant that perhaps the email company Protonmail used Google for its Cloud services. But she was looking for an address that would point to Dubai. How to proceed further?

Priya got up to make herself a cup of *kadak chai*. It was pushing 3 PM, a time when the blood flow to the brain slows down to a trickle and a jolt of caffeine is needed to make the light bulb go off in the brain. She didn’t get this far by following the straight and the narrow – she needed to think laterally. She asked herself, “I am the web hosting administrator in Google, and I have to share multiple hosts on a server. How do I organize the hosts?” Then the thought stuck her.

If she were the admin, she would bunch all the sites on that server from the same geographical region. This way it is easy to optimize the network access times. Network access time is the time between a user clicking a site and the site opening. This is where most of the time is spent. “Let me see if I can do a reverse IP lookup and find out the locations of other hosts,” she told herself. Milk was boiled and thickened and added to the boiling kettle of tea (she had both running on 2 gas burners to save time) and the chai was ready. The brain’s light was well and truly lit.

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A Reverse IP lookup is a method to identify hostnames that have their Domain Name Server (DNS) A-records associated with the IP address. Hosting sites like Google typically configure multiple hosts (meaning websites with names like *meetForCoffee.com, TeenHottie.com, mathCompute.org, Teavana.biz*) all of which would be sharing the same physical IP address. This is fairly common in shared hosting environments. Priya decided to follow her instincts and do a reverse IP lookup on the IP address to see what comes up.

Using Microsoft Bing search engine, Priya entered the following:  
ip:72.14.252.x

Why Bing? Because Bing had a built-in reverse IP lookup feature. The query produced 10 hosts using the IP address. Seven of them were based in Dubai. Bingo!

Priya wrote out the following email to Mike, copying Karan:

We got lucky. A quick search of the Email header produced an IP address which pointed to the site using which the email was sent to be a Google Cloud host. I put myself in the shoes of the Google Admin and took a chance and did a Reverse IP lookup on the address and guess what I found! Of the ten hosts (websites) that were sharing the IP address, seven were in Dubai.

Mike was thrilled that Priya came through so quickly. His hunch had been proved right, one more time. There was no time to waste. He called up the Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, who oversaw the RAW division and explained to him the delicateness of the matter. If necessary, the Honourable Minister of Home Affairs Shri Mailapore Damodaran would write to the Honourable Minister of External Affairs, Biplab Banerjee formally requesting the creation of the post of a Joint Secretary, Cultural Attaché at the Indian Consulate Dubai to oversee the promotion of Arts and Culture in Dubai. In a record time of 72 hours, the request was approved. A decent-sized room was located in the crowded Consulate office with high security links to India was installed. The stage was set for Priya and Karan to move the investigation to the next phase.

# Lutyens socialite

Meena Thakkar had been an ambitious person since her college days. She had no intention of graduating for the sake of a humdrum job. She had great communication skills and persuasive power, which was complemented by her stunning looks. After getting a degree in mass communication from a reputed institution, she straightaway landed a job in a leading public relations agency. She quickly rose up the ladder, partly because of her competence and partly because she had struck a close rapport with the owner of the agency, with whom she did not hesitate to share the bed. Over two years, she had built a network of high-profile clients who were loyal to her and gave business to the agency solely because of her.

It was time for her to reach the next level. There was a limit to which she could rise in the agency; certainly, she could not be the owner. It was a propitious time to strike out on her own. The economy had opened up and the new millennium had ushered in a stable political regime after a tumultuous five-year period from 1996 to 1999, which saw India have a succession of Prime Ministers and governments.

The People’s Party had managed to stitch together an alliance with disparate partners, largely riding on the charisma of its leader, a veteran politician who was admired across the political spectrum. But despite his sincerity and leadership skills which depended primarily on consensus-building, the coalition’s constituents were all the time trying to bully him by taking advantage of his amenability. Some of the regional party leaders were particularly belligerent, knowing well that the government depended on their being kept in good humour.

The Prime Minister was a patient man and he continued to accommodate these troublemakers in the hope that they would stop their antics in the larger interests of the country which required political stability. However, despite his best efforts, problems did not end. In fact, they grew as the satraps realised that they could have their way without retribution. But when a regional leader, who held sway in one of the bigger south Indian states, pushed him into a corner, his patience snapped. The Prime Minister made it clear that he could not be more accommodating and requested the woman leader to see reason. She did not and indicated that her party would no longer support the government.

The Opposition, sensing an opportunity, demanded that the Prime Minister seek a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha since he did not appear to enjoy a majority. He agreed, hoping that the dissenting leader would not go the extra mile of asking her MPs to vote against the government. He had hoped in vain, and his government fell. The Prime Minister made a rousing speech and wound up by announcing that he would be forwarding his resignation to the President of India. The Freedom Party made a comeback in the elections that were held thereafter. It was an unexpected turn of events even for the most optimistic of the Freedom Party supporters. The party did not get an absolute majority on its own but was in a position to form the government with the help of allies.

The end of the political circus offered unlimited opportunities to those who were willing to take the call. Meena Thakkar took the call, quit her job and floated her own firm, Skyline Public Relations. Three key people who had worked closely with her in the agency also put in their papers and joined the new firm. More than a dozen big clients who had valued her contribution in promoting their products also shifted their accounts to Skyline. She was in business with a bang.

Her reputation— not just limited to her PR skills— did not take time to reach the ears of the new government’s movers and shakers. More so because she had by now become a Page 3 fixture. There was hardly a gathering or event of consequence in the city to which she was not invited. To begin with, Meena was not selective, and attended nearly every such function. It provided her a good and informal occasion to rub shoulders with the cream of society, attract their attention and win over their confidence. Later on though, she became choosy and favoured only those invites where the prospect of tangible gains in the immediate future was guaranteed. To add a humane dimension to her image—which she knew was one of a ruthless businesswoman — Meena involved herself in charitable activities. She worked with an NGO that cared for street children; she contributed liberally to another NGO that sought to empower housemaids; she attended functions organised by a third NGO which campaigned for animal rights. The media was agog over the arrival of this new socialite.

In the process, she learned how the levers of power worked, and more importantly, how they could be managed. The other lesson she learned was the art of arbitration, which in other words was ‘mediation’ for a price. She got to know, for instance, that a heavyweight politician from Bihar—who would later end up behind bars for misappropriating public money to the tune of several million rupees—was lobbying for his favourite IAS officer to be appointed to the Railway Recruitment Board. She came to know that an upcoming, young regional politician from Tamil Nadu, who brazenly flouted his Scheduled Caste credentials, was having an affair with the daughter of his party chief. She was a good listener, refraining always from giving an opinion but making sure that the person who was pouring out the secrets felt secure in her presence.

It did not take long for her to get into the inner circle of various important policymakers, the bureaucracy, and the police administration. Before long, her services were being sought by some of them to either secure promotions or nix the promotion of their rivals. On one occasion, Meena Thakkar was asked by a minister, who promised her agency a lucrative contract on behalf of his ministry to promote government schemes, to trap a rival politician. She had learnt from her sources that the politician was planning to visit a small town to have a rendezvous with his girlfriend, half his age. She tracked down the man and the hotel he was staying. She then turned on her charm and loosened her purse and got hidden cameras installed in the room. The politician met the girl in the hotel room and spent the night with her. Technology did the rest. Armed with the video evidence, the minister accosted his rival and brought him to his knees. Meena Thakkar got a government contract that was worth Rs.20 crores annually. The minister took a 10% cut.

Meena Thakkar was smart enough to realise that her enterprise could not be managed single-handedly. Over the months, she assiduously built a team of some eight persons, all as unscrupulous as she was, and all being hounds who could sniff blood from a distance. This team led by her became the carrier pigeon for those in power. She had begun to use her PR skills for getting jobs done, and undone.

# Three amigas

Sonya Keni was back in Mumbai. This was where her dreams of a flourishing film career could materialize. Manav Sinha, the film producer, who had earlier been indulgent towards her, decided to splurge on her now that she had come to the tinsel city. He had booked a suite for her in the Taj, overlooking the Gateway of India. As she checked into the room, she was suitably impressed, both by the grandeur of the iconic hotel and the consideration that the producer had demonstrated. Her spirits soared.

But she still found it difficult to forget the horrific experience in Dubai. In a bid to clear her head, she had headed straight from Dubai to her home in Houston, Texas. There, she tried to get into her old routine, meeting old acquaintances, shopping, and trying to land roles in television. The last efforts had provided both time-consuming and futile. It seemed as if the TV industry had shut its doors on her. Besides, there were too many wannabes in circulation who were dispensing favours left, right and centre. She was hesitant to stoop so low.

Sonya got in touch with her Madison Avenue friend Karen. Together, the two went through the options she had.

Karen said, “It is difficult to break into the industry once you are out of it.”

She realised it only too well. Still, she promised to look out for opportunities. Karen had her own career in advertising and could only be a shoulder for Sonya to cry on. But that was no solace as she desperately needed assignments. She was running out of money.

The two also discussed her other plight. She said, “How can I get to the bottom of the episode?”

Karen soothed her, saying “You have to look forward, not fret over what happened. Time is a great healer and you will bounce back and go on to great heights. Concentrate on your career and your talent, beauty and ability will take you far.”

It was in this time of frustration that Manav’s call came. He wanted her to come to Mumbai for a possible film role. She would have to go through the screen test and all. With nothing in hand, she seized the opportunity. The worst could be that she failed to land a role. But if she did…

As she sank into the bed, she wondered why Manav was being so generous. She was not a big star, nor was she an established TV personality to be fussed over. Manav Sinha was certainly better placed than her. At this stage, he could make or break her career, at least in the Maximum City. If he had arranged even a paying guest accommodation, she was hardly in a position to protest. And yet, not only had he booked a hotel room but a room in one of the city’s grandest hotels. He was indeed a good guy, she said to herself. Or maybe he had seen the star in her, which is why he wanted to audition her for a lead role in an upcoming film.

He had told her over the phone, “Sonya, I have something for you. There is a lead role up for grabs and I think you suit it. But you have to go through the screen test, the auditions and the rest. But I have confidence that you will do well. You are photogenic, you can manage accents easily, and you are used to facing the camera.”

She was overwhelmed by the trust he had in her and had no intention of disappointing him. Recent developments had put her in a state of depression, and she was on the verge of losing confidence in herself. Manav’s call had boosted her sagging spirits. While enthusiastic, Sonya was not willing to be carried away. After all, things could wrong in the audition. She was, therefore, cautiously optimistic.

Having freshened up, she ordered tea. There was time still to meet Manav, and she wanted to utilise the moment. Maybe she could go out, hang around in malls, even watch a new Hindi film. Suddenly she thought of her friends Preeti and Pragya, whom she had met in unusual circumstances in Dubai. They too would be in Mumbai unless some work had taken them outstation.

She dialled Preeti Ahuja. “Hi, this is Sonya. Remember me?”

There was momentary silence at the other end followed by a shriek of happiness. “Sonya! My, how are you?”

“Fine, fine. I’m in Mumbai.”

“What! Where? Let’s meet. Now, now, now.”

Sonya laughed delightedly. “Okay, okay. Not now. Why don’t we catch up over dinner at the Taj Land’s End in Bandra? Then we can spend a longer amount of time.”

“Done.”

“Is Pragya around? Have you been in touch with her?”

“Oh yes, she is in town and I spoke to her only a couple of days ago. Let me call her up and the three of us can meet tonight, around 8 PM.”

Sonya kept the phone down. There was a glow on her face. She would be meeting her two friends after a long time. There was much to catch up with.

Sonya’s choice of Taj Land’s End had not been on the spur of the moment. She had heard of the place and was aware of its reputation for drawing the cream of society. The VIPs loved the place for the privacy it provided without shutting them off from the crowd. It worked on an unwritten rule: Known people could behave like perfect strangers in certain situations when face to face, for the sake of discretion.

When Sonya reached the restaurant, she found the two waiting for her. They embraced warmly. After settling down and ordering some starters, they began to indulge in small talk which enlivened the atmosphere and put them at ease. They looked around and spotted several well-known faces from the film industry. There were also a couple of young politicians who had begun to rise up the ladder. Pragya and Preeti knew a few of them and even made eye contact, but nothing more. The unwritten code was being followed.

As soon as they sat down and ordered drinks, the others looked at Preeti. Their appetite had been whetted and they wanted to know the news she had for them.

“I have heard from Steve…” Preeti was taking her time, making them restless.

“And?” both asked.

“The Castrator has acted. Someone is missing his cojones…”

Sonya burst out laughing. Pragya lifted one eyebrow and looked at Preeti questioningly.

Preeti whispered in Pragya’s ears and she laughed out loud, inviting gazes from the adjoining tables.

Preeti waited for the laughter to subside, looked around before proceeding.

“A friend of mine told me that one MP was caught watching porn while the parliament was in session. But no one is revealing the name yet. The whole of Lutyens Delhi is only talking about this - they have compiled a list based on who were present and eliminating one by one. There was even a poll amongst them, and Rocky was either at the top or the top three. And one more thing…”

“What other thing?”

“Looks like an email has been sent to some prominent members of the Government, warning them of consequences. This has led to a sudden fall in sex-for-favour acts and the touts and enablers are not happy about it.”

“Tell me about it,” Pragya replied. “I dread it when a *neta* sits beside me on a flight. Most drool openly and are always asking me to meet them. For what, I wonder. They don’t even bother about invading my space, pushing the envelope all the time. Such lechers.”

Sonya did not know much about Indian politics, so Preeti gave her a quick primer, throwing in other names besides that of Rocky — Maida, Dalda, Girgut, Supremo, and Mama-ji. Sonya was intrigued by the nicknames, and Preeti took delight in giving her the background story of how the names came about.

It was close to midnight by the time the three were done with the dinner. They parted with the promise of keeping in touch and meeting as often as possible. As Sonya made her way, she realised that she was feeling lighter, even happy. The fact that the Castrator had acted, especially thrilled her.

A Page 3 journalist who was at the adjoining table was tuned in on the conversation that was taking place between the three amigas. Repeated mention of one name, Rocky piqued his interest. There was a buzz from Delhi that all is not well with him. Being good at math, he decided to put two and two together and came up with twenty-two. It was time to write another gossip column on Page 3 along the lines of Neeta’s Natter, hinting everything about Rocky without mentioning names. Two days later, Page 3 in a leading Mumbai publication read as follows:

*Is one of the Ministers in the Central government suffering from a rare affliction of not being able to rise to the occasion? That the said minister has been divested of family jewels while on a jaunt in a city known for debauchery? That the said city is a desert in a region that boasts of oil and has to make up for that by being the Disneyland for adults? That the said minister hails from a place where the three seas meet? That the said minister is blessed with brains, brawns and a larger-than-life libido that is frequently the talk of town among socialites? What a fall!*

*…*

*…*

His editor read the copy and was frowning, smiling, and guessing frantically as to who the said minister was. This was one of those posts that bordered on yellow journalism without getting on the wrong side of the law but with enough spice to get the creative juices flowing.

“Let the guessing games begin…” he told himself as he signed off on the post. It was going to be a busy weekend.

# Cabal count their losses

It was not just the ODI with Pakistan where Dilawar had been cheated. The third and deciding Test between India and the West Indies too had been a fiasco, with his plans of match fixing going for a toss. The Don had managed to compromise the umpires and at least three key players, and yet India had won. Mama-ji was furious with the outcome. He had trusted Dilawar and in all committed $10 million on a Windies win. This was big money, and bigger money was to be had if things had gone according to plan.

Mama-ji had persuaded Dipika and her cabal to bet big on the West Indies in the third Test, assuring them that India would lose since everything had been ‘arranged’. The group had bet close to $100 million, and they would be demanding an explanation. What was he to tell them? It was not just the loss of money but the loss of his credibility that rankled. It could impact his political future. Dipika was a vengeful woman and she would not take the ‘betrayal’ lying down. And he would be the obvious target.

There were other thoughts that plagued his mind. How did things go wrong when everything had been so meticulously set up? If the outcome of the match resulted in massive losses to Mama-ji and gang, then somebody must have gained. Who were they? Did they somehow beat Dilawar at his own game? Was it that somebody decided to, knowingly, defy the Don? These were troubling questions and he needed answers.

Mama-ji decided to fly down from Delhi to Mumbai and accost Dilawar. He had to because he could not trust anyone in the capital city. After landing in Mumbai, he, drove straight from the airport to his sprawling farmhouse facing the Arabian Sea for a quick freshening up. Dressed in casuals— Bahama shorts and sandals — he signalled to his aide to get the motorboat ready. The telephone call with the Don would be made in international waters, just outside the Indian jurisdiction, out of reach of sleuths. No one could be trusted these days. Mama-ji’s farmhouse was well known to the media, and to those who mattered. He could not risk even calling Dilawar from his home – one never knows which place is bugged – the wily HM Maida was always looking for an edge.

In a matter of less than an hour, the high-powered boat had entered international waters. As it cruised along, a yacht anchored in the waters came into view. It belonged to Mama-ji through a complex chain of ownership and was a floating luxury. Mama-ji never did anything halfway. The yacht could match some of the most expensive vessels often seen anchored on the shores in Cannes and owned by global business magnates. In fact, even Mama-ji’s yacht was based for six months a year in Cannes and boasted of hosting many a party and orgy attended by the movers and shakers of society.

As he was escorted on the upper deck to his exclusive suite, he caught sight of a couple of scantily dressed starlets hoping to make it big in tinsel town. The vessel manager had made the arrangement on hearing that the boss would be making a visit. Mama-ji felt a dash of thrill run through his body, but he shook off the urge and moved on. There was critical business to attend to, and pleasure could wait. He waved at them and they melted away.

The room in which he would converse with Dilawar had been thoroughly sterilised by his aides. They could not afford hidden bugging devices and other such technological inconveniences. Sniffer dogs had been pressed into service to check for every kind of explosives known to mankind. The room was sparse except for a large table and half a dozen chairs, and a small but well-stocked bar. This is where business was done and thus had a business-like look. Within a couple of minutes of his entering the room, Dilawar logged in on a secure video conference line from a similar spot on the high seas off the Persian Gulf. Mama-ji noticed that Dilawar must be doing better than he thought – the ambience was even more garish with a splash of gold on everything. Dilawar stubbed the cigarette that he was drawing on when he saw Mama-ji appear. Pretence of respect.

Mama-ji came straight to point. “What happened? How did you mess up so badly?”

There was a faint trace of anger in his voice which the Don spotted. He said obsequiously, “*Saheb*, it was not my fault. I had planned everything. But that Vikas Mehta took away the game from us single-handedly.”

“How was he allowed to do so? What were the umpires doing?”

“They were helpless. Vikas played a flawless innings. He did not provide a single occasion to the umpires to manipulate the result.”

Mama-ji wrung his hands in despair. “I cannot believe this. Surely some of the deliveries must have nicked his pads.”

“No, sir. He played as if he knew that something had been set up. He was extra careful.”

“Hmm. So, what do we do next? The ODIs are to be played now.”

“There won’t be a mistake this time around. I have arranged for Vikas Mehta to be dropped for the ODIs.”

“That would create a furore. On what grounds would the decision be justified?”

“The fitness coach has been told to declare him unfit for the ODI series. He had suffered a hamstring injury some months ago. The fitness coach will tell the selection panel that the injury has re-surfaced. Although the pain is still minimal, the injury could get bad if he played.”

“Okay. But that alone will not be enough.”

“I have arranged that. Once the usual signals are given, the players concerned will do their bit. India will not win the one-day series.”

“You better not fail this time, Dilawar. I don’t need to tell you that, apart from losing money, I have lost face too. Powerful people have lost money and they are furious.”

The Don knew who Mama-ji was referring to. He assured him that nothing would go wrong. With Vikas Mehta out, it would be easier to manipulate.

The meeting over, Dilawar sailed away to his high-powered boat parked some distance away. On the way, he made calls to his people in India and told them in a stern voice that he would not brook any error this time around. The Don was shaken.

Mama-ji repaired to his exclusive suite where the two starlets were waiting. An hour later, he emerged, having re-discovered the vigour of youth even if for just a few moments to climax in a paroxysm of sexual release and ready to sail back to Indian waters.

# The ugly head of Casting couch

Sonya put on her best dress, applied a light makeup, and arrived for her screen test fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. It was for the film that Manav was producing and had recommended her name to the director. Manav had not yet arrived and the crew was busy with shooting some scenes featuring actor Nitin Kapur. The A-list star was much in demand those days, with the last three of his films being hugely successful at the box office. He had scaled up his fees too — he was now charging double of what he had taken previously. The producers had no option but to concede since his presence at least meant a good initial return for the film’s first four weeks in theatres.

Nitin Kapur was a good-looking man in his late twenties, having showed prowess both as a romantic as well as an action hero. He had got a break in films after winning a national talent contest which had been judged, among others, by a few leading producers and directors of the film industry. While his first four films were only moderate successes, the fifth had hit the jackpot. That changed his career graph and his attitude. As a newcomer he had been shy, and polite. Now he was arrogant, and often berated his directors and script writers. He interfered in aspects of filmmaking that were not his forte. Everyone was tired of his antics but were compelled to humour him. Nitin had acquired a demigod status in the Hindi film industry.

It was now close to two hours that Sonya had been waiting for her screen test. Apparently, the star had thrown a tantrum over some trivial matter and the shooting was getting delayed well beyond the allotted time. The director was at his wit’s end but was keeping his patience. His project would be finished in case Nitin walked out. The fact was that Nitin was finding it difficult to acquire the high notes that were needed for the shot. He was supposed to scream loudly and could not hit the high notes. Claiming that his throat was giving him problems he suggested that the scene be dubbed later. The director was not convinced and gently persuaded the actor to give it another try. Already, twenty retakes had been done. The director pampered his actor’s ego by saying that the scene dubbed in another voice would not appear as good as it would in the star’s voice.

The director was aware that Sonya was waiting for her screen test, but he could do nothing to hurry matters. He was also aware that Nitin had spotted the newcomer. The actor had turned an enquiring glance at the director, who merely nodded. After the shot was finally okayed, Nitin walked over to the director, took him aside, and said, “Who is that pretty girl?”

“It is Sonya Keni. She is here for a screen test. She has been recommended by Manav.”

“Is that so? It would be a good idea if I were to talk to her in private for a while. Maybe I can help in her career.”

“I’ll have to ask her. Besides, Manav is very possessive about her.”

Nitin grunted impatiently. “I will take care of Manav. Arrange a meeting in my room with her.”

“Let me check with Manav. After all, she is here at his call.”

There was a hint of anger in Nitin voice. “Do as I tell you. Here I am cooperating with you through all these retakes, and you cannot accept one request of mine. She should be in my room in a couple of hours’ time.”

The director was in a dilemma. He understood well the actor’s intentions and was reluctant to let a newcomer fall in the trap. At the same time, he could not afford to antagonise the lead actor who had the power to break him. With heavy legs that felt heavier with each step, he approached Sonya while Nitin walked away to his room. Since he was meeting her for the first time, he introduced himself and apologised for the delay. She was struck by his humility. He then introduced her to his crew members and gave her the lines to speak on camera. Thereafter, her profile was captured by the camera in several angles. She had to change into different costumes and give shots in varying backdrops. The make-up artistes had done a fantastic job, adding to her natural beauty.

Manav arrived while the screen tests were on. He sat quietly in a corner and watched her perform. It was close to an hour before the director called it quits. He appeared satisfied but told her that he would give a final answer in a couple of days. Manav joined them, greeted her warmly and congratulated her on her performance.

“I’m sure that the end result will be fine, and the director will give the green signal,” he said encouragingly.

He asked Sonya if she would join him for a cup of coffee in a nearby restaurant, but before she could respond the director said, “I want her to go through the raw film so that she can understand for herself the performance and learn from it.” Calling it a good idea, Manav left, extracting an assurance that they would meet for the pending coffee the following day.

After he was gone, the director cleared his throat and said in a low voice that Nitin Kapur wanted to see her in his room. “Why?” she asked.

“Maybe he wants to know you better.”

“But why? I am not working on his film.”

“Possibly you might, soon enough, if you play your cards well.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Sonya, nothing in this industry comes for free. Those who are obstinate have to struggle for long, perhaps forever. Most never make it. I see potential in you and would be disappointed to see it go waste.”

“Thank you for the confidence in me.”

“Then please go and meet Nitin.”

Sonya may have been new to the film industry, but she was not so naive as to fail to understand the motive. This was the casting couch the film industry was notorious for, and she was being asked to be a part of that. She had to decide quickly. If she declined and went back to the US, uncertainty awaited her. If she agreed, a new and dazzling career was ready to greet her in Mumbai. She took the director’s advice and made her way to Nitin’s room.

Barely had she knocked that the door opened. Nitin was there with his branded smile.

He ushered her in and directed her towards a sofa. “Thank you for coming,” he said. She did not respond.

“What will you have?” he asked, moving towards the bar, which appeared well-stocked with imported whiskey and other lesser potents. She muttered in the negative.

“How can that be? You are my guest. This is our first meeting.”

“If you insist, I’ll have a glass of beer.”

“Right away,” he crooned and got her a glass. After taking a couple of sips, she looked up. Nitin was seated next to her and running his hand unabashedly all over her body.

He said, “Your name is Sonya, I was told.”

“Yes.”

“Seeking a break in Bollywood?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. How did the screen test go?”

“I will be told about it in two days.”

“Don’t worry. I will make sure that you are selected.” He placed his hands on her thigh and began to stroke it. She flinched inwardly.

“I was told that Manav recommended your name.”

“That’s true.”

“He’s a good guy. You are in safe hands.” His hands, meanwhile, began to grope other parts of her body. She sat still.

“What’s wrong? Why are you inanimate?” He asked somewhat irritatingly.

“No. I am just nervous.”

“Oh!” He laughed aloud. “Nothing to worry. Just cooperate. I am your well-wisher.”

Soon he had disrobed her and also stripped himself. Nitin caressed her face and said, “I have four films in hand. The heroine has not been decided for one of these. I will ask the producer to take you opposite me.”

“Thank you.”

An hour later, she walked back slowly out on the road. Every fibre of her body ached, and she felt humiliated. It was the same feeling that she had gone through in Dubai. She hailed a taxi and returned to her hotel room, where she took a shower and ordered a strong cup of black coffee. It was time to organise her thoughts. She texted Preeti and asked if they could meet the following day for tea and got a confirmation immediately. But Pragya, who too was texted, was busy so she would not be able to make it.

She decided not to share the latest episode with Preeti. There was no point, she said to herself, in sobbing on another shoulder. Nothing was to be gained from that. She could have warned Nitin that if he went ahead with exploiting her, he would meet the fate that befell Rocky. But she had not, fearful that her career would end even before it began.

None of them had any way of knowing the hammer blow that was coming in the daily, *Mumbai Minutes*, the following day, on Page 3.

# Rumors grow legs – Maida swings into action

Maida was an early riser. The first thing he did with his morning cup of coffee was to carefully scan through the country’s major dailies. The *Mumbai Minute* was not one of them, and yet he subscribed to it because its Page 3 was always full of useful gossip, political and otherwise. It helped him to keep abreast of which celebrity, especially a politician, was up to what antics. He read this paper the last because it seemed to help with his digestion.

As his eyes fell upon a small ten-line news item titled, ‘The Rise and Fall of a Politician’s Libido’, he almost fell off the sofa. He quickly read the report and was relieved that it mentioned no names. But even the purely speculative tone gave a number of hints and the initiated would not have much difficulty in making good guesses. He wondered how and where the correspondent had managed to glean this information. He was aware of the gossip about certain influential people having lost their manpower, being in circulation. But this was different. Now it was in print. That made his task of unearthing the truth behind the incidents and then keeping it under wraps, difficult.

He realised that as the country’s Home Minister, he could sooner than later face media queries on the report. After all, this was a law and order matter; someone was going around possibly castrating select people. He was worried that reports of his meeting with the IB top bosses on the Obscene Email Gate too could be leaked by someone, and then it would not be long before the media would link this to the castration gossip. Maida knew the editor of *Mumbai Minute*, and called him up.

“Editor *saheb*, what’s this news that you have published about politicians losing their libido? Isn’t enough happening in the political arena that you should begin to barge into people’s personal lives? I never expected this from a reputed daily such as yours.” In reality, he considered *Mumbai Minute* nothing more than a rag.

“It’s on Page 3, Maida. There is no need to overreact. It’s in the gossip column.”

“Don’t give me that line. More number of people read Page 3 than the nonsense you print in the editorial pages. And, while on the subject, let me tell you that your editorial in yesterday’s edition, in which you suggested that New Delhi should sign a no-war treaty with China, was utter nonsense.”

“This is a democratic country, Minister. You have the right to say what you want, and so do I.”

“Democracy does not give you the right to peep into other people’s bedroom.”

“So, what do you want me to do?” The editor knew which side of his bread was buttered and he had no desire to further antagonise the minister.

“Carry a retraction in tomorrow’s edition.”

“Saying what? That the news is wrong? I cannot do that.”

“There will be consequences.”

“There is a way. I will quote unnamed sources high-up in the government as rubbishing the claim made in the news report. We will then add an addendum that the said report was derived from the grapevine, and that the paper does not endorse the insinuation.”

But Maida realised that this would add fuel to fire, with other journalists latching on to it and seeking to unearth their own ‘exclusives’. The best way to kill it was to ignore it. He said, “On second thoughts, let it be. People will forget it soon. Just make sure you don’t carry anything more on the matter.”

“Sure. By the way, one-on-one, is this true?”

“What is true?” Maida growled.

“Never mind. But I remember now. I would have called you soon on another matter. Would you be kind enough to be the chief guest at a function for the release of my book next month?”

“What is the book about?” Maida had no wish to be caught off guard by sort of endorsing a book he knew nothing about. The editor promised to mail him a synopsis of the book.

Maida was not the only one to have read the news item. Mike, Karan and Priya had also gone through it. Normally, they tended to skip the gossip page, but the headline had caught their attention. Already investigating the obscene email issue, this seemed to have intriguing possibilities about some sort of a connection with their probe. Speaking to Maida about it would be useless, Mike thought. In any case, the minister must have surely called up the editor and done his own enquiries, which he was unlikely to share with the IB.

It was a clue that he did not want to leave un-probed. He asked Priya and Karen to take the earliest available flight to Mumbai, meet the editor and the journalist who wrote the story, and get to the bottom of the affair.

“Do your homework before accosting them. I do not want a public furore that the IB is going about harassing and intimidating the media. Prepare a detailed Q & A and confront them. Be polite but firm and let them know that they would be doing a national duty of grave importance by being truthful.”

Karen and Priya exchanged glances and smiled. “Yes sir,” they said in unison. Finally, their investigation had got some oxygen.

# A Retraction

Karan and Priya landed at the Mumbai airport around noon. It was a humid day and the two were wiping off their sweat as they made their way to the exit. Since they had no cabin luggage, they did not have to spend time at the conveyor belts. At the exit door, a car was waiting to take them to their hotel. They gladly jumped into the air-conditioned comfort of the vehicle which then began its hour-long journey through the maze of traffic.

Their appointment with the editor was fixed at four that evening. The two sleuths exchanged notes in the car, went through the questionnaire one more time and fine-tuned their plan of action. They planned to speak with the editor first, then with the reporter concerned, separately. Later they would talk to them in a group. They had done a thorough study of the two characters and prepared a dossier on each of them.

The editor, Vikrant Gokhale, was in his late fifties. He had begun his career in journalism from the bottom of the ladder, as a sub-editor, thirty years ago. In the course of his profession, he had changed jobs just thrice, eventually landing the opportunity of editing *Mumbai Minute*. Under his helm, the paper had gathered a reputation for hard-hitting news, spiced with salacious gossip. The elite did not take his paper or him seriously, though they remained a constant irritant. But the masses loved the paper, which had helped in enhancing its circulation.

Vikrant was also considered close to the powers that be, whether in politics, business, or the entertainment industry. While he often rubbed them the wrong way, he was also quick to make amends and explain to them that such ‘impartiality’ gave the paper credibility and eventually helped their cause too. According to the dossier, Vikrant did not just depend on the salary received as editor. He made a pile of side money facilitating deals between the industry and the politicians. He owned a farmhouse in the hilly resort of Khandala and a penthouse in Pune.

When he received the telephone call from Karan, he was intrigued. The IB official had not stated the purpose of his visit, nor had he told that he would be accompanied by a lady officer. For a moment, he wondered if it had to do with his ‘other businesses’, but dismissed the possibility because, had that been the case, it would be agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate or the Income Tax department that would be knocking on his door. Besides, his contacts in the government would have forewarned him about the visit.

At four sharp, Karan and Priya entered the editor’s chamber. Vikrant ordered chilled lemon juice for them and waited for them to begin. Karan introduced Priya and said, “Mr. Vikrant, we are here to ask some questions about the news item which appeared in your paper regarding the libido of some politicians.”

The editor responded with amusement, “I am surprised that the IB should be interested in gossip.”

“The things that interest us would surprise you, sir.”

“Well, what is it that you want to know?”

“On what basis did your reporter furnish the story?”

“He heard it from his contacts.”

“And who are those contacts?”

“Mr. Karan, you should know that a journalist is not obliged to reveal his contacts.”

“Sometimes they have to. But let that be. Tell me, did the contacts name the politicians?”

“Yes, they did, but I chose not to publish their names. I didn’t want criminal defamation to be slapped on us.”

“That was sensible of you. Do you stand by the story?”

The editor was evasive. “I treat it as gossip.”

“But gossip can be true, no?”

“Sometimes.”

“Okay. We have some information about you. Can you please corroborate it?”

“Go ahead.”

“Six months ago, you approached a minister with a request to facilitate a defence deal on behalf of a defence contractor, actually a middleman. And you made good money after the contract went through.”

“That’s pure nonsense.”

“Mr. Gokhale, if we have this information, we also would be having the details of the deal.”

“What’s the point you are making?”

Priya came in this time. “A simple one. We know a lot about you. If you cooperate, we can be accommodating. If not, we will be compelled to place the dossier on you before the Prime Minister. And please don’t be under the impression that you can kill the probe. We will release portions of the information we have to the media, and there will be hell to pay.”

Vikrant was now sweating despite the air-conditioner’s full blast. He looked at the ceiling, took a deep breath, and then said in a meek voice. “I’ll tell you everything.”

Forty minutes later, Karen and Priya were in the newspaper’s conference room. They had discarded the earlier idea of accosting the reporter alone. Instead, they asked the reporter to join in straightaway. Gokhale asked him to spill the beans, and not hold back any information. The reporter said,

“Yesterday, I was at Amrita Bar at Taj Land’s End having my usual quota. Across me, at a table, were three young and good-looking women. Initially I was more interested in nursing my drink, but when I heard snatches of the conversation, I got interested and began to listen intently.” He paused for a sip of water.

“Go on.”

“They were speaking about reports they had heard of some politicians having been castrated. They dropped a few names too. I must add that they were rather happy while having this conversation.”

“And you took that as Gospel truth and filed a report.”

“I didn’t take it as Gospel truth but as juicy gossip, which is why it appeared on page 3.”

“Alright. Any idea who these women were?”

“No. I was seated at table 43 and they were at a table just across mine.”

Karan and Priya took leave and headed straight to Amrita Bar. After flashing their ID-cards, they asked for the bartender who was on duty that late evening. The bartender clearly remembered that evening since there was only one table, 45, that three women were having drinks. He recognised one of them as Sonya, a budding actor who had featured in the film, Kabhi *Aar Kabhi Paar* (KAKP). The next step suggested itself. The two sleuths took leave of the journalists, after thanking for their cooperation and telling Gokhale that he need not worry. A quick Google search gave them further information. Sonya Keni was the heroine of the film, and she was based in the US. Now she was in Mumbai.

Priya guessed that being an outsider, she might have checked into a city hotel. Where to begin the search, was the question. She decided to begin from the shorter list — that of seven-star hotels. After having drawn a blank in her first four calls, she got lucky with the fifth, the Taj. Yes, the receptionist said, a Sonya Keni was their guest. And the suite had been booked on her behalf by the well-known producer Manav Sinha.

It was already eight in the evening and Karan suggested that they pay her a visit the following day. But Priya said that they do so immediately; after all, there was no guarantee when she would check out. They decided to take a chance and pay her an unannounced visit. Luck was on their side, as the receptionist told them she was in her room. A message was sent across to her that a gentleman and a lady wished to meet her at the hotel’s coffee shop immediately.

Sonya was taken aback. She was not expecting any visitors. Nor was she in a mood, after the incident with Nitin, to talk to strangers. But she was curious and, therefore, decided to come down. Who knows, she thought, some producer or director wanted to sound her for a film. But that hope was dashed after Karan and Priya introduced themselves and told her gently that they wanted more information about her meeting with the two other women friends of hers.

“What do you want to know?”

Priya took the lead. “We know that you were at Amrita Bar with two other women. Who were they?”

When she hesitated, Priya showed her the Page 3 report. Sonya read it quickly and said, “This does not prove anything.”

“Leave the proving to us,” Karan chipped in.

She kept silent. The bombardment continued. Priya asked, “Did the castration really happen?”

Sonya was silent.

“Let’s assume it did. So, who did it, and where?”

She was now feeling truly ambushed. These people had come well prepared. Should she tell them about the Castrator, about her ordeal, and that of her friends? But she was thinking on her feet. They don’t know who else was with her at the table. She decided to give an answer that could be construed either way, and she retorted back, “I wish it had!”

The words came out in a torrent - “I am here because an A-list producer asked me to fly down for a screen test. I have given that test and am hoping to get the film assignment. But soon after the test, I was asked to meet a top actor in his room and became the victim of casting couch.” Tears welled in her eyes and she broke down.

Priya and Karan were stunned. They had heard of the casting couch phenomenon, and now they were face to face with a victim. They waited for a few minutes to allow her to compose herself. Before they could calibrate their response, Sonya received a call from Preeti. She cut the call and texted her that she would return the call later.

The IB officers had got what they needed and took their leave. While going out, Priya patted Sonya gently on the shoulder. As a woman, she understood her plight.

# How Sex, Sleaze and Slush came together

Mike ushered his two ace detectives in his office chamber. It being a weekend, there were few people around. Karan and Priya settled down in their usual chairs and briefed their boss on their Mumbai trip. They had a lot to tell and made sure that nothing, even the seemingly most insignificant bit, was left out. Much to Mike’s amusement, Priya even gave an elaborate account of the clothes the editor and the reporter had worn. She also offered an objective perspective on Sonya but could not refrain from also expressing her sympathies with her. Mike frowned; there was little scope for emotionalism in their profession. But he knew that Priya would not be unduly swayed by her feelings.

“Sir, we now have a good idea of how the gossip appeared in the paper. We also know of the people from where the reporter picked the juicy information. There cannot be smoke without fire.”

Priya chipped in, “Also sir, it appears there is somebody going around castrating certain politicians. We can hazard a good guess.”

Mike remained silent for a while. He stared at a pile of papers before him and asked, “How much do you people know about the cricket premier league that is played under the aegis of the Indian Cricket Board?”

The two were taken aback. What had cricket got to do with Indian politicians losing their libido? Why had Mike raised the issue out of the blue? But they knew better than to question their boss. He never said anything without purpose. There must be some link.

Karan said, “Nothing much, other than the match-fixing angle.”

Mike leaned forward and stated, “What I am going to say will remain within the confines of this room. Not only because of its super-sensitivity but also because I have no real evidence of some of things I am going to relate.”

Suspense hung in the air as Karan and Priya waited with bated breath. “I have been a spy for long and have often worked on hunches. I am sure that you two also have, at times, and realised that they were true.”

He took a sip of water and continued, “In many ways, our country still remains rooted in the era of kings where those who ruled were always part of the royalty by way of succession. The king would be succeeded by his brother or his son, and so on.”

Karan and Priya were mystified. The last thing they were expecting on a weekend was a lecture by their chief on history.

“I know you are wondering why I am talking history,” Mike said, reading their thoughts. “I am not speaking of history but the present. Have you not noticed how seamlessly progenies of politicians, film personalities and industrialists enter the professions of their parents? They get a VIP entry, without the struggles that the common man has to undergo to make a mark — even to survive.”

Karan and Priya made polite noises, still clueless on where the monologue was leading to.

Mike continued, “At least in the film industry or even in business, if a family member is not up the mark, he or she is relegated to the side-lines. But politics is different. Family members of a politician think they have a birth right to political status, even if they are repeatedly found to lack the ability.”

Mike rang the bell and ordered tea. He had requested his driver to do a tea run. He looked at his two officers with a gleam in the eye and said, “I shall now come to the present. Not too many years ago, our democratic system threw up leaders from the grassroots who had no godfather or godmother in politics. They made it big. Take the case of Lal Bahadur Shastri, or Charan Singh, or Morarji Desai. Whatever their faults, they did not enter politics by the strength of their family name. Now, consider Dipika Sharma. Take away the fact that she happens to be the granddaughter of the country’s first Prime Minister, and she is a nobody. That remains her only asset. Her success led other politicians, more so from her party, to also promote their kith and kin. Nobody could question them without first casting aspersions on Dipika — and that none could dare do.”

He took a deep breath and went on, “Dipika came to politics riding on her family’s name but that was not enough. She had to survive and for that she needed, besides loyalty of her party leaders, money. And lots of it. Money was essential to checkmate veterans like Raja Rao, who was both shrewd and a dyed-in-the-wool Indian politician. She also had to contend with Mama-ji who had outsmarted Bhim Singh. Though Mama-ji had been useful to her as a fund-raiser for the party and for her personally, she realised that he had to be cut to size before he grew too big for his boots. Maida too had begun to rise up the ladder, and with that his ambitions also began to grow wings. All these politicians were flush with money and never hesitated to use financial leverage to get their way. Dipika needed to match their money prowess.”

Karan and Priya were listening intently. Mike said, “Now I come to the cricket part. You have heard of match-fixing and spot-fixing in the premier league matches, ODIs and Tests. Years ago, the world of cricket was stunned by revelations that certain iconic players had participated in match-fixing. These players were from abroad as well from India, and they were cast aside in disgrace by their respective cricket boards. Fortunately, there were more clean cricketers than the rogue ones, and the reputation of cricket was restored over a period of time. India registered some stunning victories which helped in pushing the murky past in the background.”

“But the problem returned,” Priya said.

“That’s right.” Mike thumped the desk.

“A few years ago, Mama-ji became the chief administrator of an important state cricket association. Always on the lookout for ways to line his pockets, he plotted the return of fixing in matches, though in more sophisticated ways. He had learnt from the past. The Bharat Cricket League, although short-lived, threw up immense possibilities. He roped Manohar Munim in whom he saw the same buccaneering spirit. The rest, as they say, is history.”

“So, Mama-ji is kingpin?” Karan asked.

“He is the chief person. But there are others in the game. I have reasons to believe that Maida too is involved neck-deep.”

“Our Boss himself!” Karan sucked in his breath.

“Mind you,” Mike continued, “I have no concrete evidence, but I am sure of it, going by the inputs I have received from my sources.”

“But why is he involved?”

“Making money for self is one reason. But he has also roped in other political bigwigs. I have been told that Dipika and her close associates have put in money where Maida recommended. As many as three premier league cricket teams have huge investments from Dipika and her family and friends. But yes, as I said before, Mama-ji is the real kingpin. He has collaborated with the Dubai-based Don, Dilawar, who has been entrusted with the dirty job of compromising players and members of the cricket management, including coaches and fitness trainers.”

Karan interjected, “You are saying that a cabal is controlling the game of cricket today?”

“Absolutely. It is not just a coincidence that nearly every cricket association in the country is headed by a politician. Everyone has a finger in the pie, and when policymakers are involved, who is going to blow the whistle?”

“So people bet on match outcomes that are pre-determined,” Priya added.

“Yes, the common betting ones don’t know. The ones in the know bet on the ‘right’ side and make a pile of cash.”

“Sir, I knew about the betting racket but never realised it goes so deep,” Karan said, and added, “We must do something about it.”

“Yes. And so, Karan, I congratulate you on your new assignment. You will go to the UAE as the Deputy Attaché for Cultural Affairs.”

“What?!”

“Your post will allow you to travel through all the seven emirates of Arabia, but you will be based in Dubai. Incidentally, the Indian Consul General there is a college mate of mine.”

“Have you told him, sir, about this, er…?” Priya asked.

Mike glared at her, scandalised. She quickly muttered, “Sorry!”

“How did you manage the political bosses?” Karan wondered.

Mike guffawed. “I have ways. By the way, you must have been wondering all this while what this all has to do with the obscene email and castration report issues?”

Both Karan and Priya grinned sheepishly.

“They are all linked. How, is for you to find out. That will be your real task. The rest of your routine duties is just ornamentation. Priya will be your point-person in India. Remember, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Be careful and watch your back. We shall have conference call twice a week on a secure line. Meanwhile, Priya will continue to dig for information at the India end. Good luck to both of you.” Mike stood up to indicate that the meeting was over.

Just as they are leaving, the IB chief called out to Karan and said with a twinkle in his eye, “And don’t forget to give your best to your stated duty of promoting and showcasing India’s cultural civilisation across the UAE — unity in diversity etc.”

# Karan settles into dubai

A few days later, Karan was on board an Air India flight to Dubai. He travelled business class. He was met at the airport by an embassy official who briefed him on the essentials, on their drive to his new residence. The house was modest but well-equipped. After a quick shower and change of clothes, Karan was ready to be driven down to his new office. It was a sprawling complex, and he was pleasantly surprised to note that he had a spacious chamber to himself. It had all the necessary amenities, including a secure line. He did a quick check of the connection and settled down to his work.

A pleasant looking female employee materialised and introduced herself as his assistant. She settled down in a visitor’s chair and began to brief him on his job. It was close to two hours before he took a break. He was impressed by her efficiency. Karan had begun to seek some harmless-sounding information.

“When politicians come visiting, where do they stay?”

“Most of them prefer to stay at one of the two major seven-star hotels in Dubai, the Burj Imarat and the Burj Al Arab Jumeirah. On official visits they are entitled to only relatively less expensive hotels. But they have ‘friends’ who arrange for their stay in these seven-star hotels and take care of the hefty payments. The government of India does not come into the picture.”

“What about the bureaucrats that accompany them?”

“A select few senior officers are also housed in these hotels, though they are put up in different floors that are less expensive. The ministers enjoyed stunning views of the Persian Gulf from their plush suites, and much more.”

Karan raised an eyebrow, as if to ask her to continue. She did not. There was an awkward silence for a few seconds. Karan then stood up and thanked her for her help. She did not make eye contact as she left his office. “Something there…” he told himself.

He was put in touch by Mike with a veteran officer of the Research & Analysis Wing (RAW), which is the external intelligence agency of the government of India. His name was Krishan Kant and he had put nearly four decades in service, first as an officer in the Indian Police Service (IPS) and later, on deputation to RAW. Krishan Kant was an easy-going man at this stage of his life and career; he had only a few months left to retire. In his heyday, he had the reputation of being a feisty officer who had cracked many complicated cases. Mike had cautioned Karan against pushing the RAW official too hard. He had said, “The man is about to retire and would be in no mood to wade into controversies.”

Krishan Kant was a portly man who did not easily carry his weight. He huffed and puffed as he walked or sat down, and his breath rose and fell as he spoke. On the day he met Karan, he was dressed in loose white shirt and dark grey trousers, which seemed to be in urgent need of a press.

Karan asked him innocently, “Sir, how do you track the movement of Indian VIPs who visit Dubai? it must be really cumbersome particularly when IPL matches or other such high-profile cricket tournaments featuring India are hosted here.”

The RAW official looked condescendingly at the young man, almost half his age. “it’s quite simple,” he said. “The visits of politicians and bureaucrats are taken care of through requests that come from India’s External Affairs Ministry, and so we know who comes and who leaves from among them. Others, such as film personalities and the rest, arrive here with proper documents and their stay is taken care of by the organisers and producers. Security and logistics are their responsibility, and we step in only when there is some glitch.”

“Fair enough. I am sure you must be having your hands full given the fact that the stream of people coming from India is never-ending. But what about the private flights that land here?”

“What about them?”

“I was told that there are off-the-books flights. They take off from private airstrips in New Delhi and land at private airstrips in Dubai. Surely you must be having a list of all such flights and their occupants. Can you give me the details pertaining to the last six months?”

Krishan Kant fidgeted. He was clearly uncomfortable. “This issue is handled at the level of the Consul General. I don’t have the details, but I suppose the arrangements are made by the officials concerned.”

Karan realised that the man knew more but was not forthcoming. At least for now. He thanked Kant and went out. He had two options to proceed. One, talk to the Consul General. And two, deploy some other sleuthing technique. He was not too sure about approaching the Consul General this early; the man may be unduly alerted. Karan observed that the parking lot was packed with several private limousines which the consulate was apparently using on hire. The next step suggested itself. He would go through some of the past expense reports, identify the limousine hire firms, and engage in casual talk with their low-level staffers, including the drivers. Often, such people are a mine of information which they are only too ready to share in lieu of a proper reward.

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Meanwhile, in India, Priya had got cracking. She surfed for information on various websites in Dubai and discovered that most of these located in and around the Al Quoz Industrial Area, which was not too far from the international airport. She began to gather further information from thereon. In a couple of days, she had done the groundwork. The email must have originated from this area.

Imperial Luxury Cars was run by a wealthy Sindhi businessman who went by the name of Hingorani. His parents had migrated to Dubai at the time of partition. Initially, the family was into the bullion business but as the demand for gold declined with the opening of markets in India, the Hingoranis branched out into the service sector. Dubai had just begun on its boom ride and the present-day Hingorani, who had joined the business, latched on to the opportunity.

Soon he had brought in other members of the family into the business. Over the years, he had built excellent contacts with not just the business world but the Indian consulate as well. Besides limousines, the Hingorani family also provided state of the art private helicopter service. Needless to say, his client list comprised the who’s who of Dubai.

But the Hingorani family’s involvement with the gold trade, much of it illegal, had not altogether ended. The business empire still controlled a fair amount of gold that went into India. Besides, they were involved into arbitrage of the precious yellow metal at the Dubai Commodities Exchange. Since so much of their business involved money, the family had prudently cultivated the Freedom Party Ministers over several years. They were the go-to guys when a Minister wanted something off the books (like parking a huge bribe in a tax haven) and needed to fly down to Dubai to sign papers and indulge in a bit of R & R.

Karan gleaned all this information by chatting with one of the overworked but nice-to-talk-to travel desk guys. He was also directed to a most helpful chauffeur of the company, Ramavatar Singh who, apparently, was a favourite of many a visiting VIP.

Karan called up him, posing as a previous client. “I think I left behind my phone in the car you had picked me up from.”

Ramavatar replied “I have half a dozen similarly unclaimed phones… Can you identify yours?”

Karan had to think on his feet. He came up with the gem, “I don’t remember if my cell phone had a cover or not, but if we can meet somewhere for coffee, I should be able to identify my phone out of the lot,” Ramavatar agreed to meet at a Starbucks located halfway.

After going through the phones and shaking his head in dismay, Karan deftly shifted the conversation. “I have heard that you are a favourite of many VIPs whom you ferry. Is that true?”

Ramavatar was pleased. “That’s right, sir.”

Boastfully, he rattled off the names of politicians, businessmen, actresses and sportspersons who had landed at the private airport and used his services. Karan went over the names from his slim logbook, which the driver had kept in his pocket. It listed in detail the name, date and time of arrivals and departures of the VIPs at the private air strips. It was an opening Karan wasn’t expecting this soon.

Among the names listed were that of Girgut, Maida, Rocky and Mama-ji, all of whom had used the private airstrip to make quick dashes to Dubai and back in recent months. In addition, there were a dozen or so models and actors — male and female — as well as sports personalities, both players and senior management staff. While the information was great, Karan wondered how they all added up in the great conspiracy. The task before him was going to be a formidable one.

# Maker in a jam

Karan’s so-far short stay in Dubai was beginning to deliver results. He had briefed Mike and Priya via the secure line on the information that he had dug up. They now had nearly every bit of information regarding the visit and duration of stay of VIPs in the UAE, especially those that had come by private jets and landed at private air strips. They also knew where these high-profile personalities stayed and the people they met, at least in the open.

The IB chief was pleased but also cautious. “Understand, Karan, that this is just the beginning. There is a long way to go before we are able to cross the t’s and dot the i’s. Keep your eyes and ears open.”

“By the way, Maker would be visiting Dubai. Coinciding with that trip would be the arrival of Manohar Munim (2M), who would land in Dubai from Europe on his way back home. He would be using the service of a private jet. Track their movements,” Mike added and ended the call.

By now, Karan had developed an extensive network of contacts in the two premier hotels of Dubai. It did not take him long to find out that both Maker and 2M would be staying at the Burj Al Jumeirah, and plush suites had been booked for them. The hotel did not have ‘rooms’; only suites starting at 1850 square feet and going up to 8000 square feet. He did not even bother to calculate the tariff. It was too mind-boggling for him to comprehend. Both Maker and 2M were rich, but why pay for these suites when their beneficiaries were willing to go the extra mile? Plus, the anonymity. The question was: Who was footing the bill, and why?

It was no coincidence that both Maker and 2M would be in Dubai at the same time. It was well-planned and the agenda of the meeting was of prime importance. Maker had been chosen to represent the interests of Dipika Sharma and her coterie who had invested in a newly floated firm, Global Sports Totale (GST). Maker’s share was 26 per cent while the rest was held by Dipika’s proxies. it was one of three new companies that had cropped up in recent weeks, and they would be bidding for the two new teams that would join the cricket premier league. The other two firms were The Ambhuj Group (TAG) based in Gujarat and Desserts Unlimited (DU). DU had already publicly made it known that it would quote an exorbitant rate (it gave the figure even, confident that it could not be outbid) and that it is certain to win the rights over one team even before the auction began. The competition was now between GST and TAG to bag the second team. Since Maker’s plan could not succeed without 2M’s cooperation, he had sought this meeting.

2M had been intrigued by Maker’s request for an urgent meeting.

“2M, we must meet! There are several loose ends that need tying up!”

“Hi Bro. Why can’t we tie them over emails and phone calls?”

“It is ah… a delicate matter. There are some things I must explain to you in person, things that involve a certain amount of finesse… you catch my drift?”

“Such as?”

“As I mentioned, this has to be done face to face. Much depends upon how certain events play out in the public. Things should not only be fair but appear to be fair.”

“Fair enough,” agreed 2M. “Let us meet in Dubai. I usually stay at the BAJ. What about you?”

“Same place. See you soon. My guys will get in touch with your guys on the logistics.” Maker needed to remind 2M that he was a Central Minister.

“Yeah, right!” 2M told himself. The same haughty breed of *netas* will come begging come election time. As much as he needed the goodwill of the *netas*, one side of him despised them.

Protocol demanded that 2M meet Maker at the minister’s suite.

“How is my friend from the land of the Queen?” Maker welcomed him enthusiastically.

“Doing well and the Queen sends her regards,” quipped 2M.

“Ha ha! What’s your poison? Wine, Whisky or …?”

“Beer will do fine.”

“So, I wanted to have a tete-a-tete with you on the matter of the expansion teams.”

“Umm, we already went over that.”

“Yes, but now some new players have come in and are also interested in taking a stake. I have a friend who is putting together the Cap tables. She is hard at work, lining up funding, getting the bank guarantees… you know the stuff.”

“OK…” Munim wanted to draw out the Minister.

“Now here is the strategy…”

Maker laid it out in detail and showed how no matter who won the auction, his stakeholders got their percentage stake.

“Sheila Kaul, my friend, is burning midnight oil (she was sleeping in the adjoining bedroom, having enjoyed a hot session of sex with Maker, who wasted no time after checking in) to pull in all the things together.” He too needed the blue pill, which had become the essential companion to those suffering from Erectile Dysfunction to the studs in the porn industry.

2M took a cursory look at the Cap tables. Wow! Sheila was getting a hefty chunk and it was all sweat equity.

“Bro, this is potent. Are the Cap tables final? Are all the bank guarantees ready?”

“Yes.”

“Please submit them well before the deadline so my team has a chance to cross the t’s and dot the i’s.”

Maker was silent. He wanted to communicate to 2M that he was dealing with a Minister of the Government of India. He knew fully well that he himself would ensure that the papers are submitted in the nick of the time.

2M stood up and said, “I look forward to hearing from your team. Best of luck.”

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The bidding took place with great pomp and show, and it was telecast live in all countries whose players were participating in the Indian cricket league. Earlier, the financial status of the two new teams had been scrutinised by a team of professionals, and they had red-flagged many serious concerns. In their opinion, the teams ought not to be added to the league.

But the cricket board set aside their concerns, arguing that since the teams were new, they were in the process of working out the details. The board was assured that by the time the tournament began, the teams would have sorted out the problems. The professionals could not do much since their services had been requisitioned only in an advisory capacity.

Not surprisingly, GST won the bid, leading to a furore in TAG’s camp. The TAG management cried foul and raised questions behind closed doors on the holding pattern of the winning bidder. They wondered how Maker managed the funds for the 26 per cent stake, which was, incidentally, in the name of Shilpa Kaul. The stake amounted to a hefty Rs.60 crores. Questions were also raised about Shilpa Kaul. What was her *locus standi*, other than being Maker’s friend? What was her contribution to GST?

Since the bidding had been telecast live, television channels aired the developments in real time while the print media splashed the news the following day in their editions. But all hell broke loose later that day after the TAG management addressed a Press conference, raised serious questions about GST and accused the Indian cricket administration of favouritism. The newspapers, always on the lookout for scandalous stuff on the management of Indian cricket, splashed the allegations on their front pages. Fingers began to be pointed publicly at Maker.

Among the people keenly following the developments was Maida. He had always considered Maker as a potential opponent for three good reasons. One, he could match Maida in money power. Two, he was as cunning and unscrupulous as Maida. And three, he was seeking to displace Maker from Dipika’s inner circle. This was a good opportunity to get even. He dialled up his favourites in the media and leaked out damaging information on Maker’s connection with the irregularity. More importantly, he also added that Maker had ‘misled’ Dipika Sharma and her friends into dirtying their hands in the deal. He did not provide more material on his last apprehension but promised to give more later. The part about Dipika was not to be mentioned – it was merely to illustrate the gravity of the situation. But media did what it usually does.

Once the newspapers carried his information, credited to “sources high up in the government and the ruling party,” Maida quickly sought and got an appointment from Dipika at her residence. He came straight to the point.

“Madam, this GST thing is very disturbing. It will harm your image.”

“I don’t know how the media got this information about my involvement. Of course, it’s untrue!”

“No doubt it is untrue!” Maida said emphatically. “I am not making any allegation, but it is possible that Maker, in order to wriggle out of the mess, threw in your name.”

“You think he would do that?”

Maida maintained a diplomatic silence.

Dipika thought to herself: Maker would not dare do that. He had too much riding on the deal. Aloud, she said, “Let me think it over.”

After Maida left, she called up Maker. She was not worried by the knock his reputation was taking, but the impact it would have on her. Something had to be done to mitigate that impact and send a positive signal to the people.

She told Maker, “I know that you have not failed me. But the scandal is threatening to go out of hand. You must tender your resignation. I will soon find some way to rehabilitate you.”

“But madam…”

“No ifs and buts, Maker. I have made up my mind.”

The following day, Maker addressed a Press conference in which he rebutted all the charges levelled against him. He then added, “I have been deeply disturbed by the accusations. I would rather uphold my reputation than my ministerial post. On an issue of principle, therefore, I have sent in my resignation letter to the Prime Minister with a request it be accepted with immediate effect. I shall continue to serve the party and its leader with all the dedication at my command.”

A few days later, the media reported that Maker had divorced his wife and married Shilpa Kaul. Kaul, also a divorcee, put her Canada business on hold and settled down in the country of her origin. Meanwhile, reports of the GST team being in dire straits proved to be true. The team played just one tournament before it was thrown out for failure to pay its dues to the cricket board. A few months down the line, after the furore had died down, much to Maida’s dismay, Maker was reinstated in the ministry, albeit with a less important portfolio.

# Another series, another upset

For decades, cricket matches between India and the West Indies have drawn crowds in throngs. There is intense rivalry, but there is also respect and mutual admiration. The West Indian players are loved by the Indian audience for their sportsmanship. The reverse is also true. The West Indies team had in the last few years lost much of its sheen and was nowhere comparable to what it was in the seventies and the eighties.

Those were the days when it could boast of having iconic players like Gary Sobers, Clive Lloyd, Vivian Richards, Andy Roberts and Michael Holding. But the Indians too matched them, player for player, with their famed quartet of spinners — Bedi, Chandrashekhar, Prasanna and Venkataraghavan — and batsmen such as Sunil Gavaskar, G R Vishwanath, the swashbuckling Salim Durrani, and the brilliant wicket-keeping skills of Syed Kirmani.

Over the past couple of years, though, the West Indies team had managed a comeback of sorts and was seen as a far better composition that before. Given this background, the India-West ODI series underway in various Caribbean islands was a major attraction for cricket lovers not just in the two countries but across the cricketing playing nations in the world.

West Indies had proved its might in the first two matches, beating India comprehensively. But the Indian team made a stirring comeback to take the next two, one by a slim margin of 8 runs. All eyes were now on the fifth and deciding match at Kingston, Jamaica. The stadium was packed to capacity and the West Indian love for music and dance was reverberating all over. And the spot-fixing cabal was in action.

It had made arrangements for the West Indies to win the match and the series. Dilawar the Don could not afford to fail this time.

“At least three newspaper columns will appear predicting an Indian victory. TV experts will also aver an India win. Betting amounts will go through the roof. Therefore, if India go on to lose because of bad weather, they won’t be too many questioning the result and we will clean up big,” he explained to a *chamcha* (disciple) of Mama-ji.

The odds go up at the precise time when the toss report is coming in and a decision is yet to be made. So, when India won the toss, the cabal bet a lot of money on an India loss at that specific instant. Moments later, when it transpired that India decided to bat under overcast conditions, the odds started falling.

“That is a surprising decision by Viraj Verma,” observed a senior commentator.

The camera then panned to the Indian dressing room where the coach could be seen gesturing indignantly at his captain, but it was too late.

Experts in the commentary box began to furtively analyse the blunder and the extent it could cost the team. Their worst fears seemed to come true - with just a few overs bowled, India had lost five wickets for a paltry 38 runs on the board. The top batsmen had returned to the pavilion, barring Vijay Surya. Giving him company was the dashing wicket-keeper Shakti Kant.

Surya was going about his job as if nothing serious had happened, hitting the ball freely and giving the odd delivery the respect it deserved. He cleverly shepherded the tail and was the last man out, having scored 126 runs of his team’s total of 178. While he received a hero’s welcome as he walked back, with the sporting West Indian crowd loudly cheering his exploits, the Indian team was still not out of the woods. The score seemed too small to defend.

With the clouds darkening and the prospect of the Duckworth-Lewis system coming into effect later in the day, the West Indies decided to attack from the first ball to have a good strike rate. The game had to be halted for about twenty minutes following a sharp shower. By the time play resumed, the West Indian batsmen seemed to have lost momentum. Wickets began to fall at regular intervals and a prolonged shower with the Windies slightly behind on the D-L method stopped play for the day. India were declared the winner by three runs.

The betting mafia was biting its nails in frustration. The cabal had put in $250 million on the West Indies win — $100 million at the start of the match and another $150 million after the Indian batting collapse. Mama-ji had lost yet again, and the Don had lost face, once more. There would indeed be hell to pay.

If there was one person laughing all the way to the bank, it was Supremo. He had hit the jackpot for a second time in succession. He had taken a calculated gamble. After having been tipped off that the cabal had betted heavily on a West Indian victory, he had taken the opposite position. He seemed to know that there were people within who were determined to frustrate the mafia’s plans. Who had tipped him off? Who were his insider sources?

Supremo believed in doing the most important things himself, especially when it had to do with technology. He had known that Mama-ji was up to something. But there was no way he could tap his phone, even though he was conversant with the technology and ways to use it. These were legal matters; tapping phones without legal consent was a no-no. If he had done it and the matter leaked out, his career would be finished. But there were borderline ways to use technology. Supremo had tracked down the benami person through whom Mama-ji placed the bets. Mama-ji always used a secure line, but his benami, after placing Mama-ji’s bets, would use his personal mobile phone to place a few bets of his own, taking cues from Mama-ji. It was this open phone line that Supremo had targeted and extracted the information.

But that still did not explain how he won big on those two occasions – he had taken positions opposite to that of the cabal! That was because of his knowledge of the key players on each team and their strengths and weaknesses. He had reversed his positions in both cases after seeing a herculean effort by a player he knew was clean. This meant that the game would reach its “logical conclusion.” Ergo ka-ching!

He was shocked that Dipika had categorised acolytes as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ and kept both at a safe distance from another. She also played games, delighting in the rivalry. It was as if there were two universes for her and only she could move between the two seamlessly.

He had no qualms about the financial gains he had registered as a consequence of his sleuthing, despite the fact that Mama-ji and he had established a rapport with each other. Mama-ji was always awed by the brainy types, and Supremo impressed him by his knowledge of ancient scriptures, contemporary history, and technology. Mama-ji was aware that, having been Rao’s protege, Supremo was no pushover, and therefore he had taken pains to cultivate him. After all, Rao had won the race to prime minister ship, leaving Mama-ji behind.

It was one of those many conversations the two recently had, which had alerted Supremo. Mama-ji had let slip, perhaps inadvertently, that he was part of a big group which contributed to the finances of Dipika’s family and friends. Or maybe he had said it knowingly in order to impress the other person. Whatever the case may have been, Supremo took the hint and used it to his advantage.

Meanwhile, a fuming Dilawar swung into action. He ordered a forensic audit into the actual beneficiary of the Indian victory. But the bookies, who worked for the Don, emphatically said they had not accepted any bets from anyone outside of the cabal. Most of the betting was done online, from locations in the UK, Monaco, Macao, and other tax havens, including the state of Nevada in the US. Since the amounts were relatively small, they did not attract the attention of authorities. “Whoever had done the cross-betting,” Dilawar said to himself, “had planned and layered it well.”

# Jogi confronts Rocky

Rocky had begun to feel more confident after the rather pleasant encounter with his socialite friend. Not only had she suspected anything — at least she did not give any indication — but he had also been vindicated about his manliness. A fleeting thought did enter his mind that she might have found his uncharacteristically abrupt departure odd, but then he had provided her the reason. And had she cared to cross-check; she would have found that he had indeed been out-of-station for a couple of days. It was a few months since a part of his body had miraculously been severed, and he was learning to live with the reality. Then, something began to happen.

Rocky was a sound sleeper. In fact, he prided himself on going off into deep slumber the moment he hit the bed. But that night, he tossed and turned in his expansive bed. He felt restless. Something was amiss but he could not put a finger to the problem. It happened the following night, and the night after that. For six nights, Rocky was similarly tormented. He could not ignore it anymore, and called up his doctor-friend, Arvind.

“Doctor, Rocky here. I need your help.”

“Is everything all right?”

What a fool, Rocky thought. Would he care to waste time talking to the man if everything had been fine!

“I am having difficulty in getting sleep. Initially I thought it was an aberration, but then the condition has persisted over the last one week or so. I need some medication.”

Alarm bells began to ring in Dr Arvind’s mind. Could it be the side-effect of castration? He was not certain and decided to probe. “What have you done so far to counter it?”

“I tried everything. A glass of wine, a peg of whisky, a shot of rum… Nothing has worked.”

“It could be withdrawal symptoms.”

“Withdrawal from what?”

“Have you experienced *Sargam* lately?” *Sargam* was the codeword between them for a sexual encounter.

Rocky thought back to the time spend with the socialite. he said confidently, “Yes, and everything was okay.”

“Hmm.”

“What could be wrong, doctor?”

“I cannot say offhand, and I don’t want to guess. I will prescribe some sedatives and a small dose of testosterone. Try them for a few days and let me know. And restrict your activities to a bare minimum. You understand what I mean?”

“Yes.”

Doctor Arvind emailed him a prescription. Soon he would know if the problem was more than just a withdrawal symptom.

Rocky did not let go. In an agitated state, he opened his laptop and began to surf for material on castration and its side effects. What he read did not bolster his confidence. Castration in some, led to increased body fat, decreased muscles, anaemia, and all other sorts of medical complications. As he read, he realised that sleeplessness was only a manifestation. He was actually feeling weak, as if all energy had drained out of his body. The muscles were aching like they were being denied the necessary oxygen. That night proved to be even worse than the previous ones. A throbbing pain had gotten hold of him. He had to see Dr Arvind at the earliest.

Parliament was in session and Rocky got out of his car at the entrance. He was still groggy eyed from the lack of sleep. But with the Press around and tracking the arrival of heavyweights like him, he had to put up a cheerful front. He gave a wide smile, waved, rather exaggeratedly, at the media personnel, and walked as if he had no care in the world. He wanted to enter in quickly and avoid the glare of journalists but was thwarted in his plans by Jogi, who too happened to alight at the gate the same time. The Press photographers rushed in and requested the two for a group photograph. Both leaders stretched their hands and embraced each other.

Rocky was glad when they finally entered Parliament. Jogi struck up a conversation, something that Rocky had wanted to avoid. “How are you, my friend?’

Rocky flinched at the ‘friend’ reference, but smiled gamely and replied, “Fine, fine! How about you?”

Jogi said mischievously, “I cannot say that I am as good as you are. After all, I haven’t seen anything in recent times to arouse passions.”

Rocky stared at him and did not respond.

Jogi changed track and said, “Can we have dinner tonight? I have something to share with you about Maida.”

Dinner with Jogi was the last thing he wanted, but Rocky’s interest was aroused by the reference to Maida.

He said, “Sure. Let us meet at Bikaner House at 8 PM. It is a Private Members’ Bill day. We shall be free early.”

“Done.”

Bikaner House boasted of exquisite Rajasthani cuisine, served in a princely ambience. The place catered mainly to the political and business clientele, and the restaurants were tastefully decorated.

Jogi arrived about 15 minutes late, knowing fully well that ministers tend to run late. He was just settling in when Rocky walked in. They found a quiet corner and plonked into comfortable seats, ordering hors d’oeuvres. They told the waiter to take his time as they were in no hurry. The waiter was an experienced man and left them alone. Each got a glass of chilled strong beer to start with. After an exchange of pleasantries and the latest gossip doing the rounds, Rocky came to the point.

“You said that you wanted to talk something about Maida. What is it?”

Jogi smiled. Rocky would not have come easily merely for the sake of socialising with him. Maida was the magnet. Jogi had figured out that the journalist Richa had been sent to him by Maida to dig out information after he had asked the question about castration in Parliament. Jogi also knew about Rocky’s porn surfing in the House. What had further aroused his interest was the Page 3 story. All indications pointed to Rocky being a victim, or one of the victims. Jogi decided to adopt a diplomatic approach.

“Maida has been sniffing around, wanting to know why I asked that question…”

“How do you know?”

“He had sent the journalist Richa on a camouflaged mission. She came to me with the excuse of wanting to do a profile story on me as part of a series on Lok Sabha heroes — those that have performed well in the House. She pumped me hard on that information. Of course, I said nothing.”

“You know, I have been thinking about this for some time. Had I asked that question myself, my party high command would have been upset.”

“I understand that. I can put two and two together.”

“Meaning?”

“You were caught watching porn in Parliament. Then there was the Page 3 story. I know the feeling.”

Rocky’s heart sank. He had been underestimating Jogi all this while. Thankfully, Jogi did not say anything about Rocky’s castration. After a brief silence during which he tried to gather his thoughts, he said,

“I don’t know why you are telling me all this, Jogi. It is true that I had requested you to ask that question. But there was no hidden motive.”

“That’s what you say.”

Silence followed. Then Jogi smiled and said, “Forget it. I just thought I would tell you what Maida was up to.”

“Thanks a lot for that. Don’t worry about me. I am fine.”

Jogi looked at him sceptically but did not respond.

They had their meals in silence, punctured by small talk, and went their own ways.

But not before Jogi had the final word: “I feel sorry for the poor bastards who had all their private parts chopped off. I wonder who did it and why.”

Rocky blurted out, “No. Only the testicles were removed.”

Game. Set. Match. Quod erad demonstrandum.

Jogi moved in for the kill. “I could forget it if say, two million dollars were to be deposited into this account of mine,” he said, thrusting a piece of paper into Rocky’s hands.

“Don’t look so shocked! You made five million on the last deal — this is a fair amount. There is happiness and peace of mind in sharing. By the way, the offer is valid for 24 hours, after which my memory will come flooding back.”

# The guessing game heats up

The movers and shakers of Lutyens’ Delhi were in a tizzy ever since the Page 3 report had appeared. All sorts of guesses, wild and educated, were being flung about. Everyone wanted to know if the report was true, and if so, who the victims were. There was salacious delight in the guessing game. Meena Thakkar was a busy woman indeed. Her WhatsApp group was working overtime. Despite having any concrete information, everyone in the group weighed in and were playing a guessing game. Many of them wanted to throw in names but restrained themselves for fear of legal consequences; instead metaphors were used. Nonetheless, enough hints and veiled references were being made in order to assist members of the group to identify the politicians who had lost their cojones.

The testosterone-driven *netas*, meanwhile, were in a quandary. Should they continue with their acts that had invited the consequences? What if something more were to happen as a result? On the other hand, if they suddenly ‘reformed’, that too would arouse suspicions. After all, nearly everyone with whom they had struck up sexual liaisons — media persons, starlets and socialites — were well-informed about the gossip. Perhaps they too had made some intelligent guesses. A few of the victims threw caution to the winds and went ahead with their ‘business’; after all, what worse could happen to them physically, other than being dead! But others were more prudent, cutting down on their ‘activities’ and waiting for the storm to pass.

Maida, Dalda, Maker and Girgut were having coffee at the Parliament canteen. This was the first time that all of them were meeting after sharing the news that they had all got a similar obscene email. Maker was still seething from the grilling he had gone through by Preeti and Karan. He said officiously,

“Mr. Mailapore Damodaran! I must protest strongly about the way two of your minions from the IB treated me. The gall! The cheek! Who were they thinking they were talking to? Treating me like a delinquent. I am appalled at their line of questioning. Asking inappropriate questions about …”

He tailed off, realising that he was about to blurt out a woman’s name, which would only get him into a deeper mess. After his divorce settlement with his second wife, who was an American and had a shark for a lawyer working on the terms of separation (she wanted everything, and he wanted to give nothing), he was broke and needed to use some of his future income from the IPL team to make good on the settlement money. He needed money and needed it quick. Clearly, the investigation was not helping. He had started taking Valium to calm down. Plus, there were the diabetic tablets, and the blue pill to ensure virility when the occasion demanded. His pill box was filling up.

Maida tried to soothe him. “The IB people are capable and are looking into the matter. They are confident of tracking down the culprit. In fact, Karan has moved to Dubai to investigate it from the other end. He is making progress and as soon as something breaks, I will let you know. You don’t have to be hyper.”

“Hyper, my foot!” Maker snorted.

Girgut chimed in. “Maida-ji. The tension is killing me. The *Mumbai Minute* has printed this story. Even though it says it is a rumour, we know that it is true. I hope you catch the culprit soon. When I catch him, *“expletive,”* I will cut off the man’s balls myself!”

The way he uttered the Hindi expletive, Maida heard the name Ben Stokes. Why is Girgut recalling an English cricketer’s name, he wondered. In reply, he switched to his as-smooth-as-butter style, “We are on it, Girgut-ji. Be patient. You will be the first to know.”

To which Girgut replied with a mention of the English allrounder again, with greater feeling.

Dalda had been silently listening to the exchange. Now he butted in.

“Look, Maida, this is really serious. We must get to the bottom of the episode and bring it to an end. We all have many matters of grave importance that occupy our minds. How are we to concentrate on them when this Damocles’ sword hangs on our heads?”

“I fully appreciate,” Maida said. “I am, after all, in the same position that you are, and as eager to resolve it. The IB team will do its work. It’s not a question of ‘if’ but ‘when’. I must tell you, from the feedback I have got, that things are proceeding in the right direction.” The meeting ended.

Meanwhile, the WhatsApp group began to wonder why certain politicians had gone ‘underground’ — keeping away from their favourite pastime of sexual encounters. Nobody believed they had turned a new leaf. Something was up, they told one another.

Elsewhere, Jogi was pleased to receive the news that two million US dollars had been deposited in his account from some account located in a tax haven abroad. Rocky lives to fight another day, he thought to himself. Or, was it that Rocky lives to be tormented another night?!

# Karan edges closer

Karan had been making significant headway. He had collected a vast amount of material on the arrivals and departures of Indian VIPs to Dubai in recent months and saw that many of these coincided with the premier league cricket matches that were being played there. The tournament attracted not just high-profile leaders but also starlets and models. Karan had managed to draw some tentative links among these people, but the issue needed to be probed further. He was amused to note that these political VIPs, who always had their appointments books overflowing back home and had little time to even meet their constituents, found time to attend matches in Dubai.

He also noted, as he read the thick file before him, that the tournament and the arrival of celebrities also coincided with drug-induced wild parties and orgies that were organised discreetly for their benefit. This was the occasion where deals were struck, liaisons were made and women were bedded, either willingly or forcibly. The more Karan read the more he was disgusted. As he carefully went through the list, yet one more time, a pattern emerged before his eyes.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Date | Name of the VIP |
| April 7 | Giridhar Gulati (Girgut) |
| April 7 | Maker Funtoosh Wirewala |
| April 28 | R K Ranga (Rocky) |
| April 28 | Dalpat Dalvi (Dalda) |
| April 28 | Mailapore Damodaran (Maida) |
| April 28 | Maker Funtoosh Wirewala |
| April 28 | Madhav Mantri (Mama-ji) |

Why had so many of these turned up on April 28? It was the day the semi-final match was played. Millions of dollars must have been bet on the game. He was alert. Accusations of fixing had been going round the town for weeks, and it was entirely possible that some underhand deal might have been struck during the match. Had the match taken an unexpected and inexplicable turn? A team had snatched victory from defeat, or a team had plunged to defeat from a position of strength? Had easy catches been dropped that aroused suspicion? Had the umpires given decisions that were suspect? Had certain players been dropped or included for no rational reason? The questions were many, and Karan decided to investigate them all. He had to carefully go through the match recording and study the conduct of not just players but also those sitting in the VIP boxes in the stadium.

This was one track of the probe. The other was the obscene mail issue. He knew that Maida, Girgut, Dalda and Maker had received that offensive post. And they were all present in Dubai during the tournament. Mama-ji and Rocky too were there — had they also received the mail? Did they have any female company during their stay? He was adept at fishing out information even from the most reluctant people and decided to use his charms on some of the Burj’s staff.

He struck a rapport with some of the Indian-origin employees. They were charmed by his mannerism, his status as a cultural ambassador, and his interest in their little problems. One of them was having problems getting her daughter admitted to a good public school in Dubai, and Karan promised that the job would be done. Another had a boyfriend who was threatening to blackmail her with explicit photographs he had taken of them together, in case she did not shell out money that was beyond her known means of income. The police had been less than cooperative. Karan dialled up a high-ranking police officer and the man was rounded up.

But not everyone was buying it. Ruia Malik was one example. He was not sure if she was Indian or Pakistani. While polite, she made it known that disclosure of client information was against the hotel’s policy. He did not press her further.

He knew from conversations with Ramavatar that both Mama-ji and Rocky had been dropped off at the Burj, where they stayed. But he did not know the room numbers, nor was he aware of any special security measures that had been undertaken in those rooms. He could not hang around at the hotel for long. He was in one of its restaurants and had ordered a Budweiser and spicy nuts. While contemplating his next move, he overheard a conversation at a nearby table between two people. One seemed to part of the security department of the hotel while the other appeared to be a representative of a VIP guest.

The hotel security guy was explaining the security process in place. “All political VIPs are usually hosted in floors 81-83. These offer the best access since the express elevator skips all levels up to 81. It is easy to get in and out. Besides, the rooms offer the best view of Dubai.”

The customer's representative ought to have been impressed. But he was not. His mind was not on how easy it was to reach the floor or exit it. Nor was he too bothered by the ‘stunning views’. His mind was elsewhere.

He said, “That’s great. But the customer is looking for total privacy. He is a high-profile person who has no desire to be mobbed by admirers and self-seekers during his stay here. He has work to do, but he also wants to relax. I hope you understand what I mean.”

The security personnel gave a knowing grin. “Of course, I do. We routinely cater to such clients.”

“What I am looking for is total security. There will a select group of people who will visit the VIP. For reasons of privacy and national security, their movements should remain unknown to others.”

“That can be arranged. For complete privacy, we can switch off the CCTV cameras on the floor and switch it on when you want it back on. There will no jump in the recording in case somebody later decides to view it. We have software that takes care of the gaps.”

“Wonderful.” The VIP’s representative then told him the date of his boss’s arrival and together they proceeded to the counter that advance-booked the rooms.

Karan was delighted. He had the date of arrival, and he knew that security cameras could be compromised — and, thus, had been compromised in the past. All that he need now was the name of the VIP. Thereafter, he would have to find ways to monitor his movement as well as of those who visited him.

It was becoming clear to him that there existed a deep connection with a clutch of Indian politicians, the cricket league, the obscene mails and the castration report in the *Mumbai Minute*. Karan’s stay in Dubai was proving to be fruitful. He was hopeful that soon he would unravel the mystery and report the good news to Mike.

# Supremo retires from public life

Mama-ji was under intense pressure after the match fiasco. Dipika and Maida were livid and demanding answers. They were convinced that an insider had betrayed them. How else was it possible that their carefully laid plans had been sabotaged? The cabal followed the Omertà Code, but it also suffered from internal factionalism. At times, therefore, one section of the mafia leaked sensitive material to the media that had the potential to harm a rival group from within. It required Mama-ji’s carrot and Dilawar’s stick to keep the organisation disciplined. Mama-ji’s data operators, despite their sophisticated tools, had failed to track down the counterparty. Mama-ji decided to introduce a red herring to flush out the culprit.

The cricket premier league season was over, and it was time for the good old nation versus nation cricket contest. The Australian team would be touring India to play a seven-match ODI series. The Aussies were tough customers. They were ruthless in their approach and did not hesitate to play mind games. That they were fiercely competitive only added to the hype that had been created in the run-up to the matches.

It was time for Mama-ji to put his plan into action. He sent across the directive that there would be absolutely no fixing in the first few games. Let the best team of the day win, he announced. Of course, individuals were free to bet as they liked, but they would do so at their own risk since the outcome would not be ‘managed’. He himself placed bets through three benami proxies on the first four games, from agents in Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad. The outcome was random — the Delhi bets paid off in three games, but he lost in the fourth. The teams were tied at two games each after four matches were done with.

Meanwhile, Supremo too had been betting in much the same fashion and experiencing results similar to that of Mama-ji. The Don’s men, who had been closely monitoring the betting process, could not discover anything fishy, except that the bets placed from Delhi had generally generated better results.

Cricket experts, who were now all over in the media, were furtively analysing the outcomes. They were unanimous in saying that the series would go down to the wire. Both teams were equally placed. Vikas Mehta and Vijay Surya had been rested for the first two games, which India lost narrowly. When they returned in the next two, India won comfortably, with both players contributing significantly to the victory. While Vikas scored a quick twenty-ball forty, Surya had 67 runs to his credit from 50 balls. India went into match five as the favourite, a feeling that the cabal did everything to promote.

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India won the toss and elected to bat. The opening pair put on runs at a brisk place, and the first wicket feel at 64 on a delivery bowled by Mitch Kampanos. A left-arm swing bowler, he specialised more in swing than sheer speed. The one which scalped the Indian opener too had been pitched slightly outside the off stump. As the bat was about to make a full body contact with it, the ball swung, kissing the bat’s outer edge and going straight into the wicket-keeper’s gloves. The Delhi benami placed a bet on Mitch getting a hat-trick. Since Mitch had just one more delivery to bowl, he would have to take a wicket on his next delivery and then another one in the first ball of the new over that he would later bowl.

Vikas Mehta was the next man in. He seemed relaxed and confident. He gave one look at the field placements, took guard, had a final roving look at the fielders and waited for Mitch. He had been carefully analysing Mitch’s deliveries throughout the series - he was bowling mostly out swingers to the right-hand batsmen. He had also noticed that the bowler had a tendency to once in a while over-pitch that invited a robust response from the batsmen, who drove the ball into the boundary.

Vikas was trying to get into Mitch’s shoes and understand what he would bowl first. Vikas was by nature cautious and generally pushed the first ball he faced harmlessly away, restraining himself from playing a big shot. Mitch too was engaged in second-guessing the batsman’s mind. He knew that Vikas tended to be conservative with the first ball he faced and decided to trap him in his own game. He let loose a delivery that swerved in. Had Vikas been a little adventurous he could have possibly sent it for a couple of runs. But he sought to defend, and the ball hit his pad without coming into contact with the bat. A loud appeal for leg-before-wicket rent the air. He was given out. Vikas called for a review but that too went against the batsman; the ball was slated to hit the stumps. Two down. Mitch was on course for a hat-trick.

Supremo was watching the game intently on his television set. He got a text message on his mobile phone just as Vikas had come to bat, informing him that heavy betting was on over Mitch securing a hat-trick. He decided to bet against the hat-trick. After all, how easy was it for the technically sound Vikas and then Surya to get out the very first ball they faced? Only a slim chance. With Vikas walking back to the pavilion, he was a bit unsettled, though not rattled. After all, on a good batting track such as this, it was hyperbolic to imagine that Mitch would get his third consecutive wicket.

Vijay Surya happened to be the batsman to face Mitch as the bowler warmed up to the new over. He needed to scalp Surya in the first ball to register a hat-trick. There was hushed silence in the stadium. The home crowd had been shocked with Vikas’s first-ball dismissal, and it was now waiting to see if Mitch would get the honour he was looking for. He set an aggressive field — three slips and a gully. Another was at the short leg. Vijay wondered if Mitch was going to tempt him on the off side. Whatever, he had to remain calm and see through the delivery. It was in his interest and the interest of the team. If he managed to avert a hat-trick, it would be a psychological setback to Mitch.

The ball was pitched far outside the off stump, and Surya’s bat reached for it as if it was a magnet. He managed contact and the ball just about grazed the ground before being scooped up by the fielder at first slip. More out of habit than conviction, Mitch and the wicket keeper appealed. But to their utter surprise and to Surya’s horror, the umpire’s finger went up. The Indian team was dumbstruck. They had already exhausted their reviews. Mitch had got his hat-trick and the silence in the stadium was deafening. Multiple replays clearly showed the umpire had erred. But there was no putting the toothpaste back in the tube.

Mama-ji had finally got it right. He got in touch with his operators to find out if anyone had placed bets against the hat-trick and found that only a handful of them had done so. His techno-savvy sleuths traced the account from where the bets were placed. It was in the name of one Rameshwar Tiwari. Further investigations revealed an important name and he straightaway called up Dipika and said he wanted to share some important information with her.

He was surprised to see Maida join the meeting but kept his thoughts to himself. If Dipika wanted him there, so be it. He briefed her on the revelations. Soon after the meeting ended, she called up the Prime Minister and had a five-minute chat with him. Late into the night, the Prime Minister’s Office issued a Press statement that Mahadev Shastri (Supremo) was being relieved of his ministerial charges due to certain medical complications he had been diagnosed with. He would, in fact, be proceeding to the United States, at the New York Sloan Kettering Centre, for treatment.

Supremo was blissfully unaware of the developments as he had gone early to bed. His phone rang at 2 AM. It was a friendly editor who gave him the news. Shocked at the turn of events and still groggy-eyed, Supremo switched on the television set and heard the news for himself.

The newsreader was saying: “The Prime Minister has decided to relieve Mahadev Shastri of his ministerial responsibilities. The PM said that he was sad to take the step but that the health of his valued colleague was more important than anything else. He wished Shastri a speedy recovery and expressed hope that the sacked leader would continue to offer his valued services to the party as soon as he regained fitness. Party chief Dipika too conveyed her best wishes for his health.”

He was wide awake. Supremo brewed himself a *Kadak Chai* and settled down to think. He was single, healthy, and rich. Most of his money was stashed abroad and easily accessible. If he wished, he could spend the rest of his life in luxury, doing nothing. But that was not how he saw his future. He had to deal with the situation at hand. For that, he had two options.

One, call a Press conference and expose the party and the Prime Minister for the lie they had floated. The other was to leave for New York, get admitted in the hospital and return after a while, after having been declared ‘fit and fine’. The first action would mean that he would effectively burn his bridges with the party and Dipika Sharma. The second, although confirming the rumours about his health, held the possibility of a resurrection. He wasn’t too bothered about cutting ties with the party; he had enough means to lead a comfortable life. But he was interested in getting to the bottom of the conspiracy. Who had played dirty? He could do that by sustaining his links in the party and discreetly digging deep.

Supremo told the media that he was indebted to the Prime Minister and his party chief for having cared so much for his health. It was true, he said, that he had been keeping indifferent health and had asked the party chief and the Prime Minister to temporarily relieve him of his responsibilities. That said, he proceeded to New York and got himself admitted to the Sloan Kettering Centre. Before that he checked into the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in the city, called up a newspaper friend and asked him to cover his entry to and exit from the hospital. There should be clear video images, he added.

After spending a week in the hospital, he was discharged. Medical tests revealed a healthy body, with little to worry about. Back at his hotel room, he spent time catching up on his reading. This time he perused magazines such as *People* and *Popular Electronics*. Since an idle mind is a devil’s workshop, Supremo began to plot his next move. Soon, his mind was made up.

But first, he had a spiritual calling. He had always been a Shiva devotee. He had read about a *Dakshinamurthy* Temple (south-facing Shiva shrine) in the tiny island of Kauai in Hawaii. He called up his agent and organised a 12-month lease of an ocean-facing apartment in the town of Princeville, barely 20 miles from the temple. He flew from New York to Honolulu and then a mini hop to Kauai where he was received by the agent who managed his apartment. Supremo asked for a mid-size car rental for three months so he could move around the island.

His first visit to the temple blew him away. It was being maintained by a Shaiva *Adheenam* with an unbroken lineage of gurus going back 2,000 years. The temple was all granite but was not completed despite having all the sculptures, due to a lack of funds. The serene setting, the temple being lapped by the waters of the Wailua river and the as-yet to be installed *Spatika* (Crystal) *Lingam*, just amazed him. The tranquillity of the place, the setting and the rain-forest climate made him feel that he really belonged there. He spoke to the head of the temple, Swami Velananda, and decided to fund the rest of the construction right away. He also promised to be present for the *Kumbhabhishekam* and beyond.

In Lutyens’s Delhi, Supremo soon became history. He had simply disappeared. There was no news, barring that he had been discharged from the hospital and was recuperating. Supremo had given strict instructions to his agent to not reveal his whereabouts to anyone, more so the media. The Cabal had begun to feel safe. It could return to playing amongst itself, leaking a juicy tidbit or two and then coalescing when the whip was cracked.

# Priya, Karan are within touching distance

Karan needed to lay his hands on the video footage of floors 81-83 for the period April 27-29. But even his skills were not enough to achieve that on his own. He prepared a plan of action which he mailed through a secure server to Mike. A back story was created. An Indian minister who was on a visit to Dubai during that period, had misplaced some important official documents. The government of India was discreetly checking the hotels where he could have checked in and trying to find if the documents had been left there by mistake. The Burj was one such hotel he might have stayed at. The government of India wanted access to video footage of the floor where his suite was located, the people he met, the places where he went. And New Delhi would be indebted to the Dubai authorities if its request were met.

Mike took the plan to Maida for clearance. The request would have to be initiated by his ministry. Mike said that the information was essential to unravel the mystery of the obscene mail issue. Since Maida had already given the IB chief the go-ahead to untangle the conspiracy, he could not back out. But he was still alarmed. He too had visited Dubai on several occasions in the recent past and indulged in activities that he preferred to keep a secret. He had spent nights with beauties from India, Pakistan, and some Central Asian countries. If Karan went about digging material, he might stumble upon Maida’s hidden stuff.

But then he recalled that CCTV cameras would have been switched off, following explicit instructions he had given. He had nothing to fear. Maida looked at Mike and said, “This is rather irregular. But I suppose it is necessary to get to the bottom of the truth. I will soon send an official letter to the authorities in Dubai. Are you sure that it is a fool-proof plan?”

“Absolutely, sir. Official documents tend to get misplaced at times. We cannot allow them to fall into the wrong hands.”

“Hmm…”

After Mike left, Maida pondered over the issue. He asked his assistant to prepare the document. He felt like calling Karan and talking him directly. He was also worried about Castrator’s next step. Will he strike again, and who will be his target? After mulling for a few minutes, he decided against it. It would raise suspicion, since Karan would certainly inform Mike about the call, and Mike would begin to wonder what prompted the Minister to call his subordinate when he had already discussed the matter with him.

Of the many lessons Maida had learnt over the decades, remaining patient was among the most important. Undue haste could ruin the best laid plans. Strategies take time to fructify. He was now dealing with somebody clever, who had put fear in the minds of his colleagues who had taken ‘privileges’ for granted. Let the investigation proceed; he would wait.

Maida wanted the muck to be dug, while making sure his back was protected. He wasn’t really concerned about providing relief to his colleagues. On the contrary, he wished them to remain in fear. Once he had incriminating material against them, he would use it as and when it suited his interests. The likes of Girgut, Maker and Dalda were ruthless characters, always working to pull him down — and pull each other down too. Soon, the time will come when they will dance to his tunes. He smiled at the thought.

Four days after he had met with Maida, Mike called up Karan and informed him that the necessary papers had been forwarded to the Dubai authorities and the hotels too had been informed to cooperate but within the parameters of their privacy laws. Karan arrived the Burj with his own set of documents that cleared him the way ahead. He met the manager of the hotel who was courtesy personified. Karan explained the situation to him. “I need your assistance.” The manager had already been briefed. He said,

“We are willing to cooperate to the best possible extent. As a policy, we do not share our CCTV footage with anyone. But India is a friendly country, and the reason you have given appears genuine. You can go through the CCTV footage for the period specified by you, in one of our rooms, but we cannot allow you to take copies. As you know, we have high-profile guests, including heads of government, heads of state and monarchs. Their privacy and security cannot be compromised.”

Karan realised that it would be a herculean task for him to go through the footage on his own. Besides being time-consuming, there was a possibility that he might miss something. He needed another pair of eyes, and a sharp mind. There was none in the consulate that he could trust. He called up Mike on the secure line, updated him on the information and requested the services of Priya. Mike agreed and soon Priya was on her way to Dubai on a regular flight.

Karan received her at the airport and drove straight to the Burj Imarat where she was to be accommodated at government expense in a suite for an ‘assignment that was of utmost secrecy and pertaining to national security’. The room would also serve as makeshift office for the specified purpose.

The following day, Karan joined Priya for breakfast on the 154th floor of the Burj. Dining continental, they went over plans on how to go about looking at tons of video, what to look for, and record it (surreptitiously) for detailed checking later. They did not know what exactly it was they would be looking for, but they knew that there was a needle of evidence buried in the haystack. They were hard workers. All they needed was a bit of luck.

When Karan and Priya reached the Burj, they were pleased to find that the hotel’s chief of security himself had been deputed to coordinate with them. He was an imposing man — over six feet tall and athletically built. He had a warm smile and an apparently easy-going manner. When Priya remarked about his military bearing, he smiled and said he had been in the armed forces of the Emirates, having trained in the US. As they settled down to tea, he told them he was fluent in six languages, besides Arabic and English. With an almost childlike eagerness, he gave them a demonstration in each of languages. They were awestruck; he spoke those languages without any Arabic accent. And then, much to their pleasant surprise, he burst into a Hindi film song rendered by Mukesh — *Main pal do pal ka shaiar hoon*. They clapped in unison.

Soon, it was time for business. The Burj security chief pointed them to a room with a few monitors and a stack of DVD media that had the dates and times marked on them. Karan wanted to start from April 27th and work his way up to the 29th. He was looking for the usual signs of entry/ exit of the guests and their visitors but first, they had to locate the VIPs, which they were hoping would be Mama-ji, Rocky, Girgut, Dalda and Maida. Karan and Priya had a lingering doubt. Would Maida let this probe go all the way or would he pull the plug at some point, fearing that he too might be implicated?

Karan asked for and got floor plans with security camera locations for floors 81-83. They started combing from the 81st floor, scanning from the camera closest to the executive elevator that skipped all floors till the 80th. They figured that VIPs would prefer taking the express elevator. Even in a foreign country, on a personal visit, the *netas* liked their ego stroked. There were several other banks of elevators but Priya and Karan first wanted to begin from here.

They were looking for political bigwigs but what they saw surprised them. A yesteryear Bollywood actress hand in hand with a Sheikh decked with diamonds, with his hands all over her even as they were walking to his suite. The actress’s husband watched with an amused look and a cell phone glued to his ear as he trailed behind them. Priya turned her face in disgust. Karan gently cleared his throat and steered her back to the monitors. He had found the first catch.

They had almost missed him. Surrounded by fawning sycophants and NRI businessmen, Mama-ji was almost invisible as a tight group of eight people walked from the elevator towards his suite. As the entourage laboured along, Karan was ticking off the suite numbers on the floor plan. They finally arrived at 8114, one of the grandest in the hotel. If it were not for Mama-ji pausing to look for the key card entry and gesturing at his private secretary while the rest parted way, they would have completely missed it. The first quarry was spotted. The watch had begun. Karan froze the video feed at a spot where he could look closely at the entourage to try and see if he could spot anyone or anything unusual.

As time passed, there were a lot of incoming and outgoing visitors. Instead of keeping track of the faces, Priya counted heads: +1 for coming and -1 for leaving. At any given time, there were four to five people in the suite. Add to that, refreshments being served back and forth. Just watching the activity made the two sleuths hungry. But there was a lot of ground to cover; this was just the 81st floor, Friday April 27, and there were two more days and two more floors to go.

Karan’s eyes were starting to glaze over when he saw something. “Look! Dalda is here!”

Priya turned to look at Karan’s screen. “He is with two burkha-clad women. I wonder what they want from Mama-ji.”

Karan and Priya exchanged glances. They knew something was up.

In about ten minutes the burkha-clad women left. But Priya’s eagle eyes noticed something. One of them was considerably taller.

“What the heck? How does one get stretched in 10 minutes?” she wondered.

Priya then skipped back to catch the entry point and the women appeared to be of the same height. Something did not match. Priya fast-forwarded to the point where they were leaving and zoomed in on the taller person. It was a he and he could be easily identified by the hair on the back of his palm. There was a switch of burkhas. Interest piqued, they settled down to see what happened next.

The time inched to 10 PM. 12 midnight. 2 AM. Nothing. No activity from the suite. In fact, nothing happened till around 11 AM the following day, when a group of what appeared to be bureaucrats (*babus*) walked up to the suite. And 15 minutes later, the entourage left in reverse. But there was still no sign of Dalda! Where had he disappeared? Was he still in the room? With whom?

Karan walked up to the security chief and sought clarification. He gulped, and after a bit of hemming and hawing, shrugged his shoulders and suggested that they speak to the manager. There was still a lot of video footage to cover, but it was important to determine the accuracy by bridging the gap.

Karan and Priya decided to play the good-cop-bad-cop routine. With a twist.

Priya began quizzing the manager while Karan watched his body language. If he was surprised at a woman showing authority, he did not show it.

After giving a patient hearing, he looked at the ceiling as if to collect his thoughts, and said smoothly, “Sometimes the video feed gets disrupted. Say, when there is a power outage and the backup takes a few minutes to kick in. The gap is supposed to be covered by rechargeable battery packs on the camera, but…” he tailed off, as if to say that every second of the footage was not important.

The explanation sounded plausible but Priya and Karan were not buying it. Priya pressed further but the manager kept swatting the questions away with answers that invariably ended with “it is our hotel policy…”

What Priya and Karan came away with was that the video feed was not bullet-proof. There were gaps and if someone knew it, he could exploit it and make good his escape. The manager refused to divulge the name under which the booking was done. But Karan knew how to find that out. Ramavatar confirmed that the bookings were made by the elder Hingorani himself.

# Game Day

Saturday, April 28. 82nd Floor. 2 PM.

Rocky took long strides to his suite on the 82nd floor — 8226. It offered breath-taking views of the city, especially at night when the ocean below shone in placid glory. He had particularly demanded this suite and got it; there were few things in life that he desired and did not get.

After a quick freshening-up, he left, apparently for a series of meetings, and returned only late in the night, around 2AM. The video recording then showed no activity of his, though others were seen. A South African cricketer walked with unsteady steps towards his room, two beauties hanging on his arms. For some strange reason, he flashed a victory sign.

The video played on. Still no sign of activity on Rocky’s part. But Priya noticed something interesting. Apparently, the camera was weak to pick on those who skirted the wall while walking. She suggested to Karan that they rewind and look more carefully at the recording, right from the start. He sighed and agreed. The next day was spent in minutely observing the video feeds from start to finish. Meanwhile, Priya received a cryptic “?” message from Mike. He wanted an update. It had been decided that every two days, Karan would keep him informed of the developments.

Karan send across the following to Mike:

After two days of viewing video feeds, we have yet to find any clues as to what could be going on. But here are a few interesting things we observed:

Honourable Minister Madhav Mantri stayed on the 81st floor on the 27th April and stayed the night there. Honourable Minister Dalpat Dalvi came to visit him there. Along with him were two burkha-clad women.

After about 10 minutes, the women left but we found an anomaly. One of them was a male. And because of data loss, we could not find out when Shri Dalvi left the suite.

At any given time, there were four to five people in the suite. The burkha-clad women were the only females to visit.

The following day, at around 11 AM, the Honourable Minister checked out.

This is just one day of watching tapes and there is much to go.

We will keep you updated on our progress.

Mike promptly forwarded the status report to Maida. After perusing it, Maida called him up.

“Mike, it appears that the probe is not making much of a progress.”

“I think the team has done a good job so far, sir. After all, this is just the first status report. A lot more of the footage is yet to be studied.”

“But they have not unearthed anything of importance that can solve the mystery.”

“I agree sir. But we know a lot more now than before. Give them a few more days. I assure you that we will stumble upon something more tangible. We may even get the Castrator’s identity.”

“I am not casting aspersions on our team. But if this leaks out in the media, I will have hell to pay. I will be accused of wasting tax-payers’ money on an errand driven by mere suspicion. Look, I agreed to the investigation in good faith. But now I am beginning to believe that the obscene mail was just a prank played by a sick mind. Call off the inquiry,” said Maida as hung up abruptly.

Mike stared at the phone for a while and kept it down slowly. What had prompted this change of heart by Maida? Was he worried that the investigation could unearth material he wanted to keep hidden? But if that was so, why did he order the probe in the first place? Whatever, his hands were tied. He called up Karan and asked him to end his investigation.

“But why, sir? I thought we were making progress.”

“I agree,” Mike said, “But the Minister wants to close it.”

That ended the conversation. Karan and Priya decided to wind up, but not before taking one more look at the feed before them. Then they saw it. Priya called up Mike.

“What is it?” Mike asked.

“Sir, here is some information. Maida was in the hotel on the 83rd floor on the 28th. He had earlier watched the premier match, and then had a visitor form Pakistan’s ISI who was accompanied by a Taliban official. There were female visitors too in his suite... It all adds to something very embarrassing for our Home Minister.”

“Hmm… Keep probing for now. Let me know.”

Rocky revelations

As they went back to looking at Rocky’s feeds, the DVD started skipping frames. Priya ejected the DVD and looked at it — it had a deep scratch. Karan took the scratched media and went looking for the security chief. He was not at his desk.

As Karan lingered around, trying to make up his mind as to whom to contact, he saw an employee walk in and ask, “Can I help you?”

“This DVD has a scratch and is not working correctly. Can you make me a copy from the Master?”

“Of course. Give me about 30 minutes.” Karan thanked him and showed him where they were sitting and went back to join Priya in looking at the other feeds.

Instead of looking at the same feed together, they split up. One was looking for data from feed pointing in one direction to Rocky’s suite while the other was looking at the camera from the other direction. They had a reasonable guess that it must be Rocky, since they could not establish the time Dalda left Mama-ji’s suite.

Meanwhile, they got the fresh DVD. The first thing they noticed was that the feed was crisp, as if it were recorded at a higher resolution than the previous one. And then at 2 AM on the 28th, they saw Rocky waltz into the suite and about 15 minutes later, three young women, daringly clad, enter the suite. At once, they realized that this was an unedited feed! As they watched the minutes tick by, they felt that they were on the verge of stumbling upon something big.

Because the DVD was recorded in a higher resolution than the previous one, it ran out at 4 AM sharp. No one had entered or exited the suite. Priya said, “I checked the next in the series and it begins only at 4:30 AM. There is a gap of about 30 minutes. What do we do now?”

“If I go back to ask for a copy from 4 AM onwards, they might get suspicious. The security chief might be back by now. We may not be so lucky. But we have some evidence of hanky-panky here that we can use to ferret out the truth from Rocky. I am going to run into town and get an identical looking DVD and some marker pens. You keep this one and we will replace this with my new one…” Karan said, as he took a picture of the DVD and the jewel case. He hoped that there would be near identical replicas.

Priya went back to looking at the 4:30 AM feed. There was no activity of anyone entering or leaving the room. She had to wait all the way up to 12:45 PM the following day before she saw a couple of *babus*walk up to the suite and Rocky following behind them a few minutes later. Were the three young ladies still in the suite or did they leave during the thirty-minute interval?

Karan and Priya brainstormed. “At this point, it could even be one of those three girls that did the job. We can’t leave out that possibility,” Priya said.

Karan added, “The way they walked, they could easily be trained commandos…” He was especially struck by the tall blonde in the trio, who looked beautiful, menacing, and comely at the same time.

Priya guessed what he was thinking. “If I didn’t know you well, I would have thought that you were fancying your chances with that tall blonde!”

Karan smiled and let that go.

Priya continued, “Why don’t I leave tomorrow night and tell Mike that you have cleaned out your desk and will follow in a few days? In the meantime, I will look at this video and see if I can establish the antecedents of these three femme fatales.”

“Good idea. Let us go over the remaining feeds and see what mischief our dear Maida has been up to!”

# Maida’s indiscretions

Karan and Priya continued to watch the rest of the video feed before they were to wind up the investigations. Maida had arrived at around noon on the 28th, and he promptly got to work. There was a buzz of activity, as at least two dozen people were hovering outside the suite, apparently waiting for a meeting. Most were the suited-booted types; there was the odd sheikh too.

The match was to begin soon. The parade of visitors coming and going seemed to never end. How did so many people know of Maida’s private visit, Karan and Priya wondered. And what did Maida have to do with so many of these who had nothing to do with government work? The duo watched the recording with heightened interest.

At around 7:45 PM, Maida along with about six others left the suite. “He must be leaving for the stadium to watch the match,” Karan said.

Priya looked up the schedule to see which teams had played that day. She also made a mental note to get the video feeds of the VIP boxes (many broadcasters carried it) and go over them thoroughly, now that she knew at what time Maida left the hotel.

On a hunch, she called one of her friends, who was a sports producer at the TV broadcaster that had the rights to that year’s premier league. “Sindhu, how are you?”

“Wow! What a surprise! *Policewali* remembered me! To what do I owe the honour of this call?” Sindhu said with a laugh.

Priya laughed back. “You called me police, and so you know that a police person does not call without reason.”

“Whatever it is, I didn’t do it!” Both laughed.

Sindhu picked up the conversation again. “So, tell me, how can I help?”

“Do me a favour. Can you watch the video footage of a particular premier cricket league match played recently?”

“The full recording? Anything in particular that you want me to look out for?”

“All I want to see are the VIP box feeds.”

“That can be done, but I cannot make copies of them.”

“But you can put the file on GoogleDrive and give me viewing rights. Once I am done, you can take it down?”

“That is doable. Which match are we talking about?”

“Dubai. April 28th”

“Give me a couple of hours. I will set it up and let you know.”

Kulwinder Sindhu went straight to work. As she rummaged for the recording, she recalled the good old days with Priya when the two were in college together. They had formed a bond of friendship and were inseparable. Both excelled in studies and often prepared for examinations together. But their tastes were different. While Sindhu was the outgoing type, always quick to make acquaintances, Priya was guarded. Sindhu was a sports buff and Priya was into history and psychology. Sindhu was enamoured of television whereas Priya had little time for it. After college, their careers took different paths. Priya sat and got through the IAS, and her choice was the Indian Police Service. Kulwinder joined a leading television firm which specialised in sports journalism and had bagged the rights for various international sports events, including the Indian cricket premier league. The two had kept in touch, though lately they had not spoken one each other. Until now.

Sindhu came through. There was close to 10 gigabytes of data on the cloud, capturing feeds from three cameras, all of which were on the various VIPs that had descended upon the stadium. A galaxy of movie stars, leading businessmen from Mumbai and a handful of politicians, were seen waving to the cameras and generally having a nice time.

Once Sindhu messaged her that the recording had been set up, Priya and Karan accessed it. What they viewed shocked them. Maida was in deep discussion with Mama-ji, Dilawar, the ISI agent Pervez Pasha and another striking individual, who they could not immediately place. Priya froze the feed, used her cell phone to click a picture of the man, and looked up Google Image Search. Bingo!

It was a Taliban leader, in fact the organisation’s second-in-command, Munawar Nasheed. He was responsible for the killing of hundreds of innocent women and children and wanted by the United States for his role in 9/11 incident.

Karan was blown away. “Wow! I do not remember this being shown on TV! What the heck was the country’s Home Minister doing, talking to a known terrorist? I know that fox Pervez. Slimy character. Always up to mischief. So, this is what our boss did not want us to find! We need to get a copy of this.”

Priya thought for a while and said, “I can do a screen grab using special software but that is on my Desktop at the office. I will take the next flight back to Delhi and get all the relevant portions of this feed on to my computer for processing later. This is pure gold!”

Karan complimented Priya on her quick thinking and called the Air India manager. “Please book one first class ticket to New Delhi. Passenger’s name is Priya Menon. She already has a return ticket for a later date. Please cancel that one. Thanks a lot buddy! I owe you one.”

Priya said, “Karan, this is even more explosive than the sexual escapades. I don’t know what more will be revealed if we continue with this probe. But I suppose we will have to draw the curtains soon.”

“It’s really a pity. But let’s not be pessimistic. Who knows, with the information we have dug out, the direction all this will all this take could be very different than what we had earlier thought. You realise, this is no longer just an issue of obscene mail or castration.”

“Hmm… But I don’t see how Maida will relent. Of course, he does not know what we have unearthed.”

“Leave it all to Mike. I’m sure he will take the right call.”

With that, Priya collected her belongings and proceeded to her room. She had to prepare for her return trip.

# Castrator loses his sister

Divya was the eldest of the siblings, and the youngest was her brother, affectionately called *Chhotu* (the small one). They grew up in a normal middle-class family, with both their parents in government service. While there was never any shortage at home, they were also not living in luxury. Their father commuted to work on a two-wheeler while mother took the bus. The parents made one thing sure: their children got the best possible education they could afford. Luckily for them, the three kids — two daughters and one son— were good at studies.

Time flew by. Chhotu was especially attached to his eldest sister who doted on him. On many an occasion, when Chhotu committed some mischievous act which drew the ire of his father, Divya came to his rescue. The boy would hide behind her, terrified of his father’s anger. Divya had a resoluteness which even her father respected; he would back out in such situations. At times when he got into a scuffle with the local kids and came home bruised, Divya would rush out and teach the culprits a lesson they would not forget in a hurry. At home, whenever he wanted something, even a glass of water, he would call out to her rather than his mother.

By the time she entered college, Chhotu had enrolled in class nine. Divya was a good-looking girl, and whip smart. There were many boys in the college who sought her attention, but she ignored them. A few were adventurous enough to propose a date with her, but her blazing glare made them scurry for cover. Divya sat for the CAT test, got a 99.9 percentile, and gained admission to the prestigious IIM-A. Earlier she had secured a first class in Finance in college, topping not just her class but also in the State.

She completed her MBA with honours and immediately landed a job with a leading financial brokerage firm in Mumbai. No sweat was shed; she was selected with a handsome salary in the course of campus placements.

Her family was delighted, and Chhotu especially was over the moon. His favourite sister had taken the first step to making it big. He had missed her when she was doing her MBA in Ahmedabad, thought the two had kept in touch regularly. By the time Divya had landed her first job, Chhotu was no longer small — he was a strapping youth standing six feet tall.

In under six months of her joining, Divya came to be recognised as one of sharpest financial analysts in the company. Seniors in the organisation eagerly awaited her analytical reports, which were appreciated by its high-value clients — industry honchos. “You will go far,” her seniors told her. Modest by nature, she thanked them and promised to work even harder.

This she did, and one year went by. She thought she deserved a promotion. But the firm’s policy was to evaluate its employees work every two years and then decide on a promotion. Divya would wait for 12 more months. “You are shoo-in,” her peers told her. “Promotion is certain.”

It was only a few weeks before the review, when she got a message that her immediate boss wished to have dinner with her at a seven-star hotel. He wanted to speak to her once before taking the final call. Divya wondered why he did not deem it fit to just call her in his office and speak to her, but she was not unhappy; dinner with her boss, Nikhil Shirke was, after all, a privilege. She reached the hotel at the appointed hour.

As the dinner progressed, Shirke asked her several questions regarding her work. “Are you happy with your career?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And with the work you are doing in office?”

“Not bad, though I would love to take on more responsibilities and perhaps lead a team.”

“Hmm. You have the ability. I am happy with your performance so far.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Nikhil edged closer to her. He had to be discreet; the hotel restaurant was packed with diners. He let his hand casually touch hers and linger for a while. Almost in a whisper, he said, “Would you like to join me in my room for a cup of coffee?”

Divya was immediately alert. He had so far not said anything about a raise in salary or a promotion. Clearly, that was contingent on her willingness to accept his offer.

She gently pushed his hand away and said. “Thank you for the excellent dinner, sir. I must be going now. It’s late. See you in office tomorrow.” With that she got up and walked away without turning back.

The promotion never came, much to everyone’s surprise in the office. On the other hand, she was moved to the Financial Derivates section of the firm and asked to enhance its functioning and profile. The Financial Derivatives section was a new venture and it would take years to turn a profit. She had reached a sudden dead end in her career. There was no doubt in her mind that, had she accepted Shirke’s offer, she would have been promoted with a bigger pay packet.

A few months later, the company organised a New Year’s party at a prominent hotel overlooking the Arabian Sea. It was attended by several politicians, business leaders, celebrities from the entertainment industry, sports personalities, and senior media personnel. There were loud speeches, much backslapping, and drinks. Divya came face to face with Nikhil, who greeted her formally but courteously. It was like the incident never happened. Since she did not take alcohol, he fetched her a glass of orange juice. After some small talk, he moved away to greet others in the party. The juice had been spiked with a date rape drug.

It was only when the New Year was heralded, and it was time for everyone to say goodbye to everyone that Divya began to experience a strange giddiness. The crowd had thinned considerably by then. She tried to stand up and move but only wobbled and fell on the floor in a heap.

When she opened her eyes, the sun was shining brightly. She looked around and found herself in a room. Her clothes were lying scattered a little distance away, and Shirke was looking down at her with a lecherous smile. “I had you,” he said.

Dazed, Divya dressed up quickly and rushed to her flat, which she had recently purchased after paying a huge down payment and arranging the rest through a long-term bank loan. The EMI was backbreaking, but she had reckoned that with a definite increase in her salary and career advancements, she would be able to manage.

She knew that she had been violated. There were now two options. One, to expose the sordid episode and quit. Two, to remain quiet and keep the job. She wasn’t sure if she would be able to cause any damage to the culprit by speaking out — Nikhil had many connections. He would be able to buy his way out of the crisis. But she would be led high and dry, losing her job and losing face. And no one else in Mumbai would employ her. She decided to remain silent, for now.

Six weeks later, to her horror, she realised that she was pregnant. Listlessly, she worked that day in the office. On returning home, she found that Chhotu had come visiting. He had expected a rousing welcome from her dear sister, but she just could not bring herself to be cheerful.

Chhotu realised that something was amiss. He held her hands and said, “What happened? Won’t you tell your Chhotu?”

Divya began to cry. She was inconsolable. She told him the truth, and then fainted. Chhotu ran out and talked with the neighbours who helped him to get a doctor who lived in their complex. After examining Divya, the doctor confirmed the worst. She will be fine and that she is pregnant.

Chhotu whipped up tea and biscuits as Divya had come to by then. He convinced her to file a police complaint. Together they went to the police station.

The duty officer was polite, and as she narrated the incident, he was furious. “Who is that guy? Give me his name and we’ll teach the fellow a good lesson. He better be prepared to spend at least 10 years behind bars.”

No sooner did she give the name; the duty officer froze. “Nikhil Shirke? Are you serious?”

He then let out a sigh and said, “We have to investigate first. This is sensitive business. I will not register a first information report with his name for now.”

Divya and Chhotu were shocked. They tried to convince him but failed. On the way back, he said, “*Didi*, this is not your fault. Please get an abortion and think that it was a bad dream. Let us keep this between ourselves.”

Divya was silent for a while and then looked at her kid brother and said softly, “OK, I will think about it.”

A week later, he received the news that Divya had died of an overdose of pills. The post-mortem revealed that she was pregnant. This was like adding insult to injury to her parents. But he sat them down and explained what had happened.

Chhotu’s mind was made up. While his sister had ended her life, it would not be the end of the matter. “I will get you Shirke, soon,” he said to himself. The Castrator was born.

# That fateful New Year’s eve party

Chhotu The Castrator’s life moved on, but he could not forget his favourite sister. Divya had been his life anchor, someone he looked up to. He could not forget her tears, her anguish, her helplessness. He could not forget the emptiness he first felt on hearing the news of her suicide. And he could not forget that he had to settle scores with certain people.

He had called it quits after a few years in the Army and had branched out on his own. By then he had acquired a variety of skills — use of high-grade weapons as well as close-combat weapons such as a dagger; horse-riding, mountaineering, surviving in scorching deserts, rain forests, freezing zones. He could light a fire without the modern implements, recognise leaves, fruits and marine life that were edible. He could handle snakes and crocodiles. He was proficient in martial arts.

For a man of such multiple abilities, getting a job was not difficult. He worked in various establishments, overlooking security aspects. Moving around, he had landed his new job at the Burj as the chief assistant security officer. It was he who had given the two IB sleuths the unedited video. Had they asked for more, he would have provided that too. He was on a mission and was willing to go all the way to achieve his purpose. He was amused at the thought that the two officers must have believed they had got the footage by mistake and would have considered it an unexpected bonus.

As Divya’s thoughts flooded his mind, yet again, he remembered the conversations he had with her when she had started her job. She told him that she was surprised to see the list of clients at the financial brokerage firm; it was Mumbai’s A-list comprising politicians, businessmen, and celebrities of all hues. She had been introduced as a bright star of the company by Nikhil Shirke in several meetings with the highflyers. R. K. Ranga, a minister of state had once visited them and got into a discussion with her and impressed her with his intimate knowledge of the financial world. Those were the days when she was living the good life, full of dreams of a bright tomorrow.

She had recalled having seen Rocky at the party. He was engrossed in a conversation with Shirke, and two often glanced at her sitting a distance away while talking. She ignored it. Unknown to her, they were discussing her status.

Rocky asked, “Is she available?”

Shirke smiled, “Who is not, with the right incentive?”

“But are you sure she will not kick up a fuss?”

“Even if she does, it can be managed. You give the go ahead first. We have ways when somebody refuses a polite offer,” he grinned.

“You better be careful, my friend. Given the position I am in, I don’t want any blowback from some immature handling. I’ll wait for your signal.”

The Castrator remembered Divya telling him that she had noticed Rocky in the room when she woke up from the drug-induced slumber. But while Rocky had quickly exited, Nikhil had hung around, taunting her. She was not sure if Rocky had been involved in the rape, but it was most likely. All of this played back in the Castrator’s mind as he watched Karan and Priya go over the video recordings.

From the day Divya had mentioned Rocky’s name, the Castrator had been closely following the politician’s professional and personal journey. He had noticed that Rocky was a regular fixture on the Dubai circuit, particularly when the short-format cricket matches featuring India were played. Rocky had also discovered that Rocky rarely stayed at hotels that were earmarked for officials from India and preferred the Burj. It was evident to the Castrator that the government of India was not footing the bill. It was common knowledge that, when VIPs like Rocky stayed at the Burj, the place turned into a beehive of frantic activity, with all sorts of people, including young women, seen around.

For the Castrator, Nikhil Shirke was small fry who could be taken care of any day. Rocky was different. Elaborate planning was needed to tackle him. The Castrator worked it out with his boss at the Akademi and got posted to the Burj security crew. It was easy, given his credentials. Plus, Akademi could charge up to $40,000 per month for the skills he possessed in case tragedy struck the hotel. The Castrator thus was one step closer to his target.

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Meanwhile, the investigators were hard at work. They noted with interest that Maida had more visitors, many of whom were dressed like Arabs. He could not identify who they were. About the only thing he could make out was the size of the entourage; in some instances, as many as a dozen people accompanied the dignitary. In most cases they would wait outside the suite after the security team did a thorough sweep of the premises. Karan wondered as to what was being discussed bend those closed doors, and also who these guests were.

Karan was intrigued. There must be some clue as to the identity of these mysterious visitors. He looked closely at the footage of one such entourage. A few in the group were dressed in what looked like a uniform. He zoomed the image and picked out the logo of a local air carrier. Were these people plotting some airline rip-off? Nothing could be ruled out with Maida in the picture.

The video recording went on. As the evening turned into might, the crowd outside thinned. People who were inside too made their exit, one after the other. They had smug looks on their faces; it appeared that a good deal had been struck or was about to be struck. Just when Karan and Priya thought that it was the end of a hectic day for Maida, in marched two young women, possibly of East European origin. They were tall and slim with curves in the right place. They were buxom too, unlike the size zero models one often associated with west Europeans. They were skimpily dressed and heavily made up. The door shut as they entered the suite.

Karan was convinced that at least some of the Arab-dressed men were actually agents of foreign spy agencies, possibly Pakistan or some Arab nation. It is possible that people in the Indian external intelligence agency, RAW, would be able to identify them. But there was no possibility of involving RAW in this venture. The agency reported to the External Affairs Ministry and dealing with that ministry was another cup of tea altogether. The bureaucracy of the external affairs ministry was creaky and lived in a time warp of its own. It worked on the maxim that maintaining status quo was the best option. Sleeping dogs must be allowed to lie. Karan did not see Mike or even Maida being enthusiastic about drawing them into this sordid affair.

# Karan wraps up in UAE, returns home

Karan was now close to winding up his probe. Priya had left for Delhi to follow the leads at the other end. He made elaborate notes on the salient points that needed to be discussed with Mike and Priya. As far as the loads of dirty stuff that he unearthed about Maida, he hoped that Mike would not ask him to place it on record. The minister was a vengeful character and there was no knowing what he would do in case the records carried the explosive information. Most certainly, when the file reached him, he would be furious and demand that material pertaining to him be omitted. And he would most assuredly nix the careers of both Karan and Priya— even Mike.

It was Karan’s last day at work in Dubai. He was tired and his eyes were groggy with the constant viewing of the video recordings over the past three days. He wrapped up everything, cleaned up his desk, making sure that nothing incriminating was left behind. With one last look at the room which had served as his office, he left, closing the doors behind. He made his way to the security chief’s office, but the officer was not at his desk. His staff did not know when he would return. Karan found a sticky note pad and stuck a brief note on the monitor. It read: “Thank you, sir, for all your cooperation. You have been most helpful. It is possible that we may have to return for further information, and I’m sure you will oblige. Thank you once again.”

He rubbed his eyes and decided to go down for a chilled beer. Just as he was entering the elevator, he saw a board that informed of a restaurant on the 84th floor. He knew it would be expensive, far more than the ones on the streets outside the hotel. But, what the heck, he said to himself, he deserved it. It was time to indulge in some luxury. He made his way to the 84th floor. If the office did not reimburse the amount, he would gamely consider it as a rare splurge on his part.

The restaurant had open seating and was buzzing with activity. All the tables were occupied. But there was one which had just one person, who had a brooding look. Karan headed in that direction. The restaurant was famous for its *Chaat* and other Indian delicacies. Karan said to himself, having come there, just the beer would not suffice; he would order *Chaat*.

He addressed the lone occupant, “Excuse me, would you mind if I join you? No other tables are vacant.”

The man looked at him and said softly, “You are welcome.”

“Thank you,” Karan said and settled down. He looked closely at the person and realised he had seen him somewhere.

“Are you the security officer who helped me with the video footage?”

The Castrator smiled. “Yes. I hope you found what you were looking for?”

“Yes and no. We found some stuff, but before we could bring the probe to a conclusion, were told that the minister had called off the investigation because he believed that no real progress was being made.”

The Castrator looked up sharply. He understood from Karan’s tone that the latter was displeased by the orders. He also realised that Karan must have found something that had unsettled him and led to a desire to inquire further. But he maintained a diplomatic silence, merely saying, “Hmm... That is unfortunate.”

“So, what *chaat* is popular here?” Karan asked, changing the topic.

“They make a good *Dahi-Papdi-Samosa-chaat*.” Karan gestured to the waiter and asked for the same and a bottle of Bud Light beer.

The next half an hour was spent on small talk. Neither was willing to break the formality barrier and do self-introductions as one is generally wont to do in such situations. Both had secrets to keep and both by nature and training were reluctant to open up to strangers. Thus, the conversation veered around various types of drinks, from beer to vodka, and how much each could hold down. Typical men stuff. After finishing the drink and the snack, Karan rose and wished him goodbye and the following morning, flew back to Delhi.

# Rocky fesses up

Priya had been digging deep into the meeting that Maida had with an ISI operative and a representative of the Taliban. She wondered at the brazenness of it all. India’s Home Minister had met these two people in full public glare. Why would Maida have taken the risk? There had to be good reasons for the indiscretion, because he was known to keep such things under wraps. Was it a secret mission approved by the government of India, or was it a personal initiative by the Home Minister? Mike needs to know about it.

Karan too had returned to Delhi after winding up his task in Dubai. Before Priya and he reported to Mike, they met separately, shared notes and updated themselves. Karan was as intrigued as Priya, but he too was clueless on the purpose of that meeting. Meanwhile, Mike was deep in his own thoughts. He would be meeting Maida in a couple of days and wanted to be fully informed by his two officials on everything—and that meant everything. When Priya and Karan entered their boss’s chamber, he was on a call. He waved them in with a warm smile and continued to talk on the phone. From snatches of the conversation, the two guessed he was speaking to somebody very high up at the other end.

Mike ended the call with a “Yes sir.” He turned to his officials and said, “That was the Prime Minister. He told me of a RAW report that spoke of Maida being sighted with an ISI agent and a Taliban leader. He is greatly alarmed.”

“This is what we wanted to talk to you about,” Karan said.

“Do you mean to say you people know of this meeting?”

“Yes. And that is the real reason why the Home Minister did not want the investigations to proceed.”

“And how do you know of this rendezvous?”

“We saw it on a video footage of the Burj.”

Mike was taken aback. “Do you have that footage?”

“As a matter of fact, I have it on my pen drive,” Priya said. She then explained how they got lucky with the unedited video recording, supplied to them by the Burj’s deputy security chief. “I’m sure the poor man does not know the great favour he did us,” she chuckled. She also mentioned the help her friend Sindhu gave, of the footage from the box at the game.

Karan stepped in. “One matter continues to baffle me. Maida must have been aware of the risk of this meeting spilling out in the open once we began to dig for footage. And yet he gave us the green signal to investigate. Why?”

Mike replied, “He did not readily give the go-ahead. I made it clear to him that we could never be able to get the truth about the troublesome mails unless we followed the issue up in Dubai. I also warned him of the troubles he would have in case the information that his ministry did not do anything while being all the time aware of the matter, leaked out. Finally, I lured with the prospect of material he may get out of the probe, which could be useful to him in the coming days. Of course, I didn’t say that last bit directly, but merely hinted. Only then did he go along.”

“By the way,” Mike added, “The Prime Minister told a minister had complained of his phone being tapped. He wanted to know if we had done it. I strongly refuted it, saying that we would never do such a thing without explicit instructions in writing.”

Priya continued with her report on the video recording. “After watching it, we think that R. K. Ranga, aka Rocky, knows more than we think or wants us to know. We have copy of the footage that shows him entering his suite. And, soon after, three young women too walked in. The video does not have a recording of their leaving, so we don’t know when they exited. Maybe, if we confront him with the details, he may spill out the information for fear that keeping it hidden could adversely impact him.”

Mike gave it a thought. If he went to Maida for permission to quiz Rocky, he may not get it before seeing the video footage. That was the last thing the IB chief wanted. But what if Maida was made to believe that while the probe into the Dubai angle had ended, there was some material that needed to be put to closure? Mike hit upon a brilliant idea.

He would brief Maida, and even as the briefing was on, Karan and Priya would be interrogating Rocky. That way, Rocky would have no chance of pre-empting the probe by complaining to Maida. Mike realised that, so long as Maida remained lured with dirt on Mama-ji and Dalda, the coast would be clear to get information out of Rocky.

He shared his plan with his two associates. “We need to be sure that the appointments with Maida and Rocky are simultaneous. I will get the same window, say 3 PM tomorrow, from both. Let’s take it forward from there. Meanwhile, do you have any more evidence than what is there in the report you have submitted?”

Karan was waiting for this question. “I have the relevant DVD too, sir. I will extract the most incriminating parts and prepare a 10-minute package you can play for Maida. That should get his adrenaline going.”

Priya was surprised. “How did you manage to sneak that out?”

“I switched the DVD and returned an identical one that is blank! Even if they check, they might think that perhaps there was an error in copying.”

Mike was all smiles. “You guys are the reason I love my job! Hats off!” Karan and Priya knew that praise from Mike was rare, so they enjoyed the moment and took a bow. “I will let you know once the meetings are set up.”

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Maida was not in the best of moods when Mike walked in. For some reason he could not fathom, the Prime Minister was annoyed with him, which the latter did not care to disguise when the minister faced him at a routine Cabinet meeting.

“Tell me some good news, super sleuth! It has been a terrible day.”

“Sir, we have some interesting material on the stay of some ministers in Dubai recently.”

“Well, spit it out. Who knows, my day may yet be saved from total ruin.”

Mike waited, seeing that Maida wanted to say something more. The minister remarked, “I read the stuff you sent me the other day. But before I act on the information, do I have your word that everything that’s there is in the report is 100% accurate?”

“Which data are you referring to, sir?” Mike was all innocence.

“The meeting between Madhav and Dalpat. The one in which you thought there was a switch of the burkha. What do you think actually happened?”

“There is no point speculating. I can find out the details if you give permission. Karan and Priya can talk to them and find out.”

“Mike, I don’t need to remind you that this is super-sensitive stuff. You recall how some of these people raised hell when your people met them. They don’t want the matter to proceed.”

“And you?”

“I ordered the probe, in case you forgot.”

Mike decided to placate him. “Sir, this investigation began on the back story that you approved.”

Somewhat mollified, Maida looked up at the ceiling, wiped his face with a soft towel and ordered tea. He said, “Is there any process by which we can get the footage from the hotel?” Mike was silent.

Exasperated, Maida demanded to know if there was anything else by way of proof. Mike powered his laptop and said, “Sir, what you are going to see must remain within the four walls of this room.”

“Of course, of course,” Maida retorted, rather too quickly. he played the 10-minute video file and sat back watching Maida’s expression.

“Son of a bitch!” Maida broke out, “They switched the woman in the burkha!”

He was nothing if not sharp. “Can you go back to the point where they entered the suite?”

“I think I know who was switched.” Maida was in a zone of his own and was talking to himself. “So that was what the rascal was up to!” It was as if some pieces of a jigsaw puzzle were falling in place. Mike just watched, fascinated by the chain of thoughts he had triggered in the minister. Just then Maida’s cell phone buzzed but he ignored it. “I need a copy of this, Mike.”

Mike cleared his throat and replied, “Sir, there is a fair amount of work that remains to be done and we need the pen drive for some more time. I will make a copy once we are done getting all the info.” Mike shut the laptop lid crisply as Maida was informed of his next visitor. He left before Maida could respond.

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Rocky was surprised to see Priya with Karan. He was expecting two men. Mike was vague about the reason for their visit, but Mike let it drop that Maida wanted the IB team to meet with him on an unrelated matter.

Karan started the ball rolling. “We have some questions on what happened during your last trip to Dubai.”

“What do you want to know?” Rocky asked, glancing at his watch. This was a favourite tactic of his to tell the visitor that he was a very busy man. He was already feeling restless.

“Everything that happened in Dubai.”

Rocky was offended. In an angry tone, he said, “Do you realize who you are talking to? I am a minister, for god’s sake!”

Priya perked up, ignoring Rocky’s retort. “Was this an official visit or a personal visit, sir?”

Rocky came down to earth fast. These two were sharp and unlikely to be cowed down by threats. He would need to talk to Maida.

“Why do you want to know?” Rocky repeated.

“We are in possession of some data from this trip that necessitates us to ask these questions.”

“Such as?”

“Was this an official visit?”

“Yes.”

“Can we look at your appointment calendar?”

Rocky began to sweat despite the air-conditioner set to 22 degrees C. Of course, it was not an official visit. He was there to transfer funds of himself, and some others in the party, all of whom were getting a cut. His bluff was being called.

“You will have to ask my Personal Secretary (PS). Let me call him for you.” Rocky made a pretence of calling his PS on his cell phone and then hung up quickly. “Looks like he is busy. Can you come later?”

It was not Rocky’s lucky day. His PS just then walked in and asked innocently, “Did you call sir?”

Rocky could not evade the question. Instead of asking his PS to share his appointment diary, he told him to wait in the anteroom.

“What do you want to know?”

“On April 27th, you were visited in your room by three young ladies. What was the purpose of their visit?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“It is our business, sir, if you were in Dubai in an official capacity. We can cross-check with your PS…”

“There’s no need for that! They were there with me for er, er…”

The two were giving Rocky a long rope to hang himself with. After a few moments, Karan moved in for the kill.

“Did you get an email with this as the attachment?” Karan showed Rocky a picture of the freshly severed testicles, still oozing blood.

Rocky looked like he had seen a ghost. He was deflated. “How did you get this picture?”

“It was emailed to some of your colleagues, especially those who visited Dubai recently, which is why we are checking. This is part of an ongoing investigation.”

Rocky was silent. He gulped a glass of water, trying to gather his thoughts. “Do they know it is me,” he wondered?

“I have not received any such email.”

“How do you normally get your email?”

“On my iPhone. Why do you ask?”

“Mind if we do a quick check? Others have co-operated. You can talk to our boss, Shri Damodaran…”

“I will do just that,” Rocky started dialling Maida’s number. Karan and Priya hoped that Maida would not pick up the phone. They got lucky. Maida ignored the call.

“I am not giving you my phone.” Rocky refused to budge.

Karan was insistent. “This is a matter of national security, sir. We have credible information that one of the ministers who was in Dubai was castrated. The perpetrator is on the loose and unless we catch him, who knows how many more people are going to suffer.”

After pausing for a few seconds, Karan said, “We are tasked with getting to the bottom of this matter. If you continue to not co-operate, we will have to report to the Home Minister.” He left out part of the statement... ‘*and you will face the consequences*.’

Rocky looked left, right, up and then slowly at the two and threw in the towel. “This does not leave the three of us. Yes, I have been castrated in Dubai and I don’t know who did it.”

“Have you seen these three young ladies before?” Karan showed close-ups of the three young ladies who had visited Rocky’s suite.

“No.”

“Can you please connect us with the person who arranged for these ladies? It could be one of them that did it.”

Rocky thought for a moment and reached into his cell phone and pulled up an entry and showed it to them. “Make a note of it. I call them only through a secure line. Once I give the dates, I must ‘choose from an online listing of the available personnel, the place, time and duration’.”

“And how long did you sign them up for?”

“Eight hours. They came for the party and then stayed on.”

“What party? And where?”

“I do not remember. It was in the hotel itself.”

“Was there anything suspicious about these women?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Sir, if you remember anything, please let us know. In the meantime, we advise you not to make any foreign trips till we have figured out who the culprit it.”

“That is impossible. My calendar for the next two weeks is booked. What reason would I give the Honourable PM?” Just then, he got a call on his cell phone, and gestured that the meeting was done.

Karan and Priya left. They had made significant headway, though they wanted to quiz Rocky a bit more. Some other time, they said to themselves.

# A cabinet reshuffle

Meanwhile, major developments were taking place in the political arena. While the IB was in possession of explosive material about senior ministers, sharing only a small pie of it with Home Minister Maida, and the Central government being battered by one scam after the other, news came that the Freedom Party had decided to float the name of a senior Cabinet minister as the next President of India. The President is a high office but largely titular.

The buzz was that the man chosen for the post was one who had fallen out of favour of the dynasty and, since he could not be just sacked because that would raise a major stink, he was being pushed upstairs. The Family had killed two birds with one stone. It had got its nominee as President of India and it had got rid of a troublesome character in the government. The man given the high office was a veteran politician who had spent virtually all his political life with the Freedom Party. But he was outspoken and somewhat unpredictable.

Mike and his team watched the developments with interest, though they were detached from the action. The departure of a senior minister meant that there would be a reshuffle in the Cabinet. Speculation was rife in the media and political circles on who would be favoured and who would get the boot. Maida lost the Home portfolio, though he got the equally important Finance — his favourite. Now, Mike had to report to a new Home Minister. That was not a problem; the IB chief was used to such changes. But the situation this time was very different. He had to acquaint the new minister with the material that he had gathered and given to the outgoing Home Minister.

The new Home Minister was a relative lightweight. He took great care to groom himself, and quickly came to be talked about more for his sartorial tastes than competence. He disliked complications and believed that the way out of a confrontation was to lie low and do nothing. As a matter of courtesy, Mike sought and got an early appointment with his new minister.

The first impression he got confirmed the buzz that he had heard about the man. The Home Minister was elegantly dressed and seems somewhat out of place in the new environment. Mike congratulated him.

The Home Minister said, “Mike, it was nice of you to have come. I want to tell you that there will be no interference from my side in your activities so long as they are in the national interest.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Is there anything particular that you wish to discuss with me today?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Mike then briefed him on the material that his team had gathered but making sure to leave out much of it.

“Oh god! Mike, this is terrible. But I suppose this is all in the past. What purpose will be served in continuing with this probe? I suggest that you forget about it.”

“If you say so, sir. But this is a matter of national interest.”

“I don’t see what national interest can be served in digging up material of a personal nature on ministers. Please end this sordid episode.”

“Yes sir.”

Mike returned from the meeting and called Karan and Priya in his chamber. he briefed them on his conversation with the new Home Minister. “I want to put on record the excellent work the two have you did.”

Karan said, “Sir, does the decision to shelve the matter have anything to do with an ISI-orchestrated incident under planning?”

Mike looked at Karan in surprise. “I don’t know how you came to this conclusion. But it is true. The Home Ministry is in possession of information that one of our major cities could be the target of a major terrorist attack by Pakistan-based groups aided by the ISI. Members of the banned SIMI could also be involved. The Minister naturally wants to concentrate on this threat.”

“What do we do, sir?” Priya asked.

Mike slid a folder towards them and said, “Here is the information we have gathered so far. Have a look. Everything else can wait.”

The meeting was over. Karan and Priya left with a heavy heart.

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Supremo was immersed in the divinity of the Shiva temple in Kauai and the serene surroundings. But he was doing more than cleansing himself. He had managed to acquire the surveillance feeds from the Dubai security firm which narrated the activities of esteemed members of his party and the government. While he was not a saint, he made sure that his peccadilloes (that is what he liked to think of them) were discreet. He never fell in the trap of believing that he could be brazen and that none could touch him. As he watched the various videos, he could construct the ‘back-alliances’ that his colleagues formed (no one knew about Dalda and Mama-ji and that Dalda liked to watch). “What a world we live in,” he grimaced.

He loved Kauai, its rainforests, and the peace and tranquillity of the Shiva temple. His daily pattern consisted of being at the temple for the early morning puja, walking around the temple garden, where they were growing rare herbs, and flowers needed for establishing an Ayurveda Hospital.

Supremo reached out to a famous Ayurveda group based in the outskirts of Coimbatore, named Vaidyashramam, and set up a deal for them to send staff on a rotating basis to the Ayurveda Hospital he set up in Kauai. Land could only be leased — a 99-year lease was typical, and Supremo thought that was a good idea, and could be implemented in India too. But that idea would have to wait. If he returned to India, to Indian politics, if he became the leader of Freedom Party and the rank and file fell behind him, if… He switched off his thoughts. He was moving too fast ahead. Live in the present, he told himself. But planning for the future can surely happen, step by step.

# Another castration in dubai

A year later…

Karan was in his office cubicle, waiting for his next assignment. Ever since he had returned from Dubai, it had become a habit to browse the happenings in the Sand Paradise. As he was browsing Khabar Times, his eyes almost popped out, when he read the death by bleeding of a leading Mumbai businessman, Nikhil Shirke.

*Khabar Times*

*June 12*

*Police discovered the body of a Mumbai-based businessman, Nikhil Shirke in a hotel that he was staying in. He was tied to a chair and had died of bleeding. Forensic examination revealed that he had been castrated and consequently may have bled to death. He was a diabetic. Nikhil was a partner at a Financial Derivatives firm, Blue Bulls Securities, based in Mumbai. He was in the city on business. Police suspect foul play. Investigations are on. Anyone who has information about him is requested to contact Inspector Abu Al Hameed of Dubai Police.*

Karan got into action immediately. He made two prints of the news item and requested an urgent meeting with his boss, Mike Srinivasan. He dropped by Priya’s desk and gave her a copy of the report and waited for her to read it.

“Wow! Now this is interesting! What are the odds that two people of Indian origin are subjected to the same fate?” Priya wondered.

“I think there is a link between Rocky and Nikhil. Let us do some research about Nikhil’s firm, Blue Bull Securities,” Karan replied. But first, they needed to get the go ahead from Mike.

Mike was happy that his ace troubleshooting team has something to do. Other than the first few sheets that he had given them, there was little else to go by. Maida had told him to keep them available for a deep dive investigation of some terrorist cells that never came about. Then there was a change of guard and the new man would call Mike every few weeks, like clockwork, and tell him that he would need his crack team to start work on a terrorist plot, and that it would begin soon. But it was yet to happen.

“Start looking into the company ownership details. See if there is any connection between Rocky and Nikhil. My sixth sense is telling me that there is and once you find out, let me know immediately,” Mike’s cell phone started ringing and he nodded his head as Priya, and Karan rose to leave.

The next hour was spent poring over the company details of Blue Bulls. Nothing. They then looked up all the companies that Nikhil was a Director in and did the same with R K Ranga. Again zip. The clock was pushing three in the afternoon. Karan was ready for a Frozen Cappuccino and wondered if Priya wanted anything from Starbucks. He was going to do a coffee run. She asked for an Ice cream coffee.

The nearest Starbucks was located 5 minutes from where he worked. It took a further 15 to find parking. He gave an extra tip and asked the parker to park it close to the exit as he would be back in 10 minutes.

The cool beverage was re-connecting their brain cells. The blood was flowing to all parts of the brain. A jolt of Caffeine delivered cold does that. As Karan and Priya sipped their coffees, a lightbulb went off in Priya’s head. What about Companies House, the British registrar of companies? This housed many shell companies which were located in various tax havens. And the penny dropped.

There was a company listed BBSL and the directors were Nikhil Shirke and Ramanathapuram Krishnaswamy Ranganathan (Rocky’s full name). The outlay share capital was 2 million pounds. Each owned 50%. Bingo!

“Looks like this was a shell company that was being used to siphon off the money Rocky made to tax havens!” Mike said, after he went through the printout that Priya had created. “But we will not be able to find out the transactions unless we get a Letters Rogatory to the UK Government. And for that an investigation must be ordered by the ED, which Maida won’t do…” Mike was tailing off as if he were talking to himself.

“But how did the money reach the bank account from India?” Karan wondered.

“It must be through a hawala operator in India,” Priya replied.

“Even to find that, we will need the government’s approval and prima facie evidence of wrongdoing, such as tax evasion or money laundering… See how Blue Bulls was funded, who invested in it. Was there any impropriety in their operations?”

“Sir, the Income Tax Department will have to do that.”

“You two have your work cut out. Without involving anyone else, find out everything you can about the company, Nikhil, their image in the market. Was this a genuine firm or merely a front? Did it do any business?” Mike signed off, as his next meeting was about to begin.

Karan, Priya headed back to their offices. Priya had a few things she wanted to check on the web. The world wide web (WWW) had become the world’s largest library. But there was one catch. All the books were on the floor. One must know precisely what to look for to unearth gold.

“There is a site called GlassDoor.com, where ex-employees put in their comments on their experiences working for a company. Usually these are adverse, but who knows? Once in a while, there will be a nugget that would give us a clue into the inner workings of a company,” Priya was typing furiously as she was explaining to Karan what she was doing.

About 20 responses came when she entered Blue Bulls as the company name. The first few were innocuous, that it was the place to work at, yatta yatta. But with the sixth comment, there was some interesting information:

*If you want to understand how the financial derivatives work, this is the place. However, it is not a place for women. Any growth prospects are contingent on how much they are willing to “co-operate.”*

* *Disappointed in Dadar*

While author had left her name out, this was a clue that perhaps not everything there was professionally handled.

Priya and Karan discussed their next move. “We could go meet with some of the employees of the company, as a follow-up into the death of their boss.”

“Law and Order is a Police matter. We are with the IB. Unless there is a security angle, we cannot claim locus standi.”

“Impressive! Priya, I knew you speak a lot of Indian languages, but Latin? Wow!”

“Learn from the Master! It is a phrase used often in legal circles, to state one’s claim to participate.”

“And I never learnt anything from watching Inspector Daya, CID! Always got stuck wondering why there was always something *kala in the Dal.*”

“Back to the topic! What shall we do? Why not say that the crime in Dubai is similar to the one that occurred a year ago and this might provide clues to the other unsolved mystery?”

“That is possible, but we would have to see how we can do it without the knowledge of Home Minister.”

Mike provided them the answer. “I hereby authorise you to fly down to Mumbai and talk to the employees of BBSL. I will send a note that the Castrator has struck again and that we are trying to establish a link. Leave first thing tomorrow, before I click the Send button on my email to his sartorial elegancy.”

# Tying up loose ends

Karan and Priya decided that Karan would talk to the male members of BBSL and she would converse with the female. Less than 10 percent of the staff was female but Priya wanted to talk to them, draw them out, ask questions about the responses in GlassDoor of ex-employees. She knew that ex-employees stay in touch and there could be valuable information that she could glean from it.

Since theirs was an un-announced visit, the remaining partner of the firm was caught unawares. Which was exactly how Karan wanted it. First, security wouldn’t let them in. Even after they flashed their ID cards.

Karan looked at the receptionist and said, “This is way above your head. One of the bosses is murdered in Dubai and I need to speak with the other one. Now. Put him on the speakerphone.”

Something in his voice told the receptionist to obey him. “Sir, there are two people from the Intelligence Bureau Delhi here to see you. Shall I send them up?” She nodded quickly a few times, signed them in and had the Security scan his card to get them into the elevator.

Sanjay Thakur looked haggard and drawn. “I apologize. My staff did not know how to behave. How can I help you?”

Priya was looking around at the dazzling pieces of art and the ambience of the office. They were clearly doing well. As screens lit up and big-screen monitors showed CNBC and ET-Now channels, this was a buzzing place.

Sanjay waved them into his office and asked for two coffees to be sent up right away. Karan showed Sanjay a printout of the adverse comment about his company. He ran his hand through his hair as he read the commented and muttered under his breath, “Shit!” He then looked up at Karan as if to say, “so what?”

“Is it true? Did you or your deceased partner misbehave with female employees here?”

“Absolutely not! We are a professional organisation and run it so. All of us have Management degrees from the best Management schools and we are very profitable.”

“So, you don’t have an objection if we have a chat with the employees?” The request came across more of a command. Not that a refusal would have stopped them.

“What is it that you want to know?”

Karan could see the strain of having lost a partner and being hounded was showing on Sanjay. He was still putting up a brave front. He decided to go on the offensive.

“Were you also part of the money laundering operation your partner Nikhil was running?”

“What money laundering? What the heck are you talking about?”

Karan showed him the printout of the British Companies House document of a shell company owned by Nikhil and Rocky. As soon as he saw that, Karan’s face went white and beads of sweat appeared on his brow. Before he had a chance to respond, Karan said, “I need a list of all your employees for the past 5 years, including those who quit. Call in your workforce and tell them that we will be talking to them one-on-one and to co-operate fully.”

Sanjay’s climbdown was swift. He called his Private Secretary and gave the instructions and told them to assemble in the main conference room in 5 minutes.

“Rocky and Nikhil were up to something. I did not want to know what. He handled all the High-net worth individuals (HNI) while I ran the company. If there was money laundering involved, I am not aware. As far as I know, the company complies with all rules and regulations and has regularly paid taxes.”

“At this time, we would like to talk to the employees and will circle back to you after that. Do not leave the building till we are done. Don’t answer any calls except from your family. Am I clear?”

Sanjay nodded in the affirmative.

Priya started with Nikhil’s executive assistant. She was in her mid-30s and looked nervous and fidgety.

“How long have you been with the company?” Priya asked.

“Ten years.”

“Have you seen this review?” Priya showed her the GlassDoor review presumably written by a woman.

“No,” but Priya could see that the executive assistant did not seem surprised.

“Has Minister Ranga visited your company or did he get in touch with Nikhil on the phone?”

“I don’t remember. Usually HNIs call him directly on his cell phone. I only manage his official appointments and interfacing with media.”

A few more conversations with the female employees in the company confirmed Priya’s fears. Nikhil was putting pressure on female employees to “co-operate.”

One of the employees let out an important fact that helped them tremendously. “A few years ago, one of the fast-rising female executives killed herself. Many rumours were floating around - that she may have been pregnant, that she was threatening to expose Nikhil’s nefarious activities and so on. Even the Police had made inquiries, but it died down quickly.”

Priya took down the name of the employee and other details. Karan was observing that many male employees appeared nervous. Many would not make eye contact while answering his questions, as if they were afraid of the consequences of speaking the truth. As the conversations continued, Priya started making notes for his report to Mike…

*Her name was Divya. She was from Pune and had graduated at the top of her class from IIM-A. Very smart and ambitious. Was overlooked for promotions. Eighteen months later, committed suicide. Suspected to have been pregnant. Deceased partner and Rocky had opened shell companies in the UK.*

Karan and Priya got the address of Divya in Pune and engaged a cab to drive them back and forth. Since it was already late, they decided to start the following morning and hoped to be back in the city by the evening. What they were about to find out would be a significant reveal…

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Divya’s parents were retired and they could see the hurt of losing a brilliant daughter in their eyes. “She was brilliant and a doting sister,” her mother recalled. “Always around for her siblings, encouraging them, mentoring them,” she wiped a tear from her face as she looked at a family photograph taken a few years ago.

Karan looked at the photograph and it suddenly dawned on him. He had seen Divya’s brother somewhere. He was trying to recollect when or where, as Priya continued to ask gentle questions.

“Where are the siblings now?”

“One is settled in New Delhi and works for a Multi-National Company in Gurgaon. The other one works in the Army.”

The penny dropped. The brother resembled the security guy he had met at the Burj Imarat when going through the videos. But how could that be?

“How long has he been in the Army?”

“About four years. His postings are classified, and we don’t know where he is most of the time. He will show up suddenly for a day or two and then vanish again.”

Karan surreptitiously took a picture of the photograph using his phone and nodded to Priya that he was done. Soon they said their goodbyes and were on the way back to Mumbai.

Mike met with them a few days later. “Sir, I need your OK to get access to the Army records to find out where Chhotu is…”

Mike took his time replying. He was enjoying his cup of filter coffee, whose aroma had filled up the room. Finally, he replied, “So we find out that it is Chhotu who committed these crimes. What will that do? We have circumstantial evidence, at best. But the fact that we are uncovered the mystery will alert the already oversexed cabal that they can continue with their debauchery. Instead, I suggest we let things be. As you can see, fewer members of the cabal are traveling to Dubai and other countries, because they are afraid, they will be next. One email had that effect. Sometimes, doing nothing is also an action.”

Karan and Priya smiled. They had heard this line somewhere before.

# Epilogue

Seven years later…

Indian politics had seen a massive churn. Hasmukh Jadeja and his People’s Party had stormed back to power with a greater majority than before. Buoyed by the unprecedented success, Prime Minister Jadeja had hit the ground running, unveiling a slew of major reforms in various sectors. The Freedom Party had been caught off-guard. Once out of power, its factionalism came to the fore, though it did not succeed in splitting the party. Gulab Sharma, was being projected again as the face of the Freedom Party and it did not get much traction.

The Freedom Party had no other choice. Abandoning the First Family carried the risk of the party fragmenting. Its various satraps would then be even more powerless. It was better to stick on for the moment, they thought, than precipitate matters. That did not mean they were happy with the dynasty, but this was not the time to upset the applecart.

The new government announced decisions that were considered hot potatoes. It bifurcated a State, stripped it of special powers which had hampered its full integration with the Union of India, and brought in an Act that provided citizenship to a section of the population that had fled neighbouring countries because of religious persecution. People across the country applauded the move and the government’s rating shot up. Prime Minister Jadeja himself enjoyed spectacular ratings, like never done before.

There were problems with the economy, though. The growth rate had slipped, and rising unemployment had become a major talking point. Undaunted, the government announced a number of measures to make Indian’s economy a five-trillion-dollar one, over the next five years. Then, tragedy struck.

A disease caused by an unknown virus hit the world with the force of a sledge-hammer blow. It originated in China and soon spread elsewhere, becoming a global pandemic. Across the world, nations went into lockdown mode—businesses shut down, industries pulled down their shutters, and people stayed indoors. India did not remain untouched. The pandemic spread in the country, but due to a series of pre-emptive measures the government had taken, the toll was not as heavy as it was in other countries. Even so, the Indian economy was severely hit for at least four months.

The pandemic led to a drastic change in people’s attitudes. Needless shopping and gorging on unhealthy food in restaurants and take-away stalls was out; no outlets were open. Besides, people realised the value of healthy living. Yoga became one favourite exercise for millions holed up in their homes, as did being vegetarian.

All sporting events across the globe were impacted. Tournaments were called off or postponed to a later, undefined date. Don returned to basics, concentrating on extortion, kidnapping, and murder.

Preeti, Sonya and Pragya moved on, leaving the sordid experiences behind. Together they launched a women-centric online channel, named *Nari*. Because of its niche appeal, it quickly got millions of viewers and advertisement revenue. Within a year, it was among the most watched online programmes.

Dipika Sharma succumbed to cancer, and Mama-ji too passed away after suffering a massive cardiac arrest. The noose around Maida and Dalda had tightened and they were busy fighting cases in various courts; they were politically as good as finished. Girgut was finished after a rival TV channel showed clips of his sexual encounter with a TV anchor of another channel— of course, the explicit scenes were fudged.

The stage was set for Supremo to return. His rivals had been collared, and the Freedom Party desperately needed a face to rejuvenate itself. More importantly, it wanted someone who had ‘Hindu’ credentials to counter the People’s Party. Supremo know the *Shastras* and the computer as well. He was the ideal choice. He let his location be known subtly. Soon, a few well-meaning members of the party reached out to him and requested him to take the lead. The time had come for Raja Rao’s disciple to return.

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